**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 33**

**Episodes 4257–4400**

**Episode 4257**

**Xavier**

“How *dare* he accuse me of trying to murder people!” I spat. “And with his ridiculous gargoyles, of all things! I mean, how stupid would I have to be to try to pull something like that here, with all these people around? How dumb does he think I am?”

I was still seething after my confrontation with the princeling, pacing across a section of the ballroom as Ava stood by, listening quietly.

“Where the hell does he get the balls to look me in the face and accuse me of something like that—”

“Xavier,” Ava said, putting a calming hand on my arm as I passed her. “You know what Lucian’s like. He’s not the most logical person in the world. He probably wasn’t even thinking when he started talking. You know how he flies off the handle at any tiny provocation—and the gargoyles weren’t exactly a tiny provocation. I know he’s an ass, but you should take what he said with a big grain of salt.”

“I know, I know,” I said, blowing out a frustrated breath, forcing my shoulders to relax. “You’re right. And thanks for standing up for me out there.”

She gave me a long look. “I hope you know by now where my loyalties lie, Xavier.”

I pulled her into my arms and held her close. “I do,” I told her.

And it felt good to say it, because I meant it. I *did* know that her loyalty lay with me. I didn’t doubt it. I didn’t have to lie or bend the truth to please her.

But it also felt strange. It wasn’t *right*. Adéluce might’ve decided that she wanted Ava and me to be together, to be in love, but I just didn’t know if I’d ever be able to accept that. Not while I still held out hope for a future with Cali.

I looked over Ava’s shoulder, abruptly realizing that I hadn’t seen Cali since we’d come back into the ballroom. Where was she? I’d been trying not to be obvious about it—what with Ava’s murderous feelings toward her and all—but since Cali had nearly nosedived from the roof of the palace, I’d been on high alert, making sure that I close enough to help her, if necessary.

Beyond the Adéluce-based danger that was constantly hovering over both our heads, I was feeling deeply unsettled about what had happened up on the roof.

On the one hand, the details of the incident pointed to Adéluce, but on the other… Well, there was a chance it could have been something else. I loathed Adéluce, but she wasn’t the source of *all* the world’s evil, though I wouldn’t put it past her to contribute to a lot of it.

“Excuse me?”

I turned to see Russell’s parents standing behind me. “Yeah?”

“Have you seen our son?” Paris asked me.

I fought the urge to be snarky—I wasn’t a babysitter. “I haven’t seen him or Julia for a while.”

Ava smirked. “There are a lot of bedrooms in this place.”

I shot her a glare, then looked back at Paris and Joan. “Have you tried the pool?”

“We have no idea where that is,” Joan said.

“I’ll show you,” Ava offered, leading the women away.

Well, that took care of them. Alone, I looked around the room for Cali. I didn’t see her, but I caught sight of Lola standing with Jay and Jaqueline, and I headed over to them.

“Hey, have you seen Cali?” I asked.

Lola looked at me through narrowed eyes. “Why do *you* care?”

“Do we really have to go through this again?” I asked with a sigh.

“You’re not actually *allowed* to care about Cali,” Lola said coldly. “You gave up that right when you took off. And *furthermore*—”

“I’m pretty sure I saw her rush out a couple of minutes ago,” Jay interrupted, shooting Lola a sharp look. He pointed at a hallway. “She went that way.”

Behind me, I heard Lola snap angrily at Jay, but I was already heading for the door. Lola was the least of my problems right now. I knew she was trying to be the good best friend and stand up for Cali, but right now, that wasn’t going to actually help Cali out. Not that I could really tell her that.

Regardless, I would have to thank Jay for his help. I started to run down the hallway, trying to catch her scent. Maybe I was being paranoid, but Jay had said that Cali had *rushed* out. That meant there was something urgent going on.

In the hallway, I picked up Cali’s scent. As I followed it, I soon realized it was taking me along the same route we’d taken up to the roof, earlier. I couldn’t say that I was sorry that she’d followed me, even though it had proven to be a dangerous move for both of us. It had allowed me a rare moment alone with her. Too bad Adéluce had nearly killed her as a result.

I kept following Cali’s scent, wondering where in the world she’d gone. But when I reached the tower door, my stomach dropped. I knew where that door led. Why would Cali have gone back up to the roof? She had almost died up there.

My heart was pounding as I opened the door, but I fought to remain calm. There had to be an explanation for this. Some simple explanation for why Cali would’ve rushed out of the ballroom and run up the narrow spiral staircase to the roof—the place where she’d almost met her death, barely an hour ago.

There had to be an explanation.

But as I looked up the stairs, I couldn’t help but wonder if Adéluce was somehow behind this, too. Why, though? Was she pissed because I’d saved Cali from falling and prevented her death? Had she somehow lured Cali back up to the roof so she could finish the job?

Anger flooded me, my blood boiling as I started up the stairs. But I hadn’t even gone up three steps before there was a loud crash and the sound of yelling from somewhere behind me.

*The ballroom!* my brain yelled at me, fighting to be heard over my Cali panic.

“Dammit,” I hissed to myself.

I was worried about Cali, but whatever had just happened in the ballroom sounded urgent, and my pack was there, so I jumped down the stairs and raced back down the hallway.

If I got there and found that it was just Lucian making one of his dumbass announcements, I was going to lose my mind. Maybe he’d had his in-house poet write a history of the Vanguard pack, and the crash I’d heard was everyone trying to escape the reading.

But as I approached the ballroom door, I heard my name shouted from the other end of the hallway. I looked down to see Ava sprinting toward me, her green dress hiked up to her hips so she could run faster.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

She shook her head. “No idea—I’m coming from the pool. Did you hear that? What was it?”

“No idea,” I muttered.

I wasn’t sure what I’d heard, but I was glad Ava was with me. I liked having her at my side, and this way, I wouldn’t have to worry about losing track of her if something went wrong.

The door to the ballroom was closed. When I pulled it open and stepped through, I found everyone inside facing the main entrance with identical puzzled looks on their faces.

I shot a look at Ava, who shrugged in confusion.

I grabbed hold of a Vanguard wolf. “What the hell is going on?”

The man looked at me, then gestured helplessly, confusion etched into his face. “We… We have a visitor.”

I followed his gaze to the entrance. The massive doors were open, and as I watched, a tall man with an imposing presence stepped into the room. He was deeply tanned, like he’d just stepped off a yacht, and when he looked around, he gave the impression of ownership over everything he saw. Then he smiled, and the expression filled me with inexplicable dread.

He spread his arms wide. “I’m Andrew Whittle, Alpha of the Hackberry pack.”

The ballroom had been silent up until that point—you could’ve heard a pin drop. But the announcement of his pack caused an *immediate* reaction. Whispers and gasps rippled across the room, along with an almost tangible wave of tension.

I took an instinctive step forward.

“Xavier?” Ava said, a question in her voice.

“Don’t you remember?” I said grimly. “The Hackberry pack was allied with the Bitterfangs.”

“*Shit*,” she breathed.

Andrew looked around, the smile never leaving his face. “What is this? A party? Don’t you all look wonderful. I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting some of you—most of you, by the looks of things. And that *is* a pity, because I probably won’t get a chance, after tonight.” His smile widened. “You know, since you’re all about to die.”

**Episode 4258**

I took a deep breath. Then I closed my eyes and opened them again. I could only hope that I was having a vision, or maybe some kind of weird delusion—Hell, I’d have been *thrilled* to find out I was having a stroke and it was causing me to hallucinate. Anything would’ve been better.

But that wasn’t the case. It was obvious from the reactions of everyone else around me that I wasn’t the only one seeing Malakai leading what looked very much like an army out of the woods and heading straight toward the palace.

Greyson pulled me toward him. His whole body was tense as steel, and his eyes were fixed on the Bitterfangs. Was he scared? No, Greyson didn’t get scared… But he certainly looked *alarmed.*

*Don’t panic*, I told myself sternly. *Do* not *panic*.

I couldn’t be that version of Cali right now—the Cali that panicked. I needed to be strong and clear-headed and in control—even right now, when I was facing down an evil, chaotic Alpha werewolf we’d all thought was dead and gone, and who had threatened to kill me on numerous occasions.

Glancing up at Greyson, I saw that his jaw was set with so much determination that his face looked like it had been carved from granite. I wished I could absorb some of his steely resolve, but I didn’t think that was the way courage worked, unfortunately.

I heard footsteps on the tiles—someone was coming toward us. In a blink, I summoned my magic, ready to blast whoever it was right off the roof. I would fight, that much I was certain of.

I raised my hands, but just as I was about to unleash a blast, I realized it was only Lucian, and stopped myself in time.

Lucian glared at me as I lowered my hands. “Were you going to *blast* me, Caliana? You have a lot of nerve—”

“We have bigger problems, Lucian,” Greyson interrupted, nodding toward the woods. “He’s back.”

“I know,” Lucian snapped. “I saw him. Why do you think I came back here?” He looked out at the fast-approaching army, his expression grim. “I thought you killed him.”

“Clearly I didn’t,” Greyson snapped. “But that seems fairly irrelevant right now. We have to fight. The war isn’t over.”

My stomach twisted into a tight knot. This *couldn’t* be happening. How could it be? We’d all thought he was dead—or maybe we’d all wanted to believe that he was dead. Either way, the Bitterfangs had covered their tracks to make us think he was.

Then I thought about Julia’s reaction to seeing the ring. She’d said it wasn’t her father’s ring. She had been sure about that, too, and we’d brushed off her concerns. I felt like an idiot. It was staring us directly in the face, but we’d chosen not to acknowledge it. It was abundantly obvious now that she wasn’t the one who’d been buried in denial.

“Even if we’re going to fight… *How?*” I asked, looking up at Greyson. “There are so many of them.”

Armin and two of the Vanguard wolves ran across the roof toward us. “We have to alert the others!”

Lucian gave a curt nod. “Yes. Start by—”

“Hang on,” Armin said, cutting off Lucian, which I’d never seen him do. “Where’s Roy?”

“He’s right behind me,” Lucian said irritably. He looked around. “He *was* right behind me.” He looked at one of the Vanguard wolves. “Go get him.”

The man hurried away.

I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn’t seem to get any oxygen into my lungs. I was getting more anxious with each passing moment. Fear was crowding in, making it hard to think.

Greyson took my hand, and when he spoke, his voice was firm but calm. “Cali, listen to me. Everything’s going to be okay. He’s coming, but that just means we’re going to have to kill the bastard again. Okay?”

I forced myself to nod.

Greyson looked at Lucian. “We need to get downstairs. We need to tell the other Alphas and get the packs ready to fight. There’s no time to do anything else.”

Something caught my attention in the corner of my eye, and I looked over to see flickering lights coming from the approaching army. I frowned.

“Is that a fire?” I muttered, speaking mostly to myself. My frown deepened. “Why would they be making fires? Are they planning to camp out? That doesn’t make any sense…”

“Shit,” Greyson hissed. He tightened his grip on my hand and yanked me toward the door that led back to the staircase. “They’re not campfires—they’re flaming arrows.”

“Oh god,” I breathed.

“You need to get off the roof, Cali,” Greyson said.

Just as we reached the door, the Vanguard wolf rushed back over to us. He was holding a shredded jacket—the same uniform jacket all the guards wore. But this one was stained with blood.

“This was Roy’s,” he gasped out.

“*What?*” Lucian bellowed.

“It was all I could find of him.”

Lucian stared at the man, stunned. “But he was just…” His face went pale. “That could have been *me*!”

“I think that staying up on this roof is a very bad idea,” I said, pressing close to Greyson. “What if there are more Bitterfangs lying in wait? We need to get downstairs, right now.”

Lucian seemed to snap out of his panic and nodded. “Yes, of course.” He gestured toward the door. “Let’s go.”

As we filed through, Armin took a step back. “With your permission, your Highness, I’ll stay up here with the other two Vanguards and monitor the movements of the Bitterfang army.”

Lucian hesitated for a moment, but then he nodded. “Very well.”

The rest of us hurried down the tightly spiraling staircase, leaving Armin behind.

I winced as the heavy door slammed shut behind us. I didn’t like the idea of leaving Armin on the roof. He was alone, and if there were still Bitterfangs up there, he could easily end up like Roy.

My heart was pounding with fear, but I didn’t have much time to dwell on Armin’s fate as we rushed down. Taking the steep curve of the stairs at a run was making me dizzy, so I tried closing my eyes. I could manage that, as long as I kept one hand on Greyson.

When we finally reached the ground floor, Lucian led the way out into the hallway and toward the ballroom.

I frowned as we approached. “Why is everyone crowded at the entrance? What’s going on?”

When we got closer, I went up on my tiptoes so I could see over the crowd, but what I saw didn’t answer any of my questions.

Xavier was standing in the ballroom, facing down a large, tanned man I didn’t recognize.

*Xavier? What’s going on? Who is that?* I asked through the mind link, hoping he didn’t ignore me.

*His name is Andrew*, Xavier answered, his voice cold and tight with worry. *He’s the* *Alpha of the Hackberry pack.*

I froze at his words. The *Hackberry pack*? They had fought alongside the Bitterfangs in the war. My stomach—already a tight fist of worry—twisted even more. Panic coursed through me now, and my pulse thundered in my ears. I thought of the mass of werewolves—led by Malakai—who by now must have made it to the palace and were probably gathering outside.

Were we under siege?

Lucian and Greyson shoved through the crowd of wolves standing at the ballroom’s entrance, and I followed in their wake, staying as close to Greyson as I could. Halfway across the room, Lucian split off from Greyson and moved toward Elle, but Greyson kept moving until he was standing next to Xavier and Ava.

The Hackberry Alpha—Andrew—looked at Greyson. He gave him a nod and a smile that might have been welcoming, except it was completely devoid of warmth.

“Hello!” Andrew’s voice rang out through the high-ceilinged room. “The Alpha of the Redwood pack and his very *special* Luna—I welcome you to what will sadly be your very last party. And haven’t you dressed up well for the occasion?” He turned his darkly glittering eyes on me. “I can’t tell you what a pleasure it will be for me to someday tell my grandchildren how I met a real *due destini* mate—and then watched her die.”

I was shaking, but to my surprise, it wasn’t with fear—it was with rage. This guy could *fuck all the way off*. I was so sick and tired of this bullshit. I was tired of how the Bitterfangs and their sick allies were always threatening me, my pack, and my friends. And for what? For *nothing*. Just for being. Just for existing. Just for living our damn lives in opposition to some arbitrary principles they thought were correct.

Well, that was *it*. I’d had enough.

I took a step forward, meeting Andrew’s eyes.

“You seem to know a lot about me,” I said pleasantly. “So you must know that I’m not *just* a *due destini* mate.”

And then, without waiting for him to respond, I raised my hands and blasted the bastard with everything I had.

**Episode 4259**

**Greyson**

I was just reaching out to grab Cali and pull her back behind me when I felt the floor tremble beneath my feet. A blast from Cali hit Andrew straight in the chest and he flew backward, shooting through the ballroom’s big double doors like a cannonball. The air in the ballroom crackled with the errant electricity from the blast, and Cali looked down at her hands, apparently shocked by her own power.

I was pretty shocked myself, but I wasn’t in the mood to be surprised again, so I sprinted for the doors to check on the fallen Alpha. Xavier must have felt the same way, because he was right beside me.

Outside the doors, Andrew was lying in a heap on the floor. It looked like he’d been thrown against the far wall and knocked unconscious.

“Let’s finish him off,” Xavier growled, and I didn’t disagree.

Xavier was just stepping toward him when Andrew’s limp form was swarmed by a pack of werewolves, who’d run in to help him.

“Fuck,” I muttered, yanking Xavier back. “Andrew didn’t come alone.”

“Let me *go*,” Xavier snarled.

“If you go out there, we won’t be able to help you,” I said tightly.

Xavier looked at me, then at the wolves surrounding Andrew. He gritted his teeth but didn’t argue further.

“Just help me shut the door,” I told him. “We need to barricade it to keep them out.”

Xavier grabbed the heavy door—every door in the palace was heavy—and helped me slam it shut, but when he turned to look at me, his expression was grim. “This goes both ways, you know. They can’t get in, but we can’t get out, either.”

“I know that,” I said testily. “But until we figure out what to do, I really don’t see another option.”

“Terrific,” Xavier muttered.

It suddenly occurred to me that Xavier didn’t know about the Bitterfangs.

“Listen,” I said urgently, turning to him. “Malakai isn’t dead.”

Xavier stopped moving. For a moment, he just stared at the massive door lock he’d been fiddling with, and then—slowly—he turned to look at me. “Say that again.”

“He’s not dead. Malakai. I saw him.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s moving toward the palace right now, along with the biggest pack I’ve ever seen. He’s probably already here.”

Xavier’s eyes went dark as he quickly processed a range of panicked emotions. “Don’t you think you could’ve mentioned that a little earlier?”

“When was I supposed to have found the time?” I snarled back. “While Andrew was flying through the air, perhaps? And is now *really* the time to point fingers, Xavier? We’ve got a very big crisis on our hands.”

Xavier’s jaw worked. He looked over his shoulder at Cali. “Is she okay? That was a lot of magic she shot at that asshole. Her magic can weaken her if she’s not careful—”

“Don’t worry about Cali,” I said sharply. “She knows what she’s doing.”

I was speaking with a lot more confidence than I felt. I was worried about Cali myself. That *had* been a lot of magic, and while I was obviously proud of her, I also didn’t like that she’d stepped forward like that and put herself directly in harm’s way. She’d acted out of anger—acted on instinct—and that could be dangerous.

I looked over my shoulder at the assembled alliance wolves.

“You three,” I called, waving to a knot of Blue Bloods. “Come over here and barricade this door. Make it impenetrable—we need to keep them out. And I need to go find Lucian.”

I needed to talk to him about how we were going to stay safe inside the palace. The place had so many doors and windows—how could we possibly secure them all?

But first, I headed over to Cali.

“Hey,” I said quietly, taking her hands. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at me, and I could see that she’d recovered from the initial shock of what she’d just done. “Did I kill him?” Tears filled her eyes. “I wanted to. I wanted to blast him into pieces, Greyson.”

I pulled her close and felt her start to cry against my chest.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “No, Andrew’s not dead. But if I get my way, he will be soon. You did the right thing, love.”

She took a shuddering breath and wrapped her arms around me.

Around us, the wolves were starting to talk. Questions were buzzing back and forth.

“What’s going on?”

“Who was that guy?”

“Why did Cali attack him?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Are we in danger?”

I took a deep breath. Someone had to say something, and it looked like that someone was going to have to be me. I’d fucked up as the Alpha. It was on *me.* I had to own up to it and tell everyone what was going on.

Grasping Cali’s hand, I led her toward the stage at the front of the room and stepped up onto it. I looked out over the crowd, trying to appear calm and strong.

“Everyone! Listen to me!” The murmuring died down. “We’re under attack by the Bitterfangs—”

Someone screamed. There were several gasps, and a lot of muttered curse words.

“We *will* force them back, but that means we all have to prepare to fight. Again.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Armin step into the ballroom.

“I need everyone to organize yourselves into your respective packs and wait for instructions from your Alphas,” I finished, then hopped off the stage.

I hurried over to Armin, Cali at my side. I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed his arrival—Lucian and Elle were making their way across the room as well.

When we reached him, I saw that Armin was sporting a bloodied arm.

“What happened?” Lucian demanded.

“Bitterfangs,” Armin said, to no one’s surprise. “I fought off a couple of them. A Northwind, too. They were trying to scale the palace walls.” He shrugged. “They didn’t make it.”

Lucian looked as angry as I’d ever see him. “Anything else?”

“I’m pretty sure I saw Ethaniel and what I think was some of the Ironwood pack gathering with the Bitterfangs,” Armin said grimly.

“*Dammit*,” I swore, anger flooding through me. “The Ironwoods lost their Alpha when Xavier and the Samaras killed Wade—it probably didn’t take much for Malakai to convince the Ironwoods to join his pack. He probably told them it would keep them safe, that it would be in their best interest. That he’d look out for them.” I shook my head bitterly. “He absorbs packs like a sponge absorbs water.”

“The Ironwoods aligning themselves with the Bitterfangs is a blow,” Lucian started. “But—”

“Armin!” Aysel hurried over, her beautiful face creased with worry. “Armin, are you hurt?”

Armin looked slightly surprised by Aysel’s concern, and I couldn’t say I blamed him. “No, my lady, I’m fine. It’s worse than it looks.”

“Were you injured in the defense of my palace?” she asked.

He looked uncomfortable. “Yes, but—”

“I insist on looking at the wound!” Aysel announced, taking his arm and pulling him away.

“What about Julia and Russell?” Cali asked, looking up at me. “What’s going to happen to them? If Malakai finds them here…”

She trailed off, but she didn’t have to finish her sentence. I think we all knew how badly things could end for those two if Julia’s father found her here.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to them,” I said firmly. “Not after all we’ve been through to keep them safe.”

Ava and Xavier had joined our group, and Ava looked around the ballroom. “Russell’s parents were here earlier, looking for him.”

“Are they still here?” I asked. “Does anyone see them? Is it possible they already found Russell and Julia and left?”

It was something to hope for, but I knew we couldn’t chance it. Not with Julia’s murderous father breathing down our necks.

I caught Charlie’s eye in the crowd and waved him over. Charlie would be the one to ask about this—he was one of the best trackers in the pack.

“Hey, Charlie,” I said, “I need you to find Julia and Russell and get them the hell out of here.”

“Yeah, Greyson, of course, but…” He looked unsure. “After I find them, how do I get them out?” He glanced at the door, which the Blue Bloods were barricading to within an inch of its life. “Aren’t we kind of trapped in here?”

“I wonder if one of the witches can blip Russell and Julia out of here,” Cali said, looking around the room for one of them. “Maybe Adair could help protect them? Mikah and Gabe?”

“That’s an idea, and it’s possible,” I said, “but just in case none of those are an option, we need to come up with a backup plan.” I looked over at Lucian, who was leaning away to speak to one of his guards. I grabbed his shoulder. “Lucian, is there a secret way out of the palace?”

**Episode 4260**

**Charlie**

I ran through the hallways of the palace, keeping my eyes and ears open, working to catch Julia and Russell’s scents. It was hard, though, and I was fighting to tease theirs out from the crush of the other scents that crowded the palace.

I had no idea where the hell the two of them had disappeared to, but I did know that this was a pretty terrible time for them to have gone AWOL.

Ava had mentioned the pool, so I tried there first, but they weren’t there, and I hadn’t picked up either of their scents yet. I considered trying to follow Russell’s parents’ scents, but quickly dismissed the idea—they were probably just as lost as Russell and Julia.

Violet was running at my heels, and Lilac and Perrie were behind her. But even with all of us looking, we were still coming up blank.

“I wish we could just shout their names,” Lilac muttered.

“We can’t!” Violet snapped. “We don’t want to alert the Bitterfangs that she’s here! That’s the whole point!”

“I know!” Lilac growled back at his sister. “That’s why I said I *wished* we could do it, VIOLET!”

“Everyone, shut up,” I said sharply. “We need to focus. The sooner we find Russell and Julia, the better. Then we can get the hell out of here.”

“Do you know how many Bitterfangs there are?” Violet asked anxiously.

“Bitterfangs, Ironwoods, Hackberrys, Northwinds—it’s a real party,” I muttered. “No, I don’t know how many.”

I had no idea how many enemy wolves were out there, but there were definitely a lot, and Greyson was a lot more worried than he was letting on. I supposed that was a sign of a good Alpha—trying to stay calm while also being realistic. The truth was, all the Alphas had been caught completely off-guard by this attack—and I felt responsible. Not wholly responsible, maybe, but somewhat. I was a hunter, after all, and that meant I was supposed to have a higher sensitivity to danger. I couldn’t help but think I should’ve felt it coming.

Well, I *had* felt it coming, to a degree. I’d had that strange sense of dread that I hadn’t been able to shake, and I’d let Greyson know about it. But there wasn’t much he’d been able to do with that information.

So I was glad I’d been given the job of finding Russell and Julia. It felt like a chance to make up for dropping the ball. My Alpha had given me this mission, and it was important that I kept Violet, her brother, and his mate all safe as we carried it out. It was an important mission with high stakes, and it needed to be completed.

“Hey, Charlie, I was just thinking—should we split up?”

I whipped around to look at Violet. “What? *No!* We can’t do that!”

“But we could cover more ground,” she pointed out.

I shook my head. “We’re not splitting up.”

Lilac pulled up short. “Hang on. I think I just caught Juliet’s scent.”

“Julia,” Violet corrected.

I hurried over to Lilac and inhaled deeply.

“That’s her,” I said, nodding. “I’ve got both their scents. Okay, this way!”

Suddenly, I was feeling hopeful. If I could find the teenagers, that would be one less thing for Greyson to worry about tonight. And—beyond just finishing the mission—I really cared about Russell and Julia, and I knew that a lot of the Redwoods felt the same way. They were like younger siblings to a lot of us.

The four of us sprinted down the passageway, but we stopped when we reached a dead end.

“What the hell?” I muttered, looking around. What kind of hallway just *ended*? And it wasn’t like I’d lost their scents. If anything, they were stronger now.

Violet stepped forward and peered at the wall in front of us. Then she pointed to a crack I hadn’t noticed.

*Is that a hidden door?* she asked me.

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay, everyone stand back,” I said.

I took a deep breath and pushed the wall panel. There was an audible click, and a door appeared in the stone and popped open.

For a moment there was silence, and nobody moved. Then *everyone* yelled, and we were attacked.

We fought back instinctively, but after a moment, I managed to see through the scuffle enough to see that our attackers were—

“Russell?” I burst out. “Julia?”

Julia and Russell stopped fighting and looked around, their expressions confused and worried.

“Charlie?” Russell said. “Violet?”

“Lilac?” Julia asked.

“This is Perrie,” Lilac offered. Perrie waved awkwardly.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “Why were you hiding?”

“We heard fighting, so we hid,” Julia said.

“Well, that was probably a smart thing to do, but I wish you could’ve mentioned it to someone in the alliance,” I said ruefully. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“What’s going on?” Russell asked.

“The palace is under attack,” I told him.

Julia’s face paled. “Is it the Bitterfangs?”

I glanced at Violet. I wasn’t sure what to say.

Violet took a step toward Julia and put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s no sense in trying to hide this from you, Julia—your father is alive.”

It was a strange moment. I felt an odd urge to apologize, but it felt strange to say, *I’m sorry your father isn’t dead*. I was really glad Violet was here to help.

“If Malakai’s here, he *can’t* find Julia,” Russell said urgently. “What are we supposed to do?”

“Greyson’s figuring that out,” I said. “We’re supposed to bring you two back to the ballroom. Don’t worry, okay? We’ve got you. Let’s go.”

We headed back down the hallway and were just passing by a spot where our hallway intersected with another. There were windows on either side of the wall, and as we approached, a werewolf crashed through the glass and landed at our feet, blocking our way.

My instincts took over and I crouched down in a defensive position—ready to fight—but the wolf immediately turned his attention on Julia.

Julia backed away. “He—he’s a Bitterfang,” she stammered, her voice trembling with fear.

I knew exactly what that meant. If this wolf got away, or was even able to mind link with another member of his pack, Malakai would know that his daughter was still alive. And we couldn’t have that.

I lunged at the wolf, reaching automatically for one of my weapons—

*Shit.* I hadn’t brought any of my weapons. And why *would* I have brought them? I’d assumed I was just coming to a regular party.

Artemis had probably brought her weapons, though. She was always ready for a fight.

Whatever—I’d have time for self-recrimination later.

I slammed into the wolf and shifted, extending my claws and raking them across the guy’s face. His goal had changed from “attack” to “escape,” so it was all I could do to keep him from jumping back through the shattered window. I knew what I had to do—I was going to have to kill this wolf to keep Julia’s secret from her bastard father. It was what Greyson would want me to do.

Violet shifted and lunged for the wolf, kicking him with her powerful back legs as I held him down. This stunned him just long enough for me to sink my teeth into his neck. I bit down with all my might, and a second later, he was dead. I felt him go still beneath me as the life drained out of him.

I spat the wolf’s blood out of my mouth and kicked the carcass away.

*Are you okay?* I asked Violet.

She was breathing hard, but she nodded. *Not a scratch on me.*

She and I shifted back to human, and I’d just turned to keep leading the group back to the ballroom when I stopped. Turning back, I leaned down and snatched the silver capsule from the dead werewolf’s neck, snapping the chain.

“What are you doing with that?” Violet asked, looking more freaked out than she had at any point with the living werewolf.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe we can use it, somehow.”

She gave me a dark look. “Just be careful with that thing, okay? Even you just holding it gives me the willies. I don’t want it to backfire on you.”

“Understood,” I told her. I’d have felt the same way if it were reversed. “Let’s go. We’d better hurry.”

We moved quickly through the palace passageways, keeping watch for more flying werewolves, but when we reached another hallway intersection, I stopped and looked around.

“Are you lost?” Perrie asked.

“I’m not *lost*,” I snapped. “I’m just… not sure which way to go.”

“Fantastic,” Lilac muttered.

“Maybe we should retrace our steps?” I suggested. “Try going back the other way?”

But just as I turned, a large—no, a *huge*—wolf stepped into the hallway, blocking our way.

Julia gasped. “Oh my god. *Dad?*”

**Episode 4261**

**Xavier**

This idiotic princeling crossed his arms and immediately got cagey in response to Greyson’s question. Of course he did. This asshole could never make anything easy, could he? I narrowed my eyes and kept my eyes on Aysel instead of Lucian as he answered.

“I don’t know of any secret way out of the palace,” Lucian said.

Aysel probably didn’t mean to reveal anything with her reaction, but she let out a quiet gasp and then gave her brother a long glare. When it became clear to me that, in spite of her pretty obvious reaction, Aysel wasn’t going to correct her brother, I decided to do it for her.

I stepped up to Lucian, puffing out my chest and straightening to my full height so that I was looking downon him.

“Listen here, you spoiled brat—you’d betternot be lying to us, because if you are, I will *relish* the task of making you regret it.” I pointed at the barricaded door. “We can’t exactly walk out of here. I don’t understand why you’re acting like everything’s good.”

“I don’t even see *why* we’d have to escape through a secret exit,” Lucian said. “We can fight the Bitterfangs. We have the alliance. We’re all here. We can fight. We can win—we’ve done it before.”

Aysel opened her mouth to say something, but Lucian shot her such a stern “shut your damn mouth” look that it felt like he’d actually reached over and slapped her. My fists were balled at my sides. This wasn’t exactly a party anymore, and I’d wanted to sock his asshole in the mouth for a *long* time. If beating the truth out of him was the only way forward, I’d volunteer for the job with a *tremendous* amount of pleasure.

But then I heard Greyson’s mutter. “He’s a terrible liar.”

Yeah, that was the understatement of the fucking year…

“I don’t disagree with you,” Greyson told Lucian after a heavy sigh. “I hope we can fight off the Bitterfangs, but based on what we saw from the roof, they have a numerical advantage. If we’re overwhelmed, it’s our responsibility as Alphas to help our packs escape.”

We all watched Lucian, waiting for him to just give in, but instead, he grumbled something under his breath. I could only make out the words, “Not going to be bullied,” and, “Our packs are strong.”

This poor excuse for an Alpha was prepared to *literally* throw his pack to the wolves, and for what? His pride? Some stupid secret passage in his stupid overcompensation palace?

Rather than keep beating my head against the wall with Lucian—mainly because I was reaching my breaking point and fully prepared to beat *his* head against the wall instead—I turned to Aysel. “You know of a secret way out of here. Show it to me.”

Aysel glanced between me and her brother, clearly conflicted. But, proving once and for all that she was both smarter and generally more *sensible* than her sibling, she looked at Lucian and said, “I’m going to show them the secret tunnels.”

“No, you will *not*!” he snapped. “They’re secret for a reason!”

“And this is *exactly* that reason!” she shot back, then she looked at me and nodded. “Come with me.”

I motioned for Ava to follow me. She nodded, then looked at Greyson.

“We’ll be in touch,” she told him, and then we followed Aysel out of the ballroom.

She led us into a hallway, toward a heavy wooden door. The way it creaked made it clear it hadn’t been opened in a while, and just beyond it was a staircase leading down. The air was cool and dank, getting even more so as we went down, and there were low-light sconces every few feet.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“It’s exactly what you’re looking for,” Aysel said with a sigh. “I’m sorry about my brother’s reluctance to reveal the tunnels. I’m not sure what he was planning on doing with them, but given the current situation, I see no reason to keep them secret any longer.”

I side-eyed Ava, who nodded at Aysel’s back, and I caught her drift.

“Well, I appreciate it,” I said. “You’re certainly proving your dedication to the alliance.”

Aysel didn’t reply to that. It was probably causing her a bit of internal strife to know that by showing us this place, she was disobeying not just her brother, but the Alpha of her pack. I made a mental note not to forget that.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, we found ourselves in a cave. Aysel didn’t break her stride, and Ava and I kept pace with her.

“This is our wine cellar,” she told us.

I looked at the cave paintings on the walls and rolled my eyes. Lucian fucking *would* have his own personal cave paintings. But with the Bitterfangs beating down our door, I was hardly in the mood for prehistoric stories, or wine. “Where are these tunnels?”

Aysel led us deeper into the cave, then she stopped abruptly and pointed down at a thick rug. “The entrance is under here.”

I pulled the rug away, revealing a wooden trap door underneath. I grabbed the looped, metal handle and pulled, filling the cave with stale air.

Ava peered over my shoulder, and we looked down at the tunnel. There was a metal ladder mounted to the wall that led down.

With a grimace, Ava asked, “Where does the tunnel lead to?”

“There’s a maze of tunnels under the palace,” Aysel replied. “They’ve been here for centuries.”

“I’m not here for a history lesson,” I hissed. “If we need to use the tunnels, I don’t want the packs to get lost or trapped. We need to know where they’re going—what they should be looking for.”

Looking slightly embarrassed, Aysel admitted. “I don’t know *exactly* where they lead, but Lucian told me that they let out somewhere in the forest.”

*Somewhere in the forest* was hardly the descriptor I was looking for to make sure that the packs got out safely in the event that we had to retreat. I couldn’t drop hundreds of people into a hole that turned into a maze and tell them to look for “somewhere in the forest.” That sounded more like dropping them into a neat little box for the Bitterfangs to find than an escape route.

Not only that, but the Bitterfangs were attacking us from *outside*. How could we know for sure that *somewhere* wasn’t going to drop us right at their feet?

“Is there a map?” I asked.

“Lucian might have one,” Aysel said.

“Well, he’s obviously not going to give it to us,” Ava said.

I nodded and looked up at Aysel. “Which is why *you’re* going to go and get it from him. Tell Greyson that Ava and I are going to check out the tunnel and make sure it’s safe.”

Aysel nodded and hurried off, and then Ava and I went back to staring down into the darkness. Curious, I turned around and pulled one of the wine bottles from a nearby shelf, earning myself a flat, “Really?” from Ava.

With a slick grin, I said, “I wonder how much it’s worth?” And then I held it over the tunnel opening and dropped it. It fell into the darkness and disappeared, and then I counted a nerve-wracking eight seconds before we heard it smash. “That’s a long way down.”

“Should we check it out?” Ava asked. “Just to make sure the ladder’s safe?”

“If it isn’t, we’re going to have to find a rope or something,” I said. “I don’t want to waste time waiting for Aysel to come back. Should we just go down and make sure there really is a way out of here?”

Ava nodded. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay,” I said. “You wait up here for Aysel. I’ll go.”

Then I lowered my legs into the tunnel and slowly started to climb down the ladder.

Before I got too far, Ava leaned over and said, “Be careful.”

I smiled at her. “Always.”

She scowled. “Liar. You take *too* many risks.”

I started to shoot back a retort, but I knew she wasn’t wrong, so I settled for, “I promise I’ll be careful *now*,” and then kept climbing down.

The air in the tunnel was freezing, and, thanks to my little depth experiment, smelled like wine. Looking down, even with my sensitive vision, it was hard to see anything. It felt like descending through a void, which made it difficult to gauge how far I’d climbed. When I glanced back up, the light of the entrance seemed farther away than it should’ve been, but I kept going until my shoes crunched against the broken wine bottle on the floor.

“You okay?” Ava called, her voice a distant echo.

“I’m at the bottom!” I called back up to her.

I looked around and could just make out the face of the tunnel and then two paths. When Aysel had said the place was a maze, I hadn’t thought she meant it would *immediately* become a maze.

“Shit,” I huffed quietly to myself. We were definitely going to need that map. “I’m coming back up!” I called out, but I got no response. “Ava?”

When she still didn’t answer, I started to get nervous and scrambled back up the ladder.

“Ava?”

But when I popped my head out into the wine cellar, Ava was gone.

**Episode 4262**

The number of reasons for me to be nervous had officially doubled. I was already worried that the Bitterfangs were gathering in numbers right outside the barricaded door, and *now* I was worried about Xavier roaming the palace’s secret tunnels. Really, it was silly for me to be nervous about that. Xavier had an incredible nose for danger, so it wasn’t like he was just going to go waltzing into a trap, or some threat he couldn’t handle. And besides, Ava was with him.

But still, there was a sense of foreboding in my gut about those tunnels that I couldn’t shake. Lucian was being so weird about them, not wanting anyone to go down there in spite of the emergency, and I couldn’t help but wonder why. We all needed to be doing everything we could to get all of us safely out of here. Was there something we weren’t supposed to see? Was there something down there that was an even bigger risk than the army of angry wolves?

Lucian would’ve told us if there was something *really* dangerous down there, right? He wasn’t *that* much of a selfish, spoiled asshole…

Right?

Greyson was busy strategizing with the other Alphas, and before I could walk over and ask what I could do to help, Artemis approached me.

“Hey,” she said with a sly smile. “I heard that you used your magic against an enemy Alpha.”

My mind immediately flashed back to the huge burst of power that had sent a wolf twice my size *flying*. “I did. It kind of surprised me, but I was just so angry, and it just kind of… happened.”

Adair approached us, then. “Sometimes, you have to use the anger,” he said. “It helps—as long as you don’t let it overwhelm you.” He looked between Artemis and me. “Both of you be at the ready. You’ve come a long way since we started training, and now is the time to use it.” He stepped away, going to Tabitha and wrapping his arms around her.

I felt for Tabitha. She didn’t have magic the way that Adair, Artemis, and I did. At least she had Adair to look out for her.

“How are you feeling?” Artemis asked, interrupting my thoughts. I looked at her, and she seemed to be giving me a once-over scan.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said truthfully. “I mean, I was a little drained immediately after I blasted the guy, but I recovered. I’m not nearly as worried about myself as I am about you. How are you?”

Artemis gingerly touched her side and winced. “I’m a little sore, but I’m feeling better thanks to Torin. I shudder to think—”

Out of nowhere, our conversation was cut off by the sound of loud banging from outside, and everyone turned to look at the barricaded door. My heart had *just* started to calm down, but now it shot right back to racing at top speed.

“What’s that?” I asked nervously.

Artemis shook her head. “I can’t be sure, but I suspect it’s the Bitterfangs trying to knock the doors down with some sort of battering ram. They can be effective in situations like this. I saw plenty of them in the Fae world.”

“*Effective?*” I repeated. “Will they be able to break through?”

I recognized the look on Artemis’s face—she didn’t want to lie, but she didn’t want to be honest, either.

I sighed. “Maybe we should see if Big Mac can reinforce the doors with a spell?”

As soon as I said it, I started looking around, wondering where Big Mac was. A witch’s help in addition to the Fae would be extremely useful, right about now. Had it been a mistake to let Kira head home to do the residual magic test for Xavier? It was certainly beginning to feel like one. Hell, it wasn’t like I’d known what was coming, but it sure would’ve been nice to have her here right now.

It was beginning to feel like I should just *always* expect the Bitterfangs to show up. It felt like I’d seen them more than I hadn’t, lately. Our mistake was going to have horrible consequences.

Hoping Greyson might know where Big Mac was, I started to walk over to him, but then Aysel came running in. I couldn’t remember ever having seen her exert herself before.

And why wasn’t Xavier with her—had something happened?

I shouldn’t have been worrying, I knew that, but I couldn’t help it. I tried to blame it on our mate bond, like usual, but I knew that was just an excuse. I was worried and would continue to be worried until I had evidence that he was okay.

Aysel approached Greyson, fighting to catch her breath. “Xavier and Ava are waiting at the tunnel entrance. I need to get a map from my brother so that we can navigate down there.”

That gave me a little bit of relief. At the very least, it didn’t sound like Xavier was in any immediate danger.

Another boom came from outside the barricaded door, and I frowned. Maybe Xavier wasn’t in any immediate danger, but the same couldn’tbe said for the rest of us.

“Well, hurry up and get the map back to them,” Greyson told Aysel. “I want Xavier back up here in case the barricade falls.”

“Got it,” Aysel said with a nod. Then she looked around and frowned. “Wait. Where’s Lucian?”

Greyson and I started to look around too, and I spotted him in a corner with Elle.

“He’s over there.” I pointed. “Hurry.”

Aysel rushed over to him, and I turned my attention back to Greyson.

“Do you know where Big Mac is?” I asked him. “I was thinking she might be able to fortify the barricade with a spell.”

“That’s a good idea,” Greyson said. “We need to take advantage of all our assets, but…” He glanced around. “I’m actually not sure where she is, either. I’ll find her, though.”

“No, no,” I said. “You have other things to worry about—I’ll find her.”

He looked pained for a moment before he nodded. “Okay, love. Be careful.”

*You know I will be*,I told him.

He gave me a small smile, and then I rushed off. I circled back to grab Artemis as backup, and then we set off in search of Big Mac.

Hunting her down was going to be a daunting task, especially in a place like this. Not only was the palace *huge*,but Lucian had seen fit to fill it with all manner of oversized decorations, suits of armor, and about a hundred fully decorated rooms. Big Mac could’ve ended up anywhere. I didn’t even know where to start. We couldn’t leave her here, wherever she was. I was considering just opening one door after the other, even though it wouldn’t be particularly efficient, but then Artemis made a thoughtful noise.

“Where’s Mrs. Smith?” Artemis said. “Big Mac wouldn’t leave Mrs. Smith.”

I nodded. “That’s true.”

If we could find Greyson’s mom, then we’d be able to find Big Mac.

Soon, we crossed paths with Jay, Lola, Jacqueline, Sage, and Zainab, but none of them had seen either Mrs. Smith or Big Mac.

“Rishika,” Artemis said. “She sees all.”

We hurried over to where Rishika was talking to Ravi and interrupted their conversation.

“Sorry,” I said. “But have either of you seen Big Mac or Mrs. Smith?”

Ravi pointed. “I’m pretty sure I saw Big Mac in one of the studies over there. She was going on and on about the noise. I swear, that woman really knows how to complain.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think it was in the main hallway.”

Artemis led the way toward the hallway that opened the palace up from the front door.

“Okay, let’s split up,” she said. “Just check every room until we find her.”

I nodded. “Give me a holler if you need me.”

“Likewise,” Artemis replied, and then we parted ways, with Artemis checking the left side of the hallway and while I checked the right.

The first door opened up to an empty study. My stomach knotted at the sight of the dark interior. Maybe it had been stupid to hope that we’d find her in the first room we tried, but it sure would have been convenient.

Which, of course, we allknew was Big Mac’s *favorite* thing to be.

Just as I was about to try the second door, there was another loud commotion. Artemis and I looked down the hallway just in time to see Charlie, Violet, Lilac, Perrie, Russell, and Julia bolting around the corner. Charlie, Lilac, Perrie, and Violet were all bleeding, and Russell and Julia looked absolutely petrified.

“Oh god!” I said as I ran toward them. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Charlie just shook his head frantically, his expression severe. “We have to get to Greyson, right now. Malakai and the Bitterfangs are inside the palace.”

**Episode 4263**

**Greyson**

Even though I was doing a pretty good job of hiding it, I was far more concerned about the integrity of the barricade than I was letting on. The Bitterfangs were strong, and they had an axe to grind, and that was a dangerous combination. I had to believe that if the Bitterfangs *did* break through, we’d be strong enough to hold them off, but their hubris in coming here at all was a real concern. What was making them so confident?

I wished that Xavier could get back here already. We were going to need every Alpha we could muster if we wanted to stand a chance of walking away from this without casualties. Even though every otherAlpha in the alliance was already present, Xavier’s absence amounted to a significant power decrease.

Another boom thundered from outside as the barricade took another hit. I swallowed hard. The barricade didn’t have much time left.

“Stack up everything you can!” Mace roared at the Blue Bloods. “Whatever you can find, big or small, pile it in front of the door!”

The Blue Bloods were running around like maniacs trying to strengthen the barricade, but we’d already fortified it with the strongest materials that we had—scooping up the last few chairs and splinters of wood was only delaying the inevitable. I glanced around for Cali, hoping that she’d found Big Mac. And even if she hadn’t, maybe she’d be able to throw up a shield to reinforce the barricade, like she’d been practicing. But having her out here in battle left me uneasy as well. I knew she was capable, but it didn’t mean I didn’t want to protect her from all of this.

No sooner did I have that thought than Cali came running in, followed by Charlie, Violet, Lilac, Perrie, Russell, and Julia. I was relieved at first, but that relief immediately died when I saw the panicked looks on all their faces, and the blood drying on Charlie, Lilac, Violet, and Perrie. This was bad.

I ran up to meet them. “What happened?”

“Malakai found them,” Cali said grimly.

My stomach clenched up and my jaw dropped. “Shit. How?”

Charlie dragged his hand across his face, wiping some of the blood away, and fought to catch his breath. “Malakai’s in the palace—and he knows Julia is alive.”

Those words caused a stir in the ballroom, sending waves of panic rolling through the crowd. I had to act fast, before a full-blown panic broke out, so I jumped up onto the stage and cupped my hands on either side of my mouth.

“Everyone, please try to remain calm! I need the Alphas together—*now!*” I said.

Mace, Duke, Porter, and Lucian came running over, each wearing their own grim expressions. I felt the same, but I had to act. I was the one in charge of all of us. I couldn’t drop the ball now when it was most critical.

I looked at Porter with a frown. “Where’s Rowena?”

“As soon as the Bitterfangs attacked, I sent her away,” he said. “She’s a witch, and we know how they feel about other supernaturals who aren’t werewolves. They’d target her first.”

I hissed with irritation. There was logic behind his decision, so I couldn’t be upset with him for it, but it was frustrating. We desperately needed a witch here to help out, but if Cali could’ve blipped out, I’d have sent her away, too.

“Charlie,” I said. “How many Bitterfangs are with Malakai?”

“Over a dozen,” Charlie said, but he was already shaking his head. “I didn’t really have time to count—I was trying to get Russell and Julia away. I tried to throw them off by using a bunch of different halls, but I’m guessing they’ll still track us.” Then, all of a sudden, his eyes widened. “Was it a mistake, coming back here? I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “No, you did the right thing. It’s okay.”

Rishika walked up to me. “What do you want to do? Should we get ready to fight?”

Taking inventory of everyone in the ballroom, Lilac said, “We can take them.”

Duke scoffed.  “Half of you are untrained children.”

Lilac sized him up. “I’ve already diedonce before—what have you done?”

He sneered. “Exactly. You *died*. Step down, pup.”

It looked like Lilac was ready to keep fighting, but Violet took his hand and pulled him back. “It’s okay, Lilac. Drop it.”

“Look, this isn’t open for debate. Time is running out,” I snapped, then I glared at Duke. “And you’re wrong. All the members of the Redwood pack are experienced fighters.”

It was the truth, but I couldn’t help but consider the massive Bitterfang presence I’d seen from the roof. It was one thing to take on a few dozen Bitterfangs—how many could we reasonably defend ourselves against before we were overwhelmed?

“We have no choice but to fight,” Lucian said, and I *almost* thought he was going to say something logical and reasonable, but then he added, “We haveto repel the attack and save the palace.”

My eyes rolled so hard, it brought on a small headache.

“I couldn’t give a shit about the palace,” I barked, glaring at him. “The survival of our packs is the only thing that matters.”

Charlie could barely sit still. He kept looking over his shoulder, and he was sweating so hard that it was starting to wash away the blood that was drying on his skin. “Whatever we do, we need to do it now. Malakai will be here any second.”

I searched the crowd for my brother and let out a low grumble when I didn’t see him. “Why the fuck isn’t Xavier back?”

I knew Xavier well enough to know that as soon as Aysel told him we were in trouble, he’d race back here—so his absence was making me nervous.

Maybe the Bitterfangs weren’t the only threat that had made it into the palace.

“Greyson.”

I glanced at Cali, who was looking up at me with an intense expression.

“I know that we need all hands on deck here,” she said, “but Malakai is probably coming for Julia. Can we get her and Russell out of harm’s way? Maybe that would slow Malakai down, too?”

I looked over at Julia and saw how petrified she was. I didn’t disagree with Cali—we needed to get her and Russell to safety. But trying to do so without knowing how close Malakai was, and without an actual exit strategy?

“I think that you’re right,” I said, “but unfortunately, I don’t think we have that flexibility right now. For now, it’s safer for them to stay where the alliance can protect them. Don’t worry. We’ll keep them safe.”

I could tell that Cali was worried, but she nodded. “Okay.”

I refocused on the Alphas. “Duke, Mace, Porter—I want you to prepare to lead your packs to the tunnels.”

“We don’t know where the tunnels are, Greyson,” Mace said. “We can’t just lead them on a wild goose chase.”

He was right—I didn’t even know where the tunnels were. The only people who knew were Aysel, Xavier, and Ava—well, and Lucian, who clearly wasn’t going to tell—but none of them were here.

“Dammit! Where the hell is Aysel?” I looked over at Lucian, ready to tell him to go hunt down his sister, but before I could get anything out, we heard the low rumble of several growls.

All eyes shifted toward the ballroom doors, where Malakai now stood, flanked by his pack. An eerie silence fell over the crowd as they realized who was here, and what was about to happen.

I leapt down from the stage and was joined by Mace and the other Alphas. We pushed forward while the rest of the crowd fell back—not that there was really anywhere to fall back to.

“How convenient,” Malakai said with a searing smile. “You’re all together.”

I kept walking toward him, determined to take the asshole down—for good, this time. I wasn’t going to rest until I saw his blood spill. That was clearly the only way this was going to happen. Looking beyond him, I did a quick count of the Bitterfangs who’d shown up with him and saw that Charlie’s guess had been accurate—there had to be at least a dozen of them.

Taking a deep breath, I mind linked with Cali. *Get ready to run.*

*Why? What are you doing?* she demanded.

I was about to shift, but then I felt a sudden gust of wind.

“Julia!” Russell screamed.

A body appeared in front of me, and I realized that the wind I’d felt was Julia pushing past me so she could stand in front of me. No! What the hell was she doing? She planted herself between me and her father, her arms outstretched.

“Stop!” she shouted. “You don’t need to do this! I don’t want anyone else to die! I’ll come back!”

**Episode 4264**

**Xavier**

The fact that I couldn’t find Ava was making me very nervous. She wouldn’t have just walked off and left me here—something had to have happened.

“Ava!” I shouted again, but got nothing in response but the echo of my own voice.

I tried mind linking with her. Still nothing.

Before I could start looking for her in earnest, I heard a low growl from the tunnels below me. I whipped around, wondering if the Bitterfangs had somehow discovered the secret passage. Looking at the ajar trap door, I decided to close it and bolt it again, just in case. Once it was shut, I tested it to make sure it wasn’t weak, then took a moment to press my ear to the trap door and see if I could hear anything else, but there was nothing.

Maybe I’d just imagined the noise? This was certainly a tense situation—it was possible that my anxiety was making me hear things. Really, it could’ve been anything.

But I didn’t have time to focus on that right now. I got back to my feet and replaced the rug over the door. As I straightened, a cold chill swept over me. My spine went ramrod straight, and I paused to listen intently. It was far too quiet.

Sniffing at the air, I found Ava’s scent and started following it. I couldn’t for the life of me imagine why she would’ve just left. I’d been talking to her literal seconds before she’d disappeared, and she obviously knew what was at stake. I took another sniff of the air, trying to determine if Ava’s scent was mixed in with anyone else’s, but I got nothing.

Cautiously, I followed Ava’s scent, proceeding along the wine cellar shelves, back toward the entrance. When I reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs, I saw the cave paintings again. For the first time, I realized they were crude depictions of werewolves, and it looked like they were hunting. Why they held my attention, I wasn’t sure—but then another gentle wind blew, and I caught Ava’s scent again. I needed to be focused on finding her, not on some silly drawings.

As I stepped out of the cave and prepared to climb back up to the palace, I was surprised to see a door to the left of the stairs. I could’ve sworn it hadn’t been there when we’d come down, but maybe I’d been more distracted than I’d known? A place this size had to have about a hundred twists and turns—really, it was no wonder I’d missed it.

Reminding myself to stay focused, I kept walking toward the stairs. But then I realized Ava’s scent trail didn’t lead up to the rest of the palace, but rather through the door.

*What the hell, Ava?*

Slowly, I pushed the door open and crept inside. On the other side, there was a *long* hallway, with candles flickering in sconces along the walls. That on its own didn’t make much sense to me—who was responsible for keeping them lit? And then I thought about it and realized that the idea of a dedicated candle maintenance servant *did* seem perfectly in character for Lucian.

Staying cautious and alert, I walked down the hallway, attempting to mind link with Ava. *Ava. Where are you? Can you respond to me, please?*

But her voice didn’t appear in my head. I was trying my hardest not to panic, but not getting any response from her was unsettling—almost as unsettling as the realization that I was starting to feel genuinely frantic. I was desperate to get to her and make sure she was okay, in a way that I hadn’t expected to feel.

In the past, whenever Ava had been in danger, I’d blamed my concern on my instincts—she was my mate and my Luna, so of course I needed to protect her. But the worry I was feeling now ran deeper than that. Whatever it was that the two of us had, I’d begun to rely on it. Maybe it was just because I couldn’t rely on my connection to Cali anymore—but something was telling me that it was more than that.

Up ahead, I heard a sound and froze. The candles flickered, and it sounded like someone was approaching. Quietly, I crouched down and partially shifted, just in case, but then a figure appeared in the flickering light.

“Ava?” I stood up and started toward her. “Why didn’t you—”

She smiled at me, and I saw that her mouth was dripping with blood.

“What *happened*?” I demanded.

Ava spat out a glob of the blood. “Don’t worry, it isn’t mine.”

I started to close in on her, but then, all of a sudden, her expression darkened and her smile disappeared. She started running toward me, shifting as she went, baring her fangs, her eyes burning with rage.

I stumbled backward, my eyes widening. “What’s wrong with you?”

I shifted and braced myself, knowing full well that I didn’t want to fight Ava, but then she rushed right past me with a rumbling growl. I turned to watch her go, just in time to see her barrel into a massive werewolf.

She wasn’t attacking me—she was trying to protect me.

In an instant, I recognized the other werewolf as Titus, the Bitterfang second.

*Fuck*.

Ava was a good fighter, no question, but Titus lived up to his name—he was huge. And he fought in that unorthodox Bitterfang style that could be tricky to defend against. Ava crashed into him and they went tumbling to the ground. I fully shifted and charged into the fray, but I was quickly kicked aside—and not by Titus, but by Ava.

*What the hell?* I demanded. *I’m trying to help you!*

She glared at me. *Get out of here! The Samaras need you—I’ll take care of Titus.*

*I’m not going to abandon you!*

I charged again, this time avoiding Ava’s paws so that I could really throw myself into the fight. Titus was enormous, and even with Ava and me fighting together, he was so unpredictable that it was almost impossible to get any hits in. He’d bare his teeth and lunge, like he was ready to sink his teeth into your leg, and then he’d twist at the last moment and swipe at your shoulder with his claws.

He clipped Ava across the jaw, and when I wheeled around to snap at him and get his teeth away from her, he kicked out at me, raking his hind claws across my hip. I let out a roar and looked over at Ava, who was fighting for breath.

We weren’t making any progress. All we were doing was *barely* defending ourselves, and we were never going to win this way. We had to work together.

I locked eyes with Ava, and even though she still seemed annoyed that I’d insisted on staying, she nodded at me. Moments later, we both jumped at Titus. Ava went up, so I went down. If he bit, I’d still be able to get to him; if he swiped, Ava would. He lashed out with his paw, and I let it hit me so that Ava could pounce onto his leg and pin it down. I quickly slashed at the paw that Titus had just used to injure me and did the same. When he was down, Ava dug her hind leg into his groin and flexed her claws.

With him secured, I sank my teeth into his neck and ripped upwards, taking a huge chunk out of his throat. He stopped moving, and Ava and I let him go and stumbled away.

I spat out the chunk of Titus’s flesh and ran toward Ava, shifting as I moved, and she met me halfway.

“Are you okay?” I demanded breathlessly.

She just scowled up at me. “Why didn’t you listen to me?”

“We killed him. It’s over,” I said, almost sick with relief that she was unharmed.

Titus’s blood was streaked across her skin, and the soft golden glow of the candlelight haloed her head and made her eyes sparkle, giving her a sensual look that made my wolf stir. Without thinking, I wrapped her in my arms and kissed her, already anticipating more. I knew this wasn’t the time or the place—there was a literal war going on—but I couldn’t help it. I needed her.

Just as Ava started to kiss me back, I tasted blood in my mouth—Ava’s blood. She suddenly jerked and gasped, and I pulled back.

“What is it?” I demanded.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t get anything out. Blood began to gush out of her mouth—there was too much. Far too much. She started coughing out the blood, spraying more of it against me. But then she went silent. She was gagging.

She was choking on her own blood.

Panic rose within me. What did I do? How the fuck did I stop this from happening? Before I could act, her eyes rolled back and she went limp, collapsing in my arms.

“AVA!”

**Episode 4265**

Everyone in the ballroom was dead silent as Julia stared her father down. She’d mentioned the possibility of turning herself in before, but I’d thought we’d all decided against the idea. But it must’ve been too hard for her to just stand here and watch the war begin again.

I wouldn’t allow her to sacrifice herself, though. She was just doing what she thought was best, but none of us wanted her to give up her life for us. That was why we’d hidden and protected her this whole time. I started to step toward her to pull her back, but then Greyson grabbed my shoulder, pinning me in place.

“Greyson,” I said. “Julia doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll handle it.”

Still, I looked over at Julia and begged, “Please come back. Don’t do this.”

Russell broke free of the crowd of Alphas trying to hold him back and rushed up to stand defensively in front of Julia.

“I’m not letting you do this,” he told her, and then he turned to face Malakai. “Just take me. It was all my idea. I’m the reason she left you. Take me.”

Malakai’s eyes flashed with fury. “Oh, I will. I’ll take you both.”

*How evil can this man possibly be?* I asked Greyson silently. But I already knew the answer.

Malakai turned his attention to his daughter. “Come with me.”

Julia hesitated.

“Julia, don’t!” I shouted.

But she stepped forward anyway, ignoring both me and Russell, who was trying desperately to hold her back. I saw Malakai’s hand drifting to his side, reaching to grab something that glinted in the ballroom light—he’d partially shifted his hand. It was his claw.

He was going to stab her.

My hand hummed with energy as I called my magic, but I didn’t have a clear shot. It was a risk, but one I had to take, so I screamed, “Get down!” and raised my hand. But before I could fire at Malakai, Greyson shifted and lunged at him, and that was the cut that snipped the thread—all hell broke loose.

Malakai’s pack came bolting forward to protect their leader, and so the alliance Alphas charged forward as well along with their strongest fighters. In the chaos, Julia was knocked down to the ground, falling at Honora’s feet as she came into the ballroom. I thought about blasting *her* to keep her away from Julia, but moments after I had the thought, there were bodies and wolves everywhere—suddenly, I couldn’t blast Honora without risking hitting an ally, or Julia, for that matter.

Malakai—who was keeping his distance from the fray, allowing his pack to shield him—looked over at his mate and thundered, “Grab Julia! Now!”

Honora looked down at her daughter. As I rushed to Julia’s side, I thrust my magic-primed hand toward the Bitterfang Luna, ready to blast her away…

And she stepped back.

I froze with shock, but then the screaming and fighting quickly snapped me out of it, and I grabbed Julia—lifting her straight off the floor—and pulled her away from the Bitterfangs.

I quickly twisted around and shoved her into Russell’s arms. “We can’t let him get to her! He’ll kill her! We have to get her out of here!”

I was still shaking from the horror of witnessing Julia getting ready to sacrifice herself, and Malakai getting ready to murder her. He’d intended to do it right here, in front of everyone. It made me sick to my stomach.

On the opposite end of the spectrum was Honora, who easily could’ve reached Julia before me, or at least put up a fight, but who’d silently stepped aside instead. Had anyone else noticed? Why the hell had she done it? She’d even been fucking *late* for the confrontation.

I made sure Julia and Russell were safely behind me, then turned back to the battle and got ready to join the fight. *How* I was going to do that, I wasn’t entirely certain. I could fight, sure, but the ballroom was a chaotic flurry of werewolves right now, and I wasn’t exactly sure where I’d be useful.

Before I could make a decision, a Bitterfang werewolf broke free of the tornado and lunged toward me. I stepped backward, wanting to make sure I was protecting Julia and Russell as well as myself, but then a magic arrow came streaking through the air and hit the advancing wolf in the side. It went crashing to the ground at my feet, and when I whipped around, I saw a very confident-looking Artemis on the other side of the ballroom. She grinned, giving me a little salute with her magic bow, then she winked and summoned another arrow.

At that point, I belatedly remembered that I wasn’t limited to blasting people anymore. I had more than one weapon to work with, now—and what had I been painstakingly training for, if not this moment?

Holding out my arms, I summoned up my sword in one hand and my shield in the other. The shield was a little unsteady, but it felt good on my arm. I slammed the shield into an attacking wolf, knocking it to the side, and immediately lunged after it with my sword—missing it by inches. But even with that little failure, using my sword and shield was flooding me with power.

I could do this.

I spied Greyson in the thick of the battle, taking care of a Bitterfang wolf. There was another one running up behind him, so I sprinted forward and blasted him with my magic, catching the second wolf off-guard and sending him flying. He slammed into the wall and let out a loud howl, and I moved to stand defensively at Greyson’s side. As I did, I couldn’t help but notice that the Bitterfangs seemed to have realized they’d bitten off more than they could chew—we were gaining ground, and fast.

The Bitterfangs were being forced out of the ballroom.

*Once we get them out, secure the door*, Greyson mind linked to me.

I glanced down into his eyes to let him know that I’d heard him, but also that I was *not* about to let him get trapped outside the ballroom with the Bitterfangs.

We continued to push them back, and we were on the edge of the ballroom. If we could get them out of here, maybe we could gain the upper hand. But then some of the Bitterfangs started to push on the ballroom doors. Duke and Mace were already moving to keep the doors open, but they were straining. What did we do?! Stay here and get completely cornered against the door by the Bitterfangs and their allies? Or get trapped inside the ballroom?

We were losing the doors quickly. We were losing the *advantage*. And if the doors shut, Greyson was going to be stuck out there.

“Greyson!” I screamed. I stepped out into the hallway, grabbed onto Greyson’s fur, and yanked him back. We just barely slid through before the doors were slammed in our face.

In my arms, Greyson shifted back to human and called out, “Get the doors! Don’t let them close us in here!”

I called to my sword and shield, watching them appear right in front of me, and tried to slow my racing heart. Sure, we had we managed to save Julia from her father’s murderous treachery, but we’d also been forced into the Bitterfangs out.

Everyone in the ballroom, Greyson included, got busy shoving against the door to try to reopen it, but it wasn’t budging. He swore. I stepped up to him and gently pulled him away. He had an open wound bleeding down his side, but it was already healing.

“We’ll get out of here,” I told him. “We’ll figure it out.”

Looking around, I was actually relieved to see that, despite all the fighting, barely any of our people had been injured, let alone severely. Torin was healing one of the Cobalt wolves, and now that Charlie had gotten a chance to stop and breathe, he was accepting care from Violet while Lilac looked on anxiously.

“Everyone seems to be okay. That’s a good thing,” I told Greyson, still fighting for breath.

“And what about you?” He was watching me with deep concern. “Are you okay?”

I smiled at him, playfully holding out my arms. “Not even a scratch.” He let out a little sigh of relief, and I asked, “But what are we going to do now? We’re trapped in the ballroom. What if they barricaded the other side? What if they’re just waiting for us to try to get out and then Malakai and his goons will attack?”

“We have no way of knowing,” Rishika said, pointing to a few single doors throughout the room. “Any door we try will lead out to the main hallway, where Malakai is.”

“Crap. We really are trapped,” I said.

With a grim nod, he turned around and jumped up onto stage, calling the attention of everyone in the room. “Look, I know this isn’t how any of us saw our night going, but the Bitterfangs have us surrounded. We’re going to have to fight our way out no matter what.”

**Episode 4266**

**Xavier**

My scream was still echoing off the walls, but it was cut short when I spotted a shadow looming in front of me. The candlelight flickered once again and I noticed that Titus, now shifted back to human, was standing behind Ava. He held a bloodied sword glistening in his hands.

“Guess these human things can come in handy sometimes,” he said. He raised the sword to strike me, but I carefully rolled Ava’s lifeless body to the side and lunged at him, ducking under his guard and tackling him to the ground. He was trying to keep hold of the sword, but I’d already grabbed it by the hilt and was trying to wrestle it from his grip.

I wasn’t sure if I was crying because of the devastation of losing Ava or the white rage of facing her murderer, but both emotions were bleeding through my body, electrifying my every cell. Titus was no match for my fury, and eventually, I got him pinned down, my foot on his neck. I wrenched the sword from his hands and plunged it straight into his chest. I shoved until I felt the sword hit the floor on the other side of the man’s body—and then I stopped pushing and started twisting.

This was for *Ava*.

Titus gurgled blood, but even on death’s door, an evil sneer appeared on his face.

“You’re too late to save them,” he hissed. “You’re always too late.”

Even more anger filled my body, and I yanked the sword free and slashed it right across Titus’s neck. His blood sprayed my front, but I didn’t care, because his eyes glazed over, and he went still—dead for sure, this time.

I fell away from him, then turned over onto my knees and crawled toward Ava’s body. She was still a vision of beauty in the soft light, but she was gone. She’d left me. I lifted her into my arms hoping—*praying*—that maybe I’d imagined it, but her skin was cold, and her mouth and body were drenched in her own blood.

How could this be happening? I didn’t understand.

Ava was my mate—my *Luna*. I was supposed to protect her. The feeling of wet warmth on my face startled me, and I realized that there were more tears coming now—this time, not brought on by the heat of battle. This was just… grief. Pure, raw, unexpected. It was a lump in my throat that was threatening to strangle me.

“Don’t leave me,” I whispered. “Don’t die.” I leaned closer, my lips brushing against her ear as I cradled her as close to me as I could. “I love you.”

My whole body was shaking, and I didn’t know what to do next. I was half prepared to just sit there with Ava until death came and found me as well, but then I felt a tap on my shoulder. My instincts kicked in, and I jumped up and spun around, standing defensively in front of Ava’s body…

… only to come face-to-face with a very puzzled-looking Ava staring back at me.

“Did you say something?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

For at least a full minute, I didn’t move—I barely breathed. My brain was struggling to process what was going on. I finally found the strength to look over my shoulder, expecting to see the two dead bodies. But the corridor was empty.

What was happening? Was I going crazy?

“Xavier?” Ava reached up and gently cupped my cheek. “You’ve been crying? Are you okay?”

Too overwhelmed to speak, desperate to prove to myself that the Ava I was looking at now *wasn’t* a hallucination, I reached out and pulled her into a tight hug—so tight that she eventually grunted breathlessly. “Too much!”

I eased up, but only a little. I refused to let go of her. I needed to feel her against me right now. To know that she was here and not dead. I needed to feel her chest rising and falling as she breathed, the reverberation of her voice as she spoke, the calming beat of her heart. My brain was damn near thrashing against the sides of my skull as it struggled to figure out what the hell was going on.

“Xavier, please tell me what’s wrong,” Ava said. “You’re scaring me.”

Struggling to find my voice, I finally managed to say, “I thought you…” I looked back again, still convinced that I’d see Ava’s lifeless body, but it wasn’t there. And not only was it not there, but the pool of blood was gone, too. It looked like nothing had happened here at all. Wait… “The floor…”

“The floor?” Ava said. “What about it?”

We’d been fighting on a stone floor, but now, I was kneeling on the rough floor of the cave. I looked up and took stock of my surroundings, realizing that I wasn’t in that mysterious hallway anymore—I was back in the wine cellar.

“You thought what? That I’d abandoned you.” A smile came to Ava’s face. “Geez, I leave you for one second, and you’re falling to pieces. Actually, that’s kind of romantic.”

I frowned. “I called for you, and you weren’t there. I—”

I looked back at the trap door that led to the tunnels, but the rug had been pulled aside and the door was open. I could’ve sworn I’d covered it up.

“I thought I heard something and went to make sure it wasn’t the Bitterfangs,” Ava said. “But I wasn’t gone long. Twenty, maybe thirty seconds.”

“I tried to mind link with you.” I said. “Why didn’t you respond?”

She shook her head. “No, you didn’t. Are you sure you didn’t hit your head down there?”

I didn’t answer—honestly, I didn’t know what to say. I was still kind of freaking out, but I had to pull myself together.

“What did you find down there?” Ava asked. “Can we use the tunnels to escape?”

Finally fighting off my feeling of temporary insanity, I said, “I think so, but we need that map. The tunnel splits immediately, right at the bottom of the ladder. Didn’t Aysel come back yet?”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Do you see Aysel? Am I holding a map?”

I sighed. “Fine, then I think we need to go back to the ballroom. We’ve been gone too long.” Though I really had no idea *how* long we’d been gone. Everything was still a blur.

“I agree. Let’s go.”

As we started to make our way back up the stairs, I noticed that the door I’d gone through earlier wasn’t there. I stopped on the stairs and started feeling along the wall, wondering if there was something I’d missed, or some kind of secret door handle.

“Hey.” Ava grabbed my arm and turned me around to look at her. “What’s going on? What happened to you down there?”

I took a deep, shaky breath as I relived the horror of watching Ava die in my arms.

“I thought you…”

I stopped. If I told her what I’d seen, she’d ask me *why* I’d seen it, and I just didn’t have an explanation. Icouldn’t explain it cogently to myself, let alone someone else. Had it been a hallucination? Or was *this* the hallucination?

Maybe I was dead and this was my personal hell.

“I called for you and didn’t hear from you, so I got worried,” I said, trying to sound more annoyed than shaken—she’d ask fewer questions, that way.

Ava still had that small smile on her face. “Well, I can’t be mad at you for worrying about me, now can I?” She stood up on her toes to give me a kiss. “Come on—we should hurry.”

As we jogged up the stairs, I suddenly heard my own voice echoing in my mind. *Don’t leave me. Don’t die… I love you.* The memory jolted me, sent a chill running down my spine. Why had I said that? And, more importantly, did I feel it?

And then I heard Adéluce’s sick laugh ringing in my ears.

It had been her. Everything I’d seen, everything I’d experienced—that entire nightmare—it had been Adéluce. I wanted to scream, but I was with Ava, and I couldn’t.

*I heard you*, Adéluce sang in my mind. *You told Ava that you love her. The four-letter word I’ve been waiting to hear you say.*

I clutched my head with the hand that Ava wasn’t holding, trying in vain to stop her voice.

“What’s wrong?” Ava asked.

“Just a headache,” I lied.

I wasn’t going to admit what I’d seen in the hallucination. I hadn’t told the *real* Ava that I loved her, and right now that was the only relief I was getting. I’d been tricked into saying it to a fake. But I’d still said it, hadn’t I?

*Since I know how you truly feel about Ava, I can use your love against you*, Adéluce said, sounding as happy as I’d ever heard her. *You think things with Cali were bad? I haven’t even gotten started.*

**Episode 4267**

**Greyson**

Immediately, the room erupted into concerned murmurs and frustrated comments about our being too disorganized and unprepared to fight through the ring of Bitterfangs that had already trapped us in here. I couldn’t disagree with them, but fighting seemed like the only—

“There’s a secret exit,” Lucian announced from somewhere in the middle of the room, his voice thick with annoyance. All eyes shifted toward him, and he continued. “Different from the tunnels. There’s another way to get out of this room that they can’t possibly know about.”

Jumping off the stage, I ran over to him. “Why the fuck didn’t you say so earlier? Where is it?”

He immediately led me to a wall of portraits of his seemingly endless supply of relatives.

Behind us, there was more pounding on the door.

“Guys, this door is going to crumble any minute!” Ravi shouted.

“Hurry,” I told Lucian. “I want to get as many people out as possible.” Then I turned to Adair. “Can you help lead the charge? I know you’re Fae and not technically—”

“I’ll do it,” Adair interjected. “For Tabitha and Dani and everyone else.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving him a quick nod.

Mace, Duke, and Porter all approached.

“We need to regroup,” Porter said. “They drove us back. If they decide to come in here, we’re screwed.”

Duke nodded. “Agreed. We can’t take on the Bitterfangs like this with our backs up against the wall. There are too many of them, and we’re disorganized and unprepared. If we can sneak out of the palace and gather our forces, we’ll be able to launch a surprise counterattack. That way, we’ll stand a chance at finallycrushing Malakai and his followers.”

Lucian walked up to a portrait of a woman who looked like an older version of Aysel and hooked his hand into the side. He fiddled for a moment, then the portrait swung to the side, revealing a paneled door behind it. Lucian pushed it, and it popped open.

I peered in and noticed that the passage beyond was particularly narrow. “Where does this lead?”

“To my bedroom,” Lucian replied.

“And can we get to the secret tunnels from your bedroom?” I asked, half-annoyed.

I’d initially assumed that this was a practical addition to the ballroom, but now I was beginning to think it had been built as a quick escape for Lucian to… I forced myself to stop thinking about it. There was *nothing* good down that path.

However, Lucian nodded at me. “Not directly, but there’s another passage that leads to the tunnels.”

Cali scoffed. “Just how many secret tunnels and doorways do you *have*?”

The princeling shrugged. “Just be glad I had the foresight to have them built. *And* that I’m being generous enough to share them with you all.”

Saving his own ass, along with his pack’s, and just so happening to have some other people in the general area wasn’t exactly what I’d have called *generous*, but I didn’t want to argue with Lucian right now. We didn’t have the time, and I had to focus all of my energy on saving the alliance.

There was a sound of splintering wood behind us—the door—and Rishika looked at me. She didn’t have to say anything. We were nearly out of time.

“Lucian,” I said. “Get everyone out except Mace, Porter, Duke, and Paige.” I looked at Cali. She was watching me with anticipation. I didn’t want her to stay behind—if she followed Lucian, there was a good chance she’d be able to escape—but I knew that look on her face. “And Cali. We’ll stay behind until the rest of the alliance is safe.”

Lucian let out an actual whine, like a lost puppy. “I really think I should stay behind with some of my fighters, too. It *is* my palace that’s under siege—and I’m as much an alliance Alpha as the rest of you.”

“You’re also the only person who knows the secret tunnels,” I told him. “It’s your responsibility to make sure the others get out.”

He watched me for a moment, but then nodded, and I made a mental note not to get used to this level of helpfulness from him—it was situational.

I turned to face the rest of the ballroom. “All right!” I shouted. “I need everyone to follow Lucian. Move quickly and quietly.”

The Vanguards immediately started throwing around the same arguments as Lucian, and they weren’t the only ones—a number of wolves from the other packs weren’t happy about the idea of leaving, either. It filled me with pride to see Artemis, Rishika, Ravi, Violet, Charlie, Sage, and Zainab in that group—even Jacqueline stayed—but I believed they could be better utilized.

“Those of you who want to fight, it’s your job to make sure everyone gets out safely,” I said. “There’s no guarantee that this plan will go smoothly. We’ll need some of our strongest fighters in the tunnels, as well.”

This seemed to soothe the complainants.

“We still haven’t accounted for your mom or Big Mac,” Cali told me quietly.

I shook my head. “I’m not too worried about that. Big Mac will make sure they’re both safe.”

“And what about Xavier?” Cali asked.

Between the locked door and the Bitterfangs, Xavier and Ava wouldn’t be able to get back into the ballroom. I’d just have to hope that my brother figured out what was going on and acted accordingly. “I’m hoping he’s formulating a plan to get us out through the tunnels already that Aysel showed them.”

Cali nodded. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If I hadn’t believed Malakai was dead, none of this would be happening. I should’ve listened to my gut. I *knew* something was wrong with the way Malakai fell off the ridge.”

Cali wrapped her arms around me, giving me a comforting hug. “It isn’t your fault. You did everything you could to prove it. Nobody’s going to blame you.”

I hugged her back. “I’ll try to remember that.” Rubbing my hands across her back and being grateful for this moment, I asked, “Are you sure you won’t leave with the others?”

She shook her head against my chest. “My magic might not be as good as Adair’s, but I can still cause some damage.”

I knew that. I’d seen it for myself.

We walked over and joined the other Alphas and Lunas.

“Once the last wolf makes it through the door, the rest of you will follow,” I told them.

Cali glared up at me. “What about you?”

Smiling at her, I said, “I’ll be right behind you, bringing up the rear.”

There was more pounding on the door, and a few of the pieces of furniture that pack members had rushed to buttress it clattered to the floor. We were out of time. The next push was going to let them in.

I whirled back around to the assembled alliance wolves. “Hurry!”

As people started to step through the portrait and into the passage, Mace sniffed at the air and then frowned. “Something’s burning.”

My nose went up instinctually, and I sniffed, immediately picking up the smell of burning wood. “I can smell it too. Are the Bitterfangs trying to smoke us out?”

About half of the alliance had made it into the passage when a thunderous boom made our heads whip around toward the door. Whatever they were doing outside, it was officially working. The door was splintering, and it was just a matter of them getting the furniture out of the way.

“Go!” I yelled at the stragglers. “Hurry!”

Those who were left broke into a mad scramble, rushing through the secret doorway. Cali, always one to try for calm—because she had a particular knack for putting people in a more serene state of mind—ran over and held out her hands.

“Hurry, but don’t fight each other!” she told them. “It’s only going to slow everything down.” She started physically shoving the wolves into two lines—the only configuration that would fit the width of the narrow hallway. “Hands on shoulders! No gaps! Go!”

As I watched the door, I felt sweat breaking out on my forehead.

“Any second,” I called to Mace and the others. “Get ready.”

Just as the last few wolves climbed into the secret passage, Cali left them behind and came to stand at my side. I really wished that she wasn’t staying behind—I’d have felt so much better if she’d been on her way to safety with Lucian and the others—but at the same time, having her with me was filling me with a sense of power. Because she was here, I had no choice but to win this fight. I would protect her with everything I had.

The other Alphas turned toward the door as well, and then there was an eerie silence. Even the sound of our breathing could barely be heard, probably because most of us were holding it. Heat was filling up the room, and now smoke was sneaking in. Cali lifted her hands, and they were haloed with a sort of magic haze.

There was an ear-splitting crash, and the Bitterfangs began to pour into the ballroom.

**Episode 4268**

The sheer number of Bitterfangs swarming into the ballroom made them look like scattering roaches. They were *flooding* in, like they were a sea held back by a failing dam, crawling over the last remaining piece of the barricade.

“Please, be careful, love,” Greyson begged. “You can use your magic from a distance without getting too physically involved.”

I knew that he was scared for me, but I could fight—I *wanted* to fight. But before I could argue with him, he shifted, and was joined by the others as they threw themselves into the battle. There wasn’t time to second-guess myself or wait for approval—I summoned up my sword and shield, determined to take full control of them both.

We were ridiculously outnumbered, but Greyson and the other Alphas were being smart. Exactly *because* there were so many Bitterfangs, they kept getting in each other’s way as they fought to pounce on Greyson and the others who were stuck together in a circle, each of them with their backs to each other.

Which, of course, meant it wasn’t long before the Bitterfangs on the fringes of the fight spotted me—a nice, separate, “keeping her distance” target.

I gripped my weapons tight, preparing to face the small horde headed my way—but then a familiar magic arrow whizzed through the air, hitting one of the incoming wolves. In seconds, I found myself flanked by Artemis, Rishika, Charlie, Lola, and Jay.

Though I was grateful for the backup, I was still frustrated as hell that they weren’t escaping.

“Why didn’t you get out with Adair and the others?” I asked Artemis.

“We didn’t get the chance,” she said. “The barricade fell just as we were about to go through. We shut the door before the Bitterfangs could figure out how everyone escaped.” 

I looked over my shoulder at the secret passage and saw that no one seemed to see it. Hopefully it would stay that way—anonymous. If the Bitterfangs discovered that that was the way everyone had escaped, they would absolutely breach the exit. Everyone would be in danger.

“We have to make sure no one gets to that door,” I told Artemis.

I locked eyes with Rishika and told her to stay back and hold down the fort with Charlie, Lola, and Jay. And then Artemis and I fought our way toward the secret passage and took down any enemy wolves that were in its vicinity. Artemis was alternating between magical arrows and her daggers, and I was lunging for anyone who got close, slashing at them with my Fae sword. Our confidence was growing, and I always felt stronger when I had Artemis at my side.

“Let’s get back in there. If we stand here too long, they might pick up on us practically guarding it,” Artemis said, and Rishika’s wolf nodded. Then she looked at me and grabbed a dagger off of her thigh. “Take this. Let’s go.”

I took the dagger and followed Artemis and Rishika back into the battle. Scanning the outer ring of it, I noticed that Greyson was fighting a Bitterfang wolf. He wasn’t losing, by any means, but it seemed like he wasn’t gaining the upper hand, either. I threw my shield and sword up into the air, and they dissipated. In their place, I conjured a swarm of my magic and sent a blast of it flying. It smashed through the other enemies and collided into the side of the wolf Greyson was fighting, knocking him off balance just long enough for Greyson to finish him off.

*Thanks*,he said, and I nodded at him.

I turned back toward the secret door and was about to summon my sword and shield again when I had the wind knocked out of me and was tackled to the ground. I managed to scramble onto my back, but what I saw next didn’t inspire confidence. Andrew of the Hackberry pack was out for vengeance, snarling at me with his fangs bared, about to sink them into my neck. I immediately tried to throw him off, but the position he’d tackled me into had my hands trapped—my magic was useless. 

The dagger that Artemis had given me was hot in my hand, but it was just out of reach. Any major attempt on my part to shift so I could either get to the dagger or use my magic would give Andrew too much leverage—I just had to focus on making sure he couldn’t rip my throat out.

“GET OFF MY SISTER!” Artemis’s scream echoed off the walls, its volume matched by the sound of Andrew’s yelps a moment later. 

I shoved the struggling Alpha off. There was a huge gash on his back that was bleeding profusely, and his blood was dripping from Artemis’s dagger. She grabbed my hand, pulling me to my feet.

I grinned at her shakily. “Tha—”

Artemis went down, a werewolf plowing into her side.

I leapt onto the werewolf’s back, then grabbed handfuls of his fur pulled backward with all my might. It was just enough to keep him from biting Artemis. Artemis was trying to get her dagger hand free so she could stab him, but he was stronger than the two of us combined, and currently trying to buck me off like a raging bull.

Suddenly, the air was split with a thunderous roar, and I saw a flash of dark fur as Rishika lunged at Artemis’s attacker, sending all of us toppling to the ground like a fallen Jenga tower. I managed to flip to my feet and skid to a stop on the polished floor, just in time to see Rishika rip into the wolf’s neck with a spray of blood, leaving him limp and still.

Artemis was getting to her feet on my other side, and I quickly scrambled up and started toward her—but then she raised her arm and threw her dagger straight at me. I froze in shock, the dagger whizzed right by my head—I could’ve sworn I felt it graze my cheek—and then I heard a yelp right behind me, just before something heavy slammed into my back.

I spun around, letting the heavy weight fall away, and saw a dead Bitterfang wolf collapse to the ground, Artemis’s dagger sticking out of its open mouth.

Artemis darted past me.  “You can thank me later,” she said, and ripped the dagger free.

I wanted to tell her what a badass she was, but I didn’t have the time to comment—more Bitterfangs were pouring in. Considering how outnumbered we were, we were managing pretty well so far, but it seemed too good to be true. I was beginning to feel the strain of using my magic, and I had to imagine everyone else was starting to feel fatigued as well. The Bitterfangs just kept coming.

How long could we possibly keep this up?

I tried not to think of that feeling of dread I’d been having, which had only gotten worse when I’d seen the Bitterfangs and their allies gathering at the edge of the woods. No matter how many wolves we managed to kill or fend off, there were always more to take their place. I tried with all my might to force the pessimism away, but it felt like we were fighting a losing battle.

A familiar howl cracked through the air, and I whipped around to see Lola being cornered by two wolves. Jay was fighting a large wolf of his own, trying to get to her, but he wasn’t gaining ground fast enough. Desperate, I bolted in Lola’s direction, rushing past Mace and a pair of wolves he was fighting. As I ran, I held out my hand for my sword. I felt the hilt start to materialize, but then Mace knocked back one of the wolves I was jumping over and I lost my footing, tumbling ass over teakettle and rolling toward Lola and her attackers. I crashed into their hind legs—which, in my defense, *did* get them to stop closing in on Lola.

But that was only so they could turn on me.

Scrambling backward, I shot a bolt of magic at one of the wolves, making it yelp and rear back in pain. Lola pounced on the other one, ripping into the back of its neck. 

I got to my feet, but I felt light-headed and nearly fell right back down. This battle was wearing on me, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep using my magic at this pace or intensity—it just wasn’t possible. From here on out, I’d have to be more selective when using my powers.

Lola gestured urgently at a spot somewhere behind me, and I turned to see that Jacqueline had her fangs planted in the neck of a Bitterfang wolf, who was trying to shake her free. I rushed over to help, but there was no need. The wolf collapsed at her feet and Jacqueline stepped back, breathing heavily. 

“Go!” I told her. “The door!”

But before Jacqueline could respond, yet another massive group of Bitterfangs came pouring in.

“Shit,” I muttered, my heart sinking. “There are too many.”

All of a sudden, the air began to quiver with energy. It was powerful enough that for the briefest of seconds, every single person in the ballroomstopped moving. There was a blur of movement, and then Big Mac blipped into the center of the room. She staggered forward, blood running down her side, and raised her hands.

And then the room exploded.

**Episode 4269**

**Xavier**

The ground shook under my feet, sending me rocking into Ava. I grabbed onto her, keeping her from falling. A massive *roar* filled the air around us.

“What the hell was that?” I demanded.

Ava shook her head, wide-eyed. “I don’t know.”

My worries about Adéluce were going to have to wait—I couldn’t let her fuck with my head right now, not when so many people were depending on me. We should never have stayed away as long as we had. The Bitterfangs were too close. For all I knew, they’d already broken in. It seemed it was inevitable anyway.

“We have to go,” I said grimly.

I took Ava’s hand and we stumbled up the rest of the stairs. At the top, I paused to listen, but it didn’t take much focus to figure out what was going on—I could hear wolves in the distance, lots of them, and they sounded like they belonged to the Bitterfangs’ alliance packs.

“They got in,” I told Ava quietly, and then I started running toward the ballroom.

If we didn’t do something, we were going to be utterly fucked.

As it usually did, my mind went to Cali. How I’d left her in the ballroom when Ava and I had gone to check out the secret tunnels. How I hadn’t wanted to leave her in that situation, but I’d had no choice. Adéluce never would’ve allowed me to bring Cali along—and besides, but how would I have explained that to Ava?

Still, knowing it had been out of my control brought me little comfort. I just had to hurry, and hope that Cali was still alive.

Hell, I had to get out of here alive, too.

Together, Ava and I moved silently through the hallway. All of my senses were alert—if someone were going to appear, they would be dead on the floor before they realized they’d seen us. At least, if we weren’t ridiculously outnumbered.

As we approached an intersection, I stopped and considered our options. The Vanguard palace was a maze in its own right. We had to get back to the others.

“I fucking hate this place,” I huffed. “How do we get to the ballroom?”

Ava gestured at the hallway to the right. “I think it’s this way.”

She took the lead as we crept forward, but we didn’t make it very far before she stopped short. I froze as well, listening.

*Someone’s coming*, Ava mind linked.

I wrapped my arm around her torso and backed us up, pressing us carefully into the recess of a doorway. I could feel her hot breath on my neck and her body pressed against mine, and *fuck*, I wanted to protect her, too. I wanted to protect both Cali *and* Ava. It was madness. How was I meant to be in two places at once?

Answer—I couldn’t, and it was pissing me the hell off. Which, of course, was exactly what Adéluce wanted. But what else was new?

The footsteps drew closer. I was ready to take them out before they knew it, but then I caught a familiar scent. I knew who this was.

*Aysel*.

She came around the corner, and I stepped out, startling her.

“Thank god!” she burst out. “I’ve been looking for you—the Bitterfangs broke through to the ballroom!”

I grabbed her shoulders. “What happened to the alliance? What was that explosion?”

She shook her head. “I-I-I don’t! I don’t—”

“Aysel!” Ava growled. “Focus! Tell us what the hell happened!”

“*I don’t know!*” she screeched back. “I don’t know what’s going on. Lucian sent me off to get the map to the secret tunnels from one of his studies, but on my way back, I saw Malakai and some of the Bitterfangs trying to break down the door to the ballroom—from *inside* the palace. I circled around, but I realized that the other side was barricaded to try to keep them out, and then I saw it break down. I was running back to tell you when…” She was shaking, and she kept looking around in every direction, clearly shaken. She shrugged helplessly. “The whole palace shook.”

I heard a noise from farther down the hallway, and I pulled Ava and Aysel into the room that Ava and I had been standing in the doorway of. I shut the door carefully behind us and took a deep breath. I knew we couldn’t stay here for long—I didn’t *want* to stay here for long—but I just needed a moment to think. The last thing I wanted was to send us all into some suicide mission.

If I’d been in the ballroom when the Vanguards had come in, what would I have done?

No, that wasn’t how I had to think. I *hadn’t* beenin the ballroom—Greyson had. That was more important. What would *he* have done?

One thing I could count on was that Greyson loved Cali fiercely and would do whatever it took to protect her. He might have tried to get her out, somehow—but facing off against so many Bitterfangs, what chance did they really have?

I glanced at Aysel. “Is there another way into the ballroom?”

Still looking beside herself, Aysel said, “Probably. Lucian has hidden doors *everywhere*. Tunnels and secret corridors. He’s slipped out of parties before, even when I’ve been watching the doors. I’m pretty sure he has a secret door in the ballroom. It’s the only way he could’ve gotten out without being spotted.”

“Would he have told Greyson about it?” I asked.

Aysel wrung her hands. “I really, really think he would have. If they were cornered and the Bitterfangs were breaking in, he’d have wanted to save the Vanguards, too. If there’s a way out, and I’m pretty confident there is, he’d have revealed it.”

I nodded, thinking she was probably right. And Greyson would’ve used the escape route the moment he’d found out about it. That could mean that Cali wasn’t in the palace anymore. That was the only good thing I’d give Greyson.

I looked at Aysel again. “Do you have any idea where the passage would lead?”

“His bedroom?” she said uncertainly. “I can’t be positive, but that’s where a lot of the palace’s secret corridors end up, so it’s *likely*…”

“Okay, let’s make our way in that direction,” I said. “If you’re right, and everyone is there, then we can lead them down to the wine cellar and hope that these maps of yours are accurate.”

Aysel nodded. “I think that we should take one of the rear staircases. They’re far enough away from the ballroom that we should be able to pass by undetected.”

That suggestion left me conflicted. The idea of *sneaking* around the Bitterfangs and their allies, hoping to avoid them, when what I really wanted to do was kill them? It made my skin crawl. I wanted nothing more than to just run out there and tear every last one of them to shreds—*especially* Malakai.

But I had to be smart and think of those around me—just like I imagined Greyson had done, despite his own no-doubt desperate need to rip into the Bitterfangs. I couldn’t take them on like this. It was just me, Ava, and Aysel, who was panicked enough that she wasn’t in *any* position to fight.

Slowly and quietly, I stepped out of the room and peered down the hallway. At first, it was quiet, but then I saw a shadow moving down the hall.

Wolves. At least two of them. They’d probably been ordered to search every room. While I had wanted to go guns blazing if someone came across us, we didn’t want them to know about the secret entrance.

“We need to get out, right now,” I whispered to Aysel. “I need you to lead the way, but we *cannot make a sound.*”

Aysel and Ava nodded, then Aysel cautiously stepped out into the hallway and led us in the opposite direction to the ballroom. She led us through a maze of corridors until she veered off at one intersection, and we entered the biggest kitchen I’d ever seen.

Again, not surprising.

We were hurrying through the space when I heard something behind us. I turned to listen, pushing Ava to keep going, but then I realized that it was just the wind flapping a curtain.

“Keep going,” I whispered, turning back around—and smashing my head right into a stand of hanging pots and pans.

I watched on in helpless horror as the metal cookware went crashing to the floor, creating a cacophony of noise that might as well have been singing, “Hey! We’re over here! Trying to sneak away from you!”

*Fuck*.

Somewhere, a wolf howled, and Ava grabbed my wrist. “They know we’re here.”

My gaze shot from her to Aysel. “Hurry!”

We raced out of the kitchen, and started sprinting up a narrow staircase. We were taking the stairs two at a time when a low growl erupted behind us.

I whipped around and saw a massive wolf charging toward us.

**Episode 4270**

For a few moments, all I could hear was the ringing in my ears. My eyes were clenched shut, and my whole body was shaking. I finally dared to open my eyes, and it took me a moment to reorient myself. I’d expected to see a smoking ruin where the ballroom had been, but the room was mostly intact. But there were bodies littering the floor. My heart clenched at the sight of it. Did I know anyone who’d fallen? A quick scan of the room told me they were just the Bitterfangs who’d died in battle.

Not that it made me feel that much better.

There was a golden light shimmering in the busted barricade doorway, and a similar light shimmering across the open double doors—and Malakai and the rest of his pack were standing on the other side of it.

What… What the ever-loving *hell?*

Big Mac was still standing in the middle of the room, looking a little worse for wear, but when she shouted at us, we all heard her. “It’s time to get out! Right now!”

She looked not just shaken, but injured as well, and I ran over to her, joined by Greyson, who shifted back to human along the way.

“My mother?” he asked, a hint of panic in his voice.

Big Mac fluttered a dismissive hand. “Not that Sabine made it easy, mind you, but at the first sign of trouble, I blipped her out of here. And even though I would’ve far preferred to stay at the pack house with my fiancée, I couldn’t leave all of you to fend for yourselves. Especially you.” She met Greyson’s eyes. “Your mother was fretting, and I can’t have that, can I?”

“What… What *was* that?” I asked, still staring around in shock. There were only allies in the ballroom, now, and the air was eerily still. “And what happened to you? You’re injured.”

“I created a shield that repels attackers,” Big Mac said. “It’s similar to what I’ve used at the pack house in the past, but more… focused.” I looked at the shimmering light, deeply impressed by the woman’s raw power. “We can’t expect it to last forever, though. It takes a lot to execute, and my injuries—a gift from one of the Bitterfangs, before I was able to blip Sabine out—are really limiting my magic.”

“Thank you.” Greyson set his hands on Big Mac’s shoulders. “Is there any chance you can blip out of here and take Cali and a few others with you? We need to get this moving; we don’t have that much time.”

I immediately rounded on Greyson. Once again, I knew he was just trying to keep me safe, but I wasn’t leaving him behind. That really should’ve penetrated even his thick skull by now.

“Absolutely not,” I said flatly. “I’m not going to leave you. Not now!”

“Cali, *please*, I know that you just want to help, but—”

“Let me stop this lover’s spat before it gets out of control,” Big Mac interrupted. “I can’t blip anyone. Not for a while, anyway. Not if we want the shield to hold. I’m going to have to escape the old-fashioned way with the rest of you. But I can do this.”

She snapped her finger, and suddenly the shield went opaque, like a bunch of smoke had filled it up. A temporary shield from them seeing how we were going to get out. I could’ve kissed Big Mac, but I knew she wouldn’t have liked that.

“Okay, then we need to get moving,” Greyson said. “Come on. Let’s go! Everybody move!”

Greyson quickly ushered everyone over to the portrait that hid the secret doorway and pulled it aside. The door beyond the painting was still open, like it was waiting for the rest of us to escape. Beyond the magical shield, I heard the Bitterfangs howling, the sound growing more impatient with every passing moment.

“We need to hurry,” Greyson told everyone. “The shield isn’t permanent, but it might buy us just enough time to escape. Go.”

Of course, he refused to climb in until everyone else had gone, so I waited as well. When it was down to just the two of us, he lifted an eyebrow at me and I rolled my eyes, but *did* enter the passage first. He followed me in, pulled the portrait shut, and then shut the door, casting us all into darkness.

“Closing the doors may be a moot point, but it can’t hurt,” Greyson said. “Regardless, once that shield falls, it won’t take long for the Bitterfangs to track us. They’ll follow our scents through the portrait eventually. Can anyone think of some other way to stall them?” Then he looked at Big Mac, who I could see now was totally exhausted. “I’m sorry to ask more of you, but is there anything else you can do to lock the door?”

She took a deep breath and nodded, then she muttered something under her breath and waved her hand. I watched as the door disappeared, becoming one with the wall. I gasped in wonder, but then Big Mac staggered. She fought to stay on her feet, but eventually her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed into Greyson’s arms. My heart seized up as the door reappeared.

Greyson held Big Mac up, cursing at himself. “I never should have asked her. She’s already done so much, and it’s made her too weak.”

“We’ll have time for self-recrimination later—right now, we just need to get out of here,” I told him, wedging my shoulder under one of Big Mac’s arms, while Greyson took the other.

“It…” Big Mac murmured. “I’m… Go…”

She’d clawed her way back to consciousness, albeit barely. Her feet were dragging as she tried to walk on her own, but I knew she’d fall for sure if we let go. As I held onto her shivering body, I prayed that she hadn’t overexertedherself to the point where she wouldn’t recover.

We started off down the hallway, with absolutely no light to lead the way. I stumbled around in the darkness for a bit, my eyes having trouble adjusting. Greyson held onto me, and he eventually found a staircase. It was so narrow that Greyson could barely fit, and the sight of it made my stomach twist with nerves.

If we were attacked right here, we’d be sitting ducks, and shit out of luck.

“Can you get up the stairs with Cali’s help?” Greyson asked Big Mac.

She pushed away from him, her stubbornness shining through, and started to feel her way up the stairs, leaning against the wall.

Greyson looked at me. *I’ll bring up the rear. Stay close to her in case she passes out again*. *If we end up being followed, I need you to keep going and get Big Mac and the others out of here. I’ll hold the Bitterfangs as long as I can.*

His self-sacrificing behavior was less than thrilling at the best of times, and I didn’t like this new iteration of it in the slightest, but I could see the look on his face and knew I wouldn’t be able to change his mind. He was going to get us all out of this passage alive, even if it cost him all the blood in his body.

Thankfully, it didn’t come to that. We took a few more wrong turns and hit a couple more dead ends, but eventually, we found Lucian’s bedroom. It was *huge*, which wasn’t surprising in the slightest—the man’s need for the biggest and best knew no bounds—but it was also fortunate, because that meant it was large enough to hold everyone else who was trying to escape.

“Greyson!” a few people said excitedly as we appeared in the room—and then we were all together again.

“Big Mac was able to put up a shield to buy us some time, but it won’t hold for very long. We need to get out of here as soon as possible,” Greyson said. “Lucian, can you lead us to the secret tunnels?”

Lucian nodded. “It’s going to be tricky,” he said. “Are you sure that no one saw you come through? We have to double back in order to get down to the tunnels in the cellar. If we meet any Bitterfangs in the tunnels…”

Greyson’s nostrils flared with anger. “If they’re all connected, why didn’t we simply go down there in the first place?”

He looked outraged. “It wasn’t like we had much of a choice. You told me to bring everyone here, so I did. We’re regrouping.”

“Okay,” I interjected, irritated. “We’re here, and we need to get down there. How do we do it? Let’s just make it happen!”

Lucian’s frustration was pouring off him. “I am telling you, if you can’t confirm whether any Bitterfangs followed you through the passage, I don’t think it’s a good idea. The last thing we want is to be stuck down there with them.”

Greyson sighed.  “So we’re not doing this secret passage shit at all?”

“I guess not,” I said. Why hadn’t Lucian told us everything before? I understood Greyson’s frustration. Maybe we’d all been so focused on getting out of the ballroom that we weren’t thinking clearly.

“I guess we’ll just have to go down the stairs and be prepared to fight,” Greyson said.

“Maybe we can sneak down?” I said hopefully. “Nobody knows we’re up here, right?” As if to immediately answer my question, there was a loud pounding on the door, making everyone in the room jump. “Shit.”

**Episode 4271**

“Everyone, quiet!” Greyson hissed as he moved toward the door.

I was tense, hoping that whoever was banging on the door wouldn’t just decide to burst through it. I assumed that the Bitterfangs wouldn’t bother to knock, but who knew what methods they might employ to catch us off-guard?

*Have the Bitterfangs found us? Are there a bunch of them waiting outside the door, getting ready to attack? If they are, will we be able to fight them off?*

The pounding continued, and Greyson, Mace, and Rishika formed a defensive semi-circle around the door.

I concentrated and reached for my magic—if Greyson opened the door, or if the Bitterfangs broke it down, I’d be ready to blast at a moment’s notice.

And then Xavier’s urgent voice filtered through the door. “Open the fucking door! It’s me!”

I was stunned. “*Xavier?*”

I rushed past Greyson and whipped the door open. Xavier, Ava, and Aysel came rushing in. Greyson went to shut the door when we heard someone shout. The voice sounded familiar.

“Wait!” Gabriel and Mikah ran up. “We found you, thank fuck,” Gabriel said.

Greyson let them in and shut the door. I took in the state of Xavier—he was naked, covered in blood, and thoroughly pissed off. I started to move toward him to hold him, to comfort him, but I stopped myself. I couldn’t do that. At least not until I heard from Kira and found out if there *was* something going on with him.

*Besides, it wouldn’t be good to hug him right in front of Ava and Greyson, anyway. Plus, I’m guessing he wouldn’t accept it—by the looks of things, he’s back to being distant.*

Xavier glared at Greyson. “What the hell took you so long to open the door?”

“Yeah, man, it’s rough out there,” Gabriel added.

“Announce yourself straight away next time instead of just banging on the door or shouting in the hallway,” Greyson snapped. “Because yes, it *is* rough out there, and we had no idea who the hell you were.”

Xavier stepped toward Greyson, and it looked like he was seconds from laying into him.

*I can’t let them start fighting. That won’t be good for any of us.*

“Lola, look after Big Mac,” I said as I quickly stepped between Xavier and Greyson. “Are you okay, Xavier?” I frantically looked around for Torin and spotted him standing next to a Samara. “Torin? Come take a look at Xavier.”

Xavier’s anger seemed to ease slightly as he turned his attention to me. “I’m fine now. I don’t need Torin.”

“We were attacked by a Bitterfang on our way here,” Ava said. “As usual, the Samara Alpha easily held his own,” she added, giving me a pointed look.

“He certainly did! Xavier wounded him,” Aysel said. “It was very impressive.”

Wordlessly, Greyson nudged us aside, pulled the door open and peered out into the hallway, then quickly closed it again.

“That Bitterfang wolf—do you think he followed you?” he asked Xavier.

“How the hell would I know?” Xavier snarled. “I didn’t exactly have time to interrogate him.”

Greyson clenched his teeth. “No shit,” he ground out. “But you have werewolf senses, right? Any one of those senses could’ve alerted you to his whereabouts. Any werewolf worth his salt—”

“You’d better think long and hard before you finish that sentence,” Xavier said, his voice dripping with menace.

I quickly pushed them apart, realizing that things were spiraling out of control. “How can you two even *think* about arguing at a time like this? We’re all on the same side, remember?”

Xavier and Greyson both held their tongues.

I felt everyone’s eyes on me. I quickly reminded myself that everyone was looking at me as the Redwood Luna, and I had to act accordingly.

“If the Bitterfang wolf tracked Xavier, then this room isn’t safe. We need to move. Now,” I said.

“Good idea,” Greyson said. He grabbed Lucian. “You said that we need to get to the wine cellar. Show us the way.”

“If we all escape through the tunnels, then who’ll stay behind to defend the palace?” Lucian argued. “This place is full of priceless artifacts—items that are precious to the Vanguards and our legacy. I can’t just leave them behind for the Bitterfangs to defile!”

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” Xavier snapped. “The Bitterfangs are already crawling all over this place.”

Lucian turned to Aysel. “The others don’t care because it’s not their home, but it’s ours, sister. We can’t let it fall into enemy hands.”

Aysel nodded. “Agreed. We can’t abandon our home.”

“It’ll only be temporary,” I said quickly.

Xavier, Greyson, and even I had made jokes about Lucian’s palace, but I understood where the Vanguard siblings were coming from. Xavier and Greyson were focused on getting us all to safety, and so was I, but they weren’t giving any thought to the fact that they’d feel the same way as Lucian if their pack houses were threatened.

“We’ll get out, regroup, then hit back at the Bitterfangs and reclaim the palace,” I said. “But for now, we need to leave—for the alliance, and for the Vanguards.”

When Greyson spoke again, his voice had lost some of its edge. “She’s right, Lucian. We have to go. Right now, we don’t have any other choice.”

Lucian and Aysel exchanged a glance and then both nodded their agreement, though I could see by the look in Lucian’s eyes that he still wasn’t sold on the idea.

“Good. Glad we’re finally on the same page. Let’s go!” Xavier said.

I was relieved to see that the wounds on Xavier’s arms and chest were already healing, but it bothered me that Ava was the one who was holding his hand. I wondered if the sight of them together like this would ever stop bothering me.

Greyson cracked the door open, then quickly and quietly closed it again. “There are Bitterfangs coming down the hallway. We may have to fight our way to the cellar after all.”

“But Lucian said there are secret passages throughout the palace,” I pointed out. “Can’t we use them to at least get *close* to the cellar?”

Greyson looked at me, smiling. “Good point.”

But Lucian slowly shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

Aysel smacked him. “We don’t have time for uncertainty, brother. Can we use the passages, or can’t we?”

Elle poked Lucian in the side and nodded toward the fireplace. “You showed me the passage over there—the one that leads to the library. Remember?”

“Is the library close to the cellar?” I asked Lucian.

He nodded, still apparently coming to terms with the dire straits we were facing. “Yes—it’s just down the hall from the cellar’s entrance.”

“Then we need to get moving. Time isn’t on our side,” Greyson said.

Lucian went over to the large fireplace and pressed a brick. A loud, grating sound filled the room as the fireplace rotated, revealing a passageway. “Once we’re inside, we can close it behind us so that no one can follow us,” he said.

Greyson, Xavier, Mace, and I helped funnel everyone through the small opening. I accidentally brushed Xavier’s hand a few times while we worked, and electricity rushed through me every time. I had to stifle the rush of feelings that welled up in my chest, knowing that this wasn’t the time or place to address them.

“You go next,” Greyson told me once we’d helped everyone else into the passage.

“Greyson, will you—”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he said. “I’m going to stay behind just long enough to make sure that the Bitterfangs don’t follow, then I’ll catch up.”

“You go, Greyson,” Xavier said. “I’ll handle that. They’ll need you in the tunnels if anything unexpected happens.”

“No,” Greyson said. “I’m head of the alliance; it’s my responsibility to make sure that everyone makes it out of here safely.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Are you seriously pulling rank right now? Just get your ass in the tunnel and get everyone through it in one piece.”

“Xavier, this isn’t your call to make,” Greyson shot back.

“Please! Are you two really arguing again? Right now? How about you both shut the hell up so we can *all* get the hell out of here? How does that sound?” Ava snapped.

For once, Ava and I were on the same page.

“Ava’s right,” I said. “Once we’ve all made it into the passage, we can shut it behind us. The Bitterfangs won’t be able to follow easily—even if they sniff us out, it’ll take time for them to open the door.”

“But if we don’t get the hell into that passage right now, that will be irrelevant,” Ava said.

Surprisingly, everyone agreed, and within seconds, we were all enshrouded in the thick darkness of the passageway. Armin was waiting just inside and pulled a lever once we were all in, sealing us inside—just as the door to the bedroom burst open.

“Go! Go! Go!” Greyson shouted. We all raced through the narrow passage, running our hands along the wall to orient ourselves as we plowed through the darkness. Soon, a column of light appeared.

“We’re almost there!” Lucian called out.

Seconds later, we all emerged into the library. We kept up our speed and raced out of the library and into the cellar. As everyone started racing down the stairs, I heard shouting.

Greyson and I exchanged a look as realization hit us both at the same time—the Bitterfangs were coming.

**Episode 4272**

**Greyson**

I concentrated on making sure that Cali and the others were ahead of me as we made our way through the cellar—which felt more like a maze of catacombs.

*Shit, why did we stop moving?* We’d come to an abrupt stop, and I couldn’t immediately see why.

I peered ahead through the darkness, wondering what the holdup was.

“What the hell?” I said to no one in particular. “Why are we moving so slowly?”

“The tunnel narrows ahead, I’m afraid,” Armin said. “It’s only big enough for one person to pass through at a time. These tunnels weren’t built to accommodate big groups of people.”

“Fuck. Just our luck,” I grumbled.

“Why does every part of this palace fucking suck?” Xavier asked.

“On the plus side, it’s narrow enough that the Bitterfangs will only be able to come through one at a time, too,” Armin pointed out. “This might be a good place for a couple of wolves to stay back and hold them off. I’m happy to do it, with help. Otherwise, they’ll gain on us in no time.”

I was impressed by Armin’s show of bravery, but I knew that the Vanguard second wouldn’t be any match for the surging Bitterfangs without someone capable by his side.

“So much for getting out of here, huh?” Xavier said.

“That’s not helping anything,” I said. I looked at Armin. “I’ll stay back with you.”

“And I’ll make sure everyone actually gets out of here,” Xavier added.

“No!” Cali burst out. “You can’t! You’re our Alpha—we need you.”

I felt bad for worrying her, but she’d failed to realize that it was my duty *as* Alpha to stay back and hold off the Bitterfang advance. Especially since I was partially responsible for the fact that the Bitterfang attack had caught us unawares. I should’ve known that it had been too soon to celebrate. I should’ve known that our victory had come a little too easily.

*But I thought I had evidence that we’d won—Malakai’s ring. How could I have known that it was a fake?*

Regardless, I felt responsible for the predicament we were in. The Bitterfangs had tricked me. There was no other way to look at it.

“Cali, I have to make sure that you and the others have time to make it out of here safely. That means I have to stay behind. I’ll be okay,” I said. I saw the worry in her eyes, and it hurt my heart. “I’ll meet you back at the pack house. In the meantime, I need you to get the pack home safely, as my Luna. Can you do that?”

Cali looked around at the other Redwoods. I could see her registering the fear on Lilac, Violet, and Julia’s faces. Finally, she turned back to look at me and nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you at home.”

She planted a quick kiss on my lips as Aysel’s voice echoed through the tunnel. “And Armin,” the princess called, “don’t be careless. You have certain… duties that no one else can attend to.”

I rolled my eyes, then turned back to the rest of my pack and ushered them through the bottleneck. “Go! And be quick about it!” Then to Xavier I said, “Get them out.”

“Always the plan,” he said.

I watched them move off, willing them to be safe. They were making progress—*slow* progress, but they were moving. It would have to be enough for now, and Armin and I would make sure to buy them the time that they needed.

I turned back to Armin. “Ready?”

Armin nodded. We heard a rush of Bitterfang footsteps. Seconds later, the Bitterfangs appeared, all of them in wolf form, and Armin and I shifted to meet them head-on.

I lunged at the closest Bitterfang, dragging it down to the ground, easily knocking it out cold. My shoulders scraped against the walls of the tunnel, and a shock of pain raced through me. There wasn’t much room to work with—I’d have to keep that in mind.

Armin was right in front of me, tearing into a wolf who looked about twice his size. The wolf braced itself and thrust its head forward, catching Armin under the jaw and slamming him into the tunnel wall. A cascade of small rocks showered down on us with the impact.

I didn’t have time to check if Armin was okay, as another Bitterfang immediately came running at me. As I got ready to fight, I saw another wolf advancing down the tunnel and recognized him immediately.

Malakai’s voice echoed through my head. *Greyson, stop resisting. Surrender now, or we’ll be forced to slaughter your entire pack.*

*You’re mistaken*, I told him. *If* you *surrender right now, Malakai, the alliance will spare the Bitterfangs.*

The wolf in front of me went in for the attack. I easily dodged its lunge and rammed my head into its side, throwing it into the wall. More rocks showered down from above, one of them hitting the wolf on the head and knocking it out cold. I kept my gaze fixed on Malakai.

*This ends now!* I told Malakai as I lunged at him, but then another wolf threw itself into my path. Malakai and the other wolf started snapping and snarling at me, edging me backward as I worked to dodge their attacks.

The other wolf dropped low and raced at me, catching me off-guard and sinking its teeth into my front left leg. I let out a howl of pain as I tore out of his hold. Another wolf appeared at the first one’s side, snarling at me.

*Give up, Greyson*, Malakai taunted. *This is the end of the road for you—why can’t you see that? And once you’re dead, I’ll hunt down every single Redwood and make them bow down to me, and if they don’t, I’ll kill them just like I’m going to kill you.*

*Fuck you, Malakai*,I replied, limping away from the advancing wolves, managing to dodge their constant barrage of attacks.

*No, fuck* you*, Greyson*, Malakai retorted. *And as for that abomination Fae-Luna mate of yours—she’ll be the first to go once you’re dead. We can’t very well allow the blood of outsiders to stain the purity of good werewolves.*

I let out an angry howl and rushed the two wolves, knocking them both aside as I made another play for Malakai. Satisfaction coursed through me as I finally collided with the Bitterfang Alpha. We tumbled down the tunnel, knocking into the walls of the narrow corridor as we both struggled for dominance.

Fueled by rage, I lunged forward to tear into Malakai’s neck, but the Bitterfang Alpha was quick, and his admittedly amazing fighting abilities were on full display. He easily countered every move I made, dodging and parrying, forcing me to work hard to avoid the savage swings of his unbelievably long claws.

*I can’t take Malakai for granted*,I thought to myself. *One wrong move and he’ll kill me. He might even be a better fighter than Silas was. And I had both of my brothers fighting Silas along with me…*

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Malakai gained the advantage. He sank his teeth into my side and flung me against the wall. Dazed, I landed in a heap on the ground, my ears ringing. The world felt like it was shaking around me, and it took me a moment to realize that it wasn’t all in my head. The tunnel was actually shaking.

*Get up!* Armin’s voice ripped through my mind.

I stumbled to my feet, but I was dizzy. Blood was running into my eyes from the multiple cuts to my head, blurring my vision. Just then, there was a loud rumbling as a pile of rocks fell from overhead and smashed to the ground between us, closing me off from him and the Bitterfangs. *Fuck.*

*Armin!* I shouted, already digging at the rocks. *I’m coming! Just hold on!*

*Forget about me! Go find the others! Help get them out!* Armin replied.

A second later, I heard him howl in pain. I hesitated, but as I kept digging at the rocks, I realized that there were far more of them than I’d ever be able to remove in time to get to him. I cursed to myself and ran down the tunnel to catch up with the others, beyond relieved to see that they’d all finally cleared the bottleneck.

I spotted Cali and reached out to her via mind link. *Cali, I’m here!*

She turned to look at me, her eyes widening as she took me in.“You’re hurt!”

*Yes, but I’ll be fine, I’m already healing*, I replied. *We have to go!*

I thought about Armin, and how he’d sacrificed himself to save me.

Cali nodded and turned to Lucian, who was right next to her, helping to push the others along. “You said the exit is nearby?” she asked him.

Lucian nodded. “Yes, not much farther.”

We turned a sharp corner and nearly ran smack into the rest of the group, who’d come to a standstill.

“What the hell? Why aren’t you moving?” I shouted at them.

“Shit!” Lucian said, his eyes on something ahead of us.

I followed his line of sight and quickly saw the reason for his reaction. The vibration from Malakai slamming me into the wall had obviously caused a cave-in here, too—a huge pile of rocks was blocking our path.

**Episode 4273**

I inhaled a cloud of dust from the cave-in and coughed, trying to wave it away from my face, then I jumped at the sound of howls behind us. I wondered how long we had until the Bitterfangs reached us. It wasn’t like we’d be able to run with the rocks blocking the tunnel.

“Hey, people are starting to panic,” Mace said. “Not to mention that the air down here is downright suffocating. I don’t think we can stay down here for too long. Do you think we can dig our way through this?”

“We’re going to have to try,” Xavier said. “I don’t know what other choice we have. It’s not like we can turn back.”

I spotted Lola standing with Big Mac and pushed my way over to them through the crush of bodies.

“Are you well enough to use your magic to get us through?” I asked Big Mac.

Big Mac shook her head. “No. I’m still completely drained,” she slurred.

*Shit. Of course she is. We’ve asked a lot of her already, despite her injuries. But do we really even need her magic for this? Maybe there’s another way.*

“Maybe I can use my magic to blast through the rocks,” I said. “If I aim just right and use the right amount of force, I don’t see why I couldn’t do it.”

Everyone turned to look at me.

“Are you sure, Cali?” Artemis asked. “It’s risky in a space this small.”

*I know what she’s not saying—that it’s risky for a person at my skill level in a space this small. She’s not wrong, but like Xavier said, we have to get past these rocks or we’ll be sitting ducks. With Big Mac out of commission, I’m our only hope.*

“I know it’s risky, but I can do it,” I said, trying to sound more confident that I really felt as memories of all my past magic disasters played through my head. But wasn’t this what I’d been training for? The pack needed me to come through for them, and I was going to have to rise to the challenge. “I have to try. There’s no other option—that’s our only way out.”

“Okay,” Artemis said. She turned to face the others. “Everyone get back, give her some room!”

I concentrated and gathered a swell of magic inside me, trying my best to focus the energy. And then, taking a deep breath I slowly lifted my hand and shoved the magic out through my fingertips. There was a *boom*, and I was pelted with dust and pebbles. I threw my arms up to protect my face, but a spray of debris still managed to tear into my skin. I coughed and choked as the entire tunnel filled with a thick haze of dust. I could hear everyone else coughing, too.

I closed my eyes and waved it away. As the dust began to settle, I opened them again and saw that I’d blown an hole through the middle of the cave in.

*I did it! Yes!*

Greyson quickly shifted back to human and smacked a kiss onto my cheek. “Good job, love. Thank you.”

Only a moment later, the tunnel began to quake, sending rocks raining down from the ceiling. My blast had obviously upset the integrity of the tunnel even more.

“Everyone *move*!” Greyson shouted.

As more debris began to fall, everyone scrambled toward the new exit, Greyson and me bringing up the rear.

Violet was right ahead of us. “They’re coming!” she shouted as she climbed through the hole in the rocks, her voice choked with fear.

I spun around just in time to see a Bitterfang wolf expertly dodging the falling rocks as he raced toward us.

“I’ll hold him off!” I said as I conjured my magic shield. “There are more coming!”

Marissa, Knox, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab all shifted to help Greyson fend off the onslaught. I held my shield out in front of me and thrust it at the wolves, pushing them back. It was taking all my magical strength to keep the shield solid, and I could feel my reserves depleting. I was exhausted.

Artemis grabbed my arm. “Let’s go, Cali!”

I shrugged out of her hold. “No! I can’t leave Greyson behind! He’s still healing!”

Artemis didn’t bother to listen. She vaulted out of the tunnel, yanking me along with her. The fresh air hit me like a ton of bricks, and I realized just how stuffy the tunnel had been—especially with the dust from the cave-ins.

I looked around, wondering where we were. The Vanguard woods, most likely. I turned to see if Greyson was coming. When he jumped out of the mouth of the tunnel, I rushed over to hug him.

*Get on my back, I’ll carry you*, he mind linked as he shifted back to wolf form.

I hopped up onto his back, pulling Artemis along with me. Russell, Julia, and the others had shifted, too, and were waiting for us about ten yards ahead.

A flaming arrow whizzed by us, and Greyson veered out of its path just in time. The arrow hit the ground, setting the grass on fire. Artemis and I flattened ourselves against Greyson’s back as more arrows flew our way, thankfully missing their mark.

*How the hell are they even using arrows? Some of them must not be shifted.*

I hazarded a glance over my shoulder and saw a group of Bitterfangs gaining on us—two in wolf form, and another racing a little behind them in human form with a bow at the ready. Making a quick decision, I hopped off Greyson’s back.

*Cali, what are you doing?* Greyson mind linked. *This isn’t the time for heroics! We have to get the hell out of here!*

My heart was racing, and I was still a bit light-headed from using so much of my magic down in the tunnel, but I knew I had to stop these Bitterfangs, or they would call for more of them. Then we’d never make it back to the pack house safely.

I summoned my shield just in time to deflect another flaming arrow. It ricocheted and hit the ground a few feet away from me. I started to tremble with the effort of keeping the shield intact as I held my ground. Greyson had circled back to join me.

“Where’s Artemis?” I asked when I noticed she was no longer on his back.

*I convinced her to go join the others*,he replied. *Which is where we should both be right now!*

“I can, and I will!” I replied.

I pivoted to deflect another arrow, my eyes on the approaching Bitterfangs. I wondered if I could keep my shield up with one hand and blast them with the other. I’d never tried that before, but it was possibly my best option to stop them in their tracks.

*I have to do something, and fast. They’re getting closer.*

I had to be patient. If I blasted too soon, there was a chance I’d miss them. And I might not get another chance. And if I waited too long….

I tried to summon more magic to shield and shoot simultaneously, but it was too hard. I was going to have to lower my shield if I wanted to blast them.

“Greyson, you have to go! I can handle this!” I said.

*Cali, are you crazy?* Greyson mind linked. *You know I’m not going to leave you to face them alone. Don’t even suggest it. Just send another blast their way and hop on. Then we’ll haul ass to catch up with the others.*

I tried to steady my nerves as I narrowed my eyes at the approaching Bitterfangs. I began a countdown, building up my courage along with my magic.

*Three, two, one!*

I lowered the shield just as an arrow zipped past my head, scorching my hair. I didn’t flinch—it would ruin my aim. I fired a blast of magic and it was a direct hit, sending the two Bitterfang wolves flying backwards into their human pack mate. All three toppled to the ground in a heap. I just stood there for a moment, enthralled by the damage I’d done.

*Cali, what are you doing? Come on, we need to go!* Greyson said as he nudged me with this nose.

Snapping back into action, I hopped onto Greyson’s back and we raced off to join up with the others.

*That was a great shot*,Greyson said. *I’m so proud of you, Cali!*

“Thanks!” I said, still hardly believing it myself.

It didn’t take long for us to catch up with the others. I slid off Greyson’s back as he came to a stop.

Artemis quickly pulled me into a hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay! Never do that again unless I’m with you!”

“Deal,” I replied, hugging her back.

Greyson shifted back to human and cast a cautious glance over his shoulder in the direction we’d just come from. “We need to get back to the pack house.”

Everyone jumped as Lucian screamed, “My beautiful palace!”

We all turned to watch in horror as the Vanguard palace was engulfed in flames.

**Episode 4274**

I gasped at the awful sight of the fire devouring the palace. Even from this distance, the flames cast an eerie, flickering orange glow through the trees where we’d taken cover, creating a creepy, surreal vibe.

“Everything we have is being destroyed!” Lucian screamed. He took off toward the house.

“Lucian, no! Come back!” Greyson shouted.

When the princeling showed no signs of stopping, Xavier blew past me and tackled him. The two men scuffled for a few long moments before Xavier finally pinned a hysterical Lucian to the ground.

I rushed over to them and put a hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “Hey, take it easy on him!”

Xavier let Lucian go and glanced at me quickly before going back to join Ava.

Aysel rushed over to Lucian’s side, wailing with anguish. I watched them, feeling real pity for them for the first time ever. Who *wouldn’t* be beside themselves if they were forced to stand by and watch while everything they owned was burned to a crisp?

Greyson joined me as the Vanguard siblings embraced on the ground, consoling each other as they watched the spectacle of the flaming palace.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” I asked Greyson.

“I wish there were, but right now, I’m more worried about the packs’ safety,” he said grimly. “Those Bitterfangs we ran into were probably out on patrol. For all we know, there could be others, so we need to cut our losses and get the hell out of here before they level another attack. We can’t let them take another pack house.”

I heard arguing and turned to see a clearly upset Julia yelling at Russell.

“What now?” Greyson snarled, clearly pushed to breaking point—not that I could blame him.

“This has gone too far!” Julia shouted at Russell as I approached. “I’m going to go talk to my father!”

“No!” Russell snapped. “What for? So he can cut you down before you even say a word? You saw how he treated you back at the palace—you think he’s suddenly going to agree to hear you out?”

“I don’t care! I have to do something!” Julia wailed.

Russell planted his feet in front of her. “Well, I’m not going to let you.”

“Can I talk to her for a second?” I asked Russell.

“Fine! Maybe she’ll listen to you!” Russell reluctantly stepped aside.

But before I could say a word, Julia shifted and took off.

“Julia! No!” I shouted after her. “Stop!”

Not wasting a second, Russell shifted too and went chasing after her. He gained on her quickly and tackled her to the ground—just as a Bitterfang wolf stepped out from behind a nearby tree.

“Watch out!” I screamed as the Bitterfang raised his bow, aiming an arrow right at Julia.

Russell leapt in front of Julia, just as the arrow went flying. It struck him in the shoulder, and he crashed to the ground with a grunt. Julia howled in anguish.

“He’s getting ready to fire again!” I shouted.

I summoned my magic and blasted the Bitterfang into a tree, then I charged at him, my legs heavy with exertion. I hadn’t made it far before a blur shot past me. It was Xavier, and he took the Bitterfang down easily and proceeded to rip him to shreds.

“Xavier!” I shouted, even knowing that he wasn’t going to stop—even knowing that he was doing the right thing. That didn’t mean I wanted to watch.

I turned back to Russell and Julia, who’d both shifted back to human. Julia was cradling Russell in her arms while tears streamed down her cheeks. She was just as hysterical as Lucian and Aysel. It hurt my heart to see so much pain and suffering.

The arrow was still sticking out of Russell’s shoulder, and there was a lot of blood. I turned back to the others. “Torin! Come help us!”

I knelt down beside Julia, wishing that there was something I could do to help, but my magic had its limits, and I knew I wasn’t equipped to remove the arrow without doing more damage.

“You shouldn’t have done that!” Julia sobbed. “Why would you do that, Russell? Why would you risk your life like that?”

Russell pulled away from Julia and attempted to get to his feet, but he quickly collapsed into her arms. Torin came running over, and with my help, we were able to yank the arrow free, to the sound of Russell’s pained moans. I watched in horror as blood spurted out of the deep wound the arrow had left behind.

Xavier ran over to join us, still spitting the Bitterfang’s blood from his mouth as he shifted to human.

I looked up at him. “Thank you.”

Xavier didn’t even acknowledge me as he focused on Russell. “He gonna make it?” he asked Torin.

*He won’t even accept my thanks? After everything that happened tonight, he’s really back to treating me like I barely exist?*

“He’s already starting to heal,” Torin said. “He’s lucky. If the arrow had hit even a couple of inches to the left, it would’ve pierced his heart.”

Julia gasped. “What? Russell! You nearly died trying to save me!”

“I’m fine.” Russell flashed her a weak smile. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Sorry to break this up, but we have to get going,” Greyson said. “We’ll all meet back at the Redwood pack house. Keep your eyes peeled. We don’t know if there are more Bitterfangs out here.”

Everyone shifted, and I hopped onto Greyson’s back. I twisted around to take one last look at the burning palace as we took off into the trees.

The journey back to the pack house passed quickly, and Mrs. Smith rushed out to greet us as we sprinted across the front lawn.

“I’m so happy to see you all!” she said breathlessly. I could see the worry creasing her features. She quickly set about helping Torin get Big Mac and Russell into the house.

I found myself standing next to Xavier, and was surprised when he actually spoke to me. “You okay?”

I didn’t answer right away, wanting to ask why he’d ignored me only moments ago. But the moment passed when Greyson came walking up to join us.

“Hey, Xavier, is your pack okay?” Greyson asked stiffly.

Xavier nodded. “I think they all got out, but I still need to confirm.”

Greyson nodded gravely. “Armin got trapped with the Bitterfangs after a cave-in. It’s possible the same could’ve happened to others.”

Xavier hissed and shook his head. “Shit. Any chance he made it?”

Greyson’s expression was grim. “I can’t be positive, but it didn’t sound good.”

“We have to tell Lucian and Aysel what happened to him. They deserve to know,” I said. I couldn’t imagine how they were going to take news of yet another devastating loss.

“I’m going to go back to look for the rest of my pack,” Xavier said, turning to go.

“But shouldn’t we wait? What if there are more Bitterfangs out there?” I shouted before I could stop myself.

Xavier looked absolutely torn, and I immediately felt bad. Xavier was the Samara Alpha, which meant that he had to put his pack first, now.

“Sorry,” I said quickly. “I shouldn’t have interfered.”

Involving myself in Xavier’s affairs had been the norm for so long, it was hard to just turn it off. Xavier gave me a stiff nod, and a moment of awkwardness passed between the three of us before Mrs. Smith’s voice cut through it.

“Hey, I need a little help over here!” she shouted.

Without another word, Xavier rushed over to her. I watched him go, a swirl of emotions rippling through me. I quickly became aware of Greyson watching me watch Xavier. I cleared my throat and pivoted my attention to Lucian and Aysel, who were sitting on the porch steps.

“Let’s go break the news. Are you going to tell them, or should I?” I asked Greyson as we made our way over to them.

“I’ll tell them the news, but you stay close for moral support,” Greyson said.

“Hey, you two,” I said as we approached.

Lucian and Aysel looked up at us. Their eyes were bloodshot from crying, and tears were still streaming down their cheeks.

“I hate to have to tell you this,” Greyson began, wincing, “but Armin… I lost him in the tunnels. We were fighting the Bitterfangs, and then a cave-in separated us and trapped him with them. I’m not sure what happened to him.”

“What?” Aysel squeaked, her sobs starting anew. “No!”

Lucian barely seemed to have registered what we’d said. He shook his head slowly. “My home.”

Elle sat perched on the steps behind Lucian with her arms draped over his shoulders, trying to console him. “It’s okay, Lucian. The most important part is that you’re okay.”

But Lucian was inconsolable. He threw his head back and let out a loud moan. “My Vanguards! My poor, poor Vanguards. After everything Seluna put us through, now we’ve lost our home, too?” He turned his gaze on Aysel. “Dear sister, we’re homeless!”

“Don’t worry,” Elle said, pulling Lucian tight against her. “You can stay with us, Lucian.”

I shot Greyson a surprised look. There were so many Vanguard wolves, we would practically be bursting at the seams. And the idea of Lucian being here… I shuddered at the thought of going downstairs to the kitchen and seeing him with a cup of coffee in the morning.

Lucian blinked back a fresh crop of tears. “Really?” He turned to Greyson. “You’d take us in? I’m afraid there might be too many of us.”

Elle planted a kiss on Lucian’s cheek. “Of course we’ll take you in.” She turned her gaze on Greyson. “Won’t we, Greyson?”

**Episode 4275**

**Greyson**

My first reaction to Elle’s appeal was to groan, but I pushed it down just before the sound escaped my lips. Aysel and Lucian were in a bad way right now, so the least I could do was stifle my annoyance at the prospect of taking them in. It was bad enough that we’d aligned ourselves with the princeling, but to live under the same roof with him and his insufferable sister? *Ugh*.

“Elle, hold that thought,” Cali said quickly. She took me by the arm and led me out of earshot. “You know you can’t turn them down, right?”

I choked out a laugh. “Sure, I can. I’m the Alpha.”

Cali glared at me. “Greyson!”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to sound like a dick. I just have a bad feeling about taking them in. Plus, there’s way too many Vanguard wolves. Where the hell are they going to stay?”

“I know Lucian’s annoying, and Aysel isn’t much better, but are there other reasons why you’re so against it?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s impractical. The Vanguards are a huge pack. We don’t have enough rooms for all of them.”

“People can share rooms, and maybe we can get a few tents outside or something. Maybe Mace would even be willing to take some in. Or Xavier, I guess.” Cali paused for a moment, then shook the thought off. “*Something*.”

“What, are we about to have seven people to a room?”

Cali shrugged. “If that’s what it takes. Now, if you want to tell me the *real* reason why you’re against it, I’m all ears.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try,” Cali shot back.

“I hate to bring it up,” I said carefully, “but Elle and me, we still share the sire bond…”

“Yes, and Big Mac’s spell made that a non-issue, remember?”

“Yes, but the spell isn’t one hundred percent effective. Having Elle and Lucian here with me under the same roof, I have no idea what might happen.”

“Okay, I get it, you’re worried about the sire bond,” she said. “But what choice do we have? Are you just going to leave Lucian, Aysel, and the Vanguards homeless?”

“But, Cali—”

“As annoying as Lucian is, the Vanguards have repeatedly fought by our side as our allies. In some ways, we share responsibility for their loss.”

*Shit. I guess I hadn’t really thought about it that way. If Xavier and I had been more thorough in confirming Malakai’s death and recognizing the threat that the Bitterfangs still posed, the princeling might still have a palace right now.*

“Okay, I think you had the right idea with splitting them up,” I said. “We’ll take *some* in, but others, we can send to stay with other alliance packs.”

“It’s probably the only way we can accommodate everyone,” Cali said.

“And all else fails, Kira or one of the other witches could just conjure up a new palace for the Vanguards once we defeat the Bitterfangs?”

Lucian stormed over. “I heard that. I don’t *want* a new palace, and I certainly don’t want one built with witch magic! I want *my* palace back! It’s been in my family for generations, and my additions have been priceless.”

“Right now, it’s a smoldering ruin that belongs to the Bitterfangs,” I said. “Perhaps we should worry about defeating them first?”

“I can’t help but think that it *wouldn’t* belong to the Bitterfangs if you and your brother had followed up on the threat as effectively as my wolves would have,” Lucian said bitterly. “We let our guard down because you two know-it-alls said the coast was clear!”

“Yeah, and *you* were all too ready to accept it so you could throw another one of your bad parties,” I shot back. “And *was* that even a party? It felt more like an opportunity for you to stroke your ego in front of a captive audience.”

“How dare you! It was most certainly a party! Did you not see the decorations? The food? Did you not hear the *poem*?” Lucian wailed.

“Guys, guys, please!” Cali said, stepping between us “This isn’t helping.” She turned to Lucian. “Why don’t you and Aysel get settled in here, and then we’ll figure out what to do next?”

“Thank you, Caliana,” Lucian said. “Ever the voice of reason. The Redwood pack hardly deserves you.”

I bit back a nasty retort as Cali’s mind link drifted into my mind.

*I know he isn’t making it easy, but he’s having a really bad day*,she said. *Just be the bigger person?*

Despite my desperate urge to refuse, I gave her a tense nod.

“Rishika!” I shouted, trying to control my mounting annoyance.

She came walking up, looking between the three of us with interest. “Hey, Greyson, what’s up?”

“Could you come up with room assignments for our new…” I cleared my throat. “For our new *guests*, the Vanguards?”

Rishika seemed like the obvious choice for overseeing the task, since she was so organized and practical. But to my surprise, she just gave me a blank look.

“Excuse me? I’m a soldier, Greyson, not a den mother,” she said, screwing up her face.

“Did I hear someone mention room assignments?” Torin asked as he sauntered over. “If Rishika isn’t interested, I’d love to take charge.”

“Please,” I said to him, relieved that *someone* was open to doing it. “Knock yourself out.”

“I suppose it’s settled, then. Redwoods, you have my thanks,” Lucian said, pointedly ignoring me. “Now, let me go share the news with Aysel and the others.”

Cali smiled at me once he’d gone. “That was the right thing to do. You know that, right?”

I sighed. “Maybe, but I still don’t like it. Who wants to listen to the princeling talking about himself twenty-four-seven? I certainly don’t.”

Cali laughed and reached up to caress the side of my face. “Maybe we’ll get used to it. You never know—perhaps this will be just the thing to thaw the ice between you two. Cohabitation has a way of bringing people closer together.”

“It’ll only be literally, in Lucian’s and my case,” I grumbled.

Cali pulled me into a hug, and we held each other for a while. I tightened my embrace, thinking about how lucky we were to have escaped relatively unscathed.

Cali looked up at me. “So, what’s the plan?”

I groaned. “I wish I could stay with you like this for the rest of the night, but I need to go check in with the other Alphas and get a war room going. We have to come up with a strategy before the Bitterfangs get settled in or launch another attack. If they’re allowed to remain on Vanguard land, they could easily turn it into their base, which would make it even more difficult to get rid of them.”

“I still can’t believe that they came back full force like that,” Cali said.

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I don’t get it, either, but it’s the reality that we’re living in, now. I hate that we were forced to run away from them at all.”

“Yes, but we had no choice,” she said. “It’s okay to admit when you’re outnumbered and outgunned. They had the element of surprise on their side. We did what we had to. So, do you want me to go gather the others?”

I nodded and gave her a quick kiss. “Could you? Have them all assemble in the living room.”

“On it,” she said, already jogging away.

I went inside and rushed upstairs to throw on some sweats. It was going to be a long night, so I might as well be comfortable.

I went back downstairs and joined everyone in the living room. The mood was somber, of course.

“Hey, Greyson,” Torin said. “Just an update—I’ve assigned some of the rooms—”

“*Already?*” I asked, shocked.

Torin shrugged. “You know me—I live for things like that. As for injuries, Russell is healing up nicely, Big Mac is still out of commission, and we have a few other minor wounds that should be okay in no time. But we didn’t suffer any losses, that I know of.”

“We got lucky in that department,” I said. “Though Armin’s still a question mark.”

“He’s lost to us!” Lucian wailed. “Just like everything else the Vanguards hold dear! *Why?* Oh, why were my people dealt the worst hand of all? How can I ever dream of replacing Armin, someone so valuable and loyal? Has fortune truly abandoned the Vanguards?”

Xavier walked up at that moment and scowled. “I just found out that the Samaras are missing Knox, Jesse, and Marissa.”

Lucian turned a teary-eyed glare on Xavier. “I’m sorry, is this a *contest*? I wasn’t aware!”

Xavier ignored Lucian and caught my eye. “I’m taking Ava to go look for them. I think we lost them right after we left the tunnel.”

“And we need to retake my palace!” Lucian exclaimed, then he immediately deflated. “Or what’s left of it.”

“I’m not keen on having anyone go back just yet, since the Bitterfangs are crawling all over Vanguard territory,” I said. “We need to be strategic, build up our defenses.”

“The best defense is a good offense,” Xavier said. “Why not take Malakai out once and for all? What’s with all this waiting around?”

“*You* can do whatever you want with your pack,” I said flatly. “But if you’re moving with the alliance, what I say goes.”

“Surprise, surprise, Greyson pulling rank once again,” Xavier said, sneering. “Don’t you ever get tired of sounding like a complete asshole?”

I had to hold myself back from socking my brother in the mouth. Why did he constantly feel the need to challenge me in front of everyone? We’d all agreed that I would lead the alliance, so why couldn’t he just stop fighting me every step of the way?

“Shut your mouth, Xavier, before I shut it for you,” I snapped.

“Oh? I’d like to see you try it!”

“Stop it, now!” Cali yelled. “This isn’t the time for you two to fight!”

Xavier turned to Cali. “Okay then, why don’t you decide? Whose plan is better?”

**Episode 4276**

**Xavier**

Ava’s sharp glance hit me like a physical slap, and I realized right away that I shouldn’t have thrown the decision to Cali. I wasn’t even sure why I had. Maybe it was because she was always trying to get me and Greyson to stop fighting. Maybe it was because I was so used to relying on Cali, and old habits died hard. But either way, it was too late now. The damage was done.

Cali shook her head. “No way am I deciding this. You two are the Alphas. Figure it out!”

She had a point, but I wasn’t just going to roll over and let Greyson make a decision that could hurt the alliance in the long run. I didn’t care if he was supposed to be in charge—a bad call was a bad call. This wasn’t a dictatorship. If he said something we didn’t agree with, the other Alphas were entitled to voice their dissent.

“I hate to say it, but we’re hardly in a position to attack anyone right now,” Mace said. “And we should be worried about the other pack houses. The Bitterfangs have already taken the palace.”

Lucian let out a plaintive moan.

“Sorry, man, but it’s true,” Mace said. “Who’s to stop them from taking the rest of our pack houses?” He turned to Xavier. “What are you doing to protect the Samara pack house? What are any of us doing to protect our homes?”

I looked at Ava, realizing that I’d been so pumped up to go after Malakai that I hadn’t even considered the prospect of the Bitterfang systematically taking over all our home bases. That would be a smart move on their part.

“He has a point,” I said to Ava.

“He does, and while we’re here licking our wounds, Malakai might already be invading our homes,” Ava said. “Or at least gearing up to.”

Worry twisted Cali’s features. “But if that *is* their plan, how are we supposed to stop them? They overwhelmed us tonight, pretty decisively. Mace is right—we’re in no position to take them on right now, even if they do decide to take the pack houses.”

There was a long, heavy silence as everyone considered the very real possibility of the Bitterfangs hitting us at home. We’d worried about that very possibility before our false victory, so it made perfect sense that we’d worry about it again now.

*The Bitterfang pack is just so unbelievably large and powerful. Ava’s worried about Knox, Jesse, and Marissa, and for good reason. Staying here is akin to doing nothing, and that’s one thing I can’t stand—doing nothing.*

“I just spoke to Rowena,” Porter said. “I asked her to blip away from the palace right when the attack happened, and she’s safe. Our pack house is so far away, I doubt it’s in danger, so she’s offered to come back here and put a magic shield up around one of the pack houses.”

“The Blue Bloods are the only ones without a witch,” I said. “Why don’t the Cobalts go and stay with them? The Samaras have Kira, and the Redwoods have Big Mac, so we can protect all of our pack houses with magic.”

I glanced at Ava and reached out to her via mind link. *Aren’t you glad we have a witch now?*

Ava smirked. *Perhaps.*

“But do we really have Big Mac?” Cali asked. “What if she doesn’t recover in time to protect the pack house?”

“We’ll just have to do without her until she’s up to the task,” Greyson said. “In the meantime, we’ll beef up patrols and do everything we can to protect the house. This isn’t our first rodeo. I don’t think we’re out of this just yet.”

At least someone was optimistic.

“You should all get going to your respective pack houses, before the Bitterfangs regroup and make a move,” Greyson said. He shot me a wary glance before approaching. “Do you need any help looking for your missing pack members?”

“I appreciate the offer,” I said begrudgingly, “but the Samaras can look after their own.” I gestured to Ava. “Let’s collect our pack and go.”

As we all began to filter out, I caught Cali’s eye. I started to smile, but then I forced myself to turn away. The last thing I needed in the middle of all this chaos was another warning from Adéluce. She’d made herself more than clear back at the Vanguard palace, when she’d tried to blow Cali off the roof. I’d be stupid to test her, especially at a time like this.

Ava and I lingered on the lawn while we waited for the stragglers from our pack to join us.

“Good luck,” I said to Porter and Mace as they passed.

“Back at you,” Porter said.

“And good luck finding your missing pack members,” Mace added, just before he and Porter shifted and led their packs into the woods.

“We’ll be in touch first thing tomorrow,” Greyson called down from the porch.

“Sure,” I said.

Once the rest of our pack joined us, we all shifted and tore through the woods toward the pack house. I could feel the surge of relief that whipped through the pack when we arrived to see that it was still intact.

Kira came rushing out. “Hey, what the hell happened? Is everyone okay?”

“The Bitterfangs attacked. We’re okay,” I said. “Happy to see that you are, too.”

Kira nodded. “Yes, I’m good. I’d come home early…” She paused, deep in thought for a moment, then shook it off. “All has been quiet on the home front, as far as I can tell.”

“Have you seen Knox, Jesse, or Marissa?” Ava asked her.

She looked confused. “No, why?”

Ava looked distraught, and I put an arm around her. “We got separated while we were escaping the palace,” I told Kira. “We were hoping they might have made their way back home, but clearly that’s not the case.”

“Well, I’ll keep an eye out for them,” Kira said.

“Thank you,” Ava said. “I appreciate it.”

Ava and I led the pack back into the house, and everyone collapsed in the living room, completely exhausted.

“Good job, all of you,” I said, locking eyes with each and every pack member. “You fought well, and you fought bravely. I don’t want you to feel any shame for running away from a fight that we couldn’t win. The Samara pack’s only mission is to live to fight another day—and believe me, we will. We’re going to regroup, and then we’re going to make Malakai pay for everything he’d done.”

“Death to Malakai!” called a few tired, but determined, voices.

“Exactly,” I said, proud of my pack’s resolve. “We’ve lost track of three of our own, but know that I won’t rest until I have them back safely. Now go, rest up, and I’ll check in with you once I’ve found Knox, Jesse, and Marissa.”

As the pack filed out of the living room, I pulled Kira aside.

“Could you get to work creating a shield around the pack house?” I asked. “The Bitterfangs took the palace, so there’s reason to believe they’ll try to take other alliance pack houses before this whole thing is over.”

Kira nodded. “Of course, I’ll get on that right away.”

“Is there something you can do to make sure that Knox, Jesse, and Marissa can get through the barrier?” Ava asked, joining us. “In case they make it back on their own?”

Kira looked at me, then back at Ava. “I’m sorry, that’s not how the shield works. It keeps everyone out. That’s kind of the point—it’s a shield, or it isn’t.”

“That’s okay,” I said quickly. I took Ava by the shoulders. “Look at me. You stay here and rest. I’m going to go out and find Knox, Jesse, and Marissa and bring them back safe.”

“Okay,” Ava said wearily, and I couldn’t help but be a little stunned by her easy acquiescence. She must’ve been beyond exhausted.

I followed Ava upstairs, wanting to take at least a moment to recharge before heading back out to search. We were both bloodied, exhausted, and filthy.

As Ava trudged into the bathroom, I ran through the evening’s events in my head, trying to pinpoint the last time I’d seen either of the missing Samaras. But no matter how many times I tried to focus, my mind kept running back to how I’d felt when I’d thought I lost Ava to Titus.

*It was like a piece of me had been ripped away. Was that feeling real, or was Adéluce manipulating me, somehow?*

But I had to admit that controlling my emotions wasn’t actually on the list of horrible things Adéluce had done since she’d forced me under her thumb. I doubted she’d have much fun with me if I wasn’t operating under free will, anyway. All she’d done back in the cellar was make me hallucinate.

*So what I felt for Ava in that moment… It was all me.*

Then I remembered the words that had escaped my lips when I’d thought she was dead, and for the first time, I really had to wonder…

*Do I love Ava?*

**Episode 4277**

My exhaustion finally came to a head as I entered my room. I sat down on the edge of my bed and let out a loud sigh. It had been a long, hard day, and my body was definitely feeling the effects.

I couldn’t believe how quickly everything had changed. One minute we’d been celebrating our victory—albeit with a deeply inaccurate epic poem—and the next we’d been running for our lives through the bowels of the palace.

Trudging back into the pack house, I’d seen the same expression on everyone’s faces—pure shock. I was grateful that we’d all made it out in one piece… For the most part. I was still worried about the injured and missing.

*What about Knox, Jesse, and Marissa? Armin? Did the Bitterfangs take them prisoner? Did they just kill them?*

I shuddered at the thought, reminding myself not to assume the worst.

I stripped out of my tattered dress, shocked that it was still in one piece. We’d been so worried about the party initially because of Big Mac’s vision that what to wear hadn’t really been a concern. I’d been worried and almost expecting something horrible to happen, but the prospect of a new start to the pack war had never even crossed my mind. I didn’t think it would’ve been anyone’s first thought.

I was heading for the shower when a knock sounded on my door, and I opened it a crack. It was Greyson. His gaze drifted downward to take in my nakedness, and I blushed.

“I should have put on a robe,” I said.

Greyson smiled, a twinkle in his eyes. “Should I come back later?”

I laughed. “If you do, I might be asleep. I’m exhausted.”

Greyson gently pushed the door open wider. “Then I’d better come in.”

I stepped back to let him pass, still embarrassed by my nakedness. I scrambled for my robe, but Greyson grabbed me around the waist, stopping me.

“All kidding aside, are you okay?” he asked. He gently turned me to face him, his eyes boring into mine.

“I’m as okay as I can be, I guess. I was just about to take a shower,” I said huskily, unable to ignore the heat that was spreading through my body in response to my naked body being pressed up against Greyson’s fully clothed one.

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me. “Alone?”

I shuddered. The thought of having Greyson all to myself after such a long, tense day of battle proved far too tempting for me to resist.

“No,” I said, taking his hand and leading him to the shower.

I turned the water on and then helped him undress, pulling his sweatshirt over his head and then sliding his sweatpants down his legs, allowing my hands to graze his skin as I did.

“No underwear?” I asked breathlessly, taking in his growing erection as it popped free of his pants.

“I felt like I deserved a little freedom after the day we’ve had,” Greyson said with a smirk.

I giggled as I pulled him against me, heat building between us at the skin-to-skin contact. I rose onto my tiptoes and took his shaft between my thighs, then lowered myself down so that his hardness was pressed lengthwise against my fluttering sex. Then I slowly rocked my hips, using my thighs to slowly stroke his cock, enjoying the press of it against my clit.

“You’re so wet,” he whispered against my lips, wrapping his arms tightly around me. He suddenly pulled away, lifted me into his arms, and carried me into the shower.

My skin broke out in goosebumps under the heat of the water, a sharp contrast to the chill of my room. Rather than put me down, Greyson pinned me against the wall and pressed his lips against mine as the water rained down on us.

There was so much to worry about, so many things to consider now that we knew the Bitterfangs were back. But in this moment, it felt like Greyson and I were the only two people in the entire world. I needed this. We needed this.

I ran my hands through his hair, sliding my tongue against his and liking how his chest felt against my taut nipples. The feeling of our wet bodies pressed together like this reminded me of the heated moments we’d shared in Lucian’s pool. My arousal grew as I remembered how Greyson’s cock had filled me to the brim, nearly edging me to release within seconds of him sliding inside me.

I slowly lowered my feet to the ground and turned around, throwing him a hungry look over my shoulder. I smoothed my hair out of my eyes and smiled at him as the throb between my legs intensified. “What are you waiting for?”

“Not a damn thing,” Greyson said.

He pulled me back against his chest, his hands cupping my breasts before traveling lower and then between us. I gasped as he plunged deep inside me, filling me all the way up once again, until his thighs were flush with my ass. He stayed right there, gripping my waist to hold me in place as he rocked his hips.

I braced myself against the wall, pressing my cheek against the warm, wet tile. I arched my back in pleasure and pressed my hips tighter against Greyson’s so that he went even deeper.

“Right there, love,” Greyson grunted.

He hadn’t even started thrusting, yet. Not really. He seemed content to enjoy the sensation of simply resting inside me, though I could feel the pulse of his cock as his erection surged, turning my knees to Jell-O.

“You just feel so good, and I needed this so much,” Greyson said breathlessly, a rare admission of his inability to hold off. “I think if I move, I’ll come.”

“Well, let’s see if that’s true,” I said wickedly.

Slowly, I began to thrust against him, sliding back and forth on his shaft, pausing right at the head of his cock before slamming back against him over and over again. I increased my pace until shivers of pleasure seized my body. Instead of making him come as I’d intended, my own orgasm took me by surprise, and my moan echoed off the walls.

“There’s no way I’m going to come yet,” Greyson growled, “at least not until you come one more time.”

He pulled me close so that my back was flush with his chest. He gripped my breasts, tweaking my pebbled nipples as he finally started to pump in and out, our bodies slapping together under the water, our flesh vibrating at every point of contact.

Then, without warning, he picked me up and carried me back to the bed, where he wasted no time entering me again and slowly grinding his hips against me, putting all his weight behind the power of his thrusts.

He pushed my legs up so that my knees nearly grazed my ears, rose up onto his knees, and surged against me.

I writhed against him, craving another surge of release to take the edge off the last bits of stress that still lingered in the pit of my stomach. I watched Greyson closely, knowing that he was seeking his own release to clear his mind of all the awful things we’d been faced with that day.

His hips spasmed as his own climax finally took hold. My second orgasm hit me then, and we moved in sync to pull every last bit of pleasure from each other. Our gazes stayed locked for a time until we smashed our lips together, tasting each other’s tongues.

Greyson collapsed on top of me with a sigh, and I nuzzled under his chin, just happy to be in his arms. I stroked his hair and looked up at him, noting the last bit of tension lingering in his jaw.

“I love you,” he said. “So fucking much.”

I smiled and ran my hands through his hair. “How are you? Today must have been so rough on you. You’re so concerned about everyone else all the time… I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

He smiled down at me and planted a kiss on my lips. “I’m Alpha through and through—I can handle just about anything. Even you,” he said with a smirk.

I blushed and smiled up at him. “I’m being serious, Greyson. Don’t pretend that today wasn’t hard.”

Greyson sighed. “It was. Things could have gone better, but they could have gone way worse, too. Either way, I handled it, and will continue to do so until this is all over. As long as I have you by my side, nothing can stop me.”

I leaned into him. “I feel the same way about you.”

I stretched up to kiss him, only to realize that his eyes were closed. I watched as his breathing slowed, signaling that he’d fallen asleep. I dropped my head back on his chest and listened to his heartbeat.

I’d almost fallen asleep myself when I heard my phone buzzing on my nightstand.

Simultaneously concerned with not waking Greyson and with who could be calling at this hour, I gently slipped out of his arms. I grabbed my phone and slid into my robe as I stepped out into the hallway, closing the door softly behind me.

I was surprised to see Kira’s name on the screen, and I quickly answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Cali, I hope I didn’t wake you,” she said.

“No, I was up. Is something wrong?”

Kira lowered her voice, as if trying to avoid being overheard. “No, but I did the magic test on Xavier’s sample. Are you ready to hear the results?”

**Episode 4278**

**Ava**

I stepped out of the shower and quickly wrapped myself in a towel, feeling more refreshed than I’d thought I would. I padded out to the bedroom, plucking another towel from the shelf to dry my hair. I was disappointed to find the bedroom empty.

*Where did Xavier run off to? Did he already leave to go find the others? Even though I hate to think it, maybe we need to wait a while until the whole damn forest isn’t crawling with Bitterfangs.*

I’d just finished getting dressed when loud voices reached me from downstairs. I quickly jogged downstairs to see what was going on, hoping that Marissa, Jesse, and Knox might’ve made it back.

“What’s going on?” I said to no one in particular as I entered the living room. It didn’t take me long to realize that what I’d heard was the sound of an argument.

*Why the hell are we arguing with each other when we have so much other shit to worry about?*

And then I figured out who was responsible. Blaine was in Xavier’s face, and Xavier appeared to be using every bit of self-control he possessed to keep himself from knocking Blaine out cold.

“So what do you have to say for yourself?” Blaine shouted. “Because it’s yourfault that Knox is missing. You’re probably happy that he’s gone. You probably hope he’s *dead*, you hate him so much! What are you even still doing here? Shouldn’t you be out looking for him? Or is that not important to you, even though Knox has proven time and time again how loyal he is to the pack? Which is more than I can say for you.”

“I’m going to tell you one more time to check your tone and back off. I’m about to run out of patience,” Xavier said, his voice eerily calm. “I’m the Alpha of this pack—”

“I don’t give a flying fuck!” Blaine shouted. “You can take your Alpha title and shove it up your ass. I will *never* consider you my Alpha. How could I? For all I know, you’re planning to make sure that Zipper and I get ‘lost’ during the next battle. That’d be convenient for you, wouldn’t it?”

Zipper shrank away from the fight and shot me a pleading look, obviously not wanting to be dragged into this.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Xavier said.

Blaine took another step forward, bumping chests with Xavier. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me that you give a fuck about Knox, and I’ll call you a liar!”

I’d seen enough. I stepped between the two men and shoved Blaine back. “You have no right to talk to your Alpha like that!” I snarled.

“But don’t you see what he’s doing?” Blaine demanded. “The council didn’t get rid of us, so now he’s—”

“*Shut up!*” I shouted. “I’ve never seen anyone more ungrateful in my life! Xavier let you rejoin this pack despite his better judgment, and this is how you repay him? If it weren’t for him, you’d be a pitiful, pack-less, wolf-less asshole—or did you forget that?”

I stepped back and took a long look around the room, making sure everyone was listening.

“We’re in the middle of a pack war,” I said flatly. “Or hadn’t you noticed? We can’t be fighting each other!”

“But what about Knox?” Blaine pressed.

I softened slightly—Blaine was truly worried about his friend. Too bad he was expressing it so horribly. “Knox is my cousin, Blaine. Don’t you think that I’d move heaven and earth to get him back? Or do you doubt me, too?”

Blaine dropped his head.

“And don’t you *ever* accuse my mate of not caring about his pack. If you truly think that, you’re a fucking idiot, and you can get the hell out of here right now.” I stepped close to him. “There’s the door.” I pointed at it.

Blaine averted his gaze.

“What are you waiting for? Don’t tell me you plan on staying in a pack run by a man you don’t trust?” I pressed, enjoying the sight of Blaine squirming—perhaps a little too much. When Blaine made no move to head for the door, I stepped away from him and chuckled. “That’s what I thought.”

Something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye, and I looked over to see Kira gesturing for me to come over to her. Before I did, I gave Blaine another shove for good measure.

“Now that you’ve obviously decided to stay,” I said, “*play nice*.”

I went over to see what Kira wanted and was surprised when she led me to a room where Cali was waiting. I frowned. Cali was literally the last person I ever wanted to see.

“What’s she doing here?” I asked Kira. “And who let her in without Xavier or me knowing?”

“I blipped her here,” Kira said quickly. “We need to strategize, and there’s no time to waste.”

I looked at Kira, confused. “What? I thought Greyson, Xavier, and the other Alphas were handling the strategy.”

Cali shook her head. “Kira’s not talking about the Bitterfangs.”

“No? Then what *is* she talking about?”

“Xavier,” Cali said simply.

There was an awkward pause as I glanced between the Fae and the witch, both of whom harbored feelings for my man. I was seconds away from kicking them both the hell out of the pack house when Kira finally spoke up.

“There’s something you need to know,” she said.

“So I gathered,” I said dryly, “and if one of you doesn’t start talking—”

“I kissed Xavier,” Kira said quickly.

My anger flared. “*What?*”

I took a step toward her, and Cali hopped up from her seat and dove between us.

“Just hear her out, Ava,” she said.

“Says the *other* bitch who kissed my mate!” I hissed. “You’re lucky I haven’t already shifted and ripped you a new one.”

“Ava, please,” Kira said. “It’s not what you think. I kissed him to get a sample of his essence, so that I could run a magical test on it!”

“Oh, so *that’s* the excuse we’re using for kissing other people’s mates?” I was still pissed, but I heard a note of truth in Kira’s words. I turned to Cali. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that’s why you kissed Xavier at the palace? To ‘collect his essence’?”

Cali slowly nodded. “Well, yes. That *is* why I did it. Kira didn’t kiss Xavier long enough to get a good enough sample, so I had to get one for her.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “This is crazy talk. I thought I’d heard it all, but this really just takes the fucking cake!”

“I swear, I’m not here to cause any trouble,” Cali said.

*Too late for that.*

With tremendous effort, I held my tongue. “So what? Why are you telling me this?”

“I left the party early to run the test,” Kira said.

“And she found magic residue on Xavier,” Cali finished.

“What?” I suddenly felt like I needed to sit down. It was like the wind had been knocked right out of me. I leaned casually against the wall, not wanting Cali or Kira to see me sweat.

“But we shouldn’t read too much into it,” Kira said. “I didn’t get a definitive result.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves—which were going haywire. “So… What do we do now?”

Kira and Cali exchanged an uncertain glance.

My annoyance spiked, which thankfully watered down my shock a little. “Just spit it out, why don’t you? I’m over the dramatics.” I also didn’t like that Cali seemed to know way more about this than I did.

“In order to get a better, more conclusive result, we need a sample of Xavier’s blood,” Kira said.

She and Cali both turned expectant glances my way.

“Why are you looking at…” Then it dawned on me. “You want *me* to get his blood? How? I’m not a fucking vampire! And how do you know blood is the key? What if it ends up being just as inconclusive as the first test? What will we need, then? His liver? His heart? His tongue?”

Cali winced.

“Oh, give me a break, Cali. You sleep with werewolves and just fought in a werewolf battle—you can’t possibly be that squeamish,” I snapped.

*Always the dainty little drama queen. What the hell do Xavier and Greyson see in her?*

“A few drops will probably be enough,” Kira said. “Look, I know this is weird, but I think we can all agree that something’s been off with Xavier lately, right?”

Cali nodded—clearly all too happy to feel some sort of link to Xavier. Kira nodded, too, and finally, so did I. I didn’t like the messengers, but their message was legit.

“So we owe it to him to get to the bottom of it, right?” Kira asked.

“Fuck. *Fine*,” I said. “I’ll just tell him that we’re checking him for magic. Why all the secrecy? Why are you telling me this and not him?”

“Because he can’t know!” Kira said quickly. “If someone’s cast some sort of spell on him, they might fight back if they realize that we’re on to them.”

I arched an eyebrow. “And how would they find out?”

“We don’t know how connected he might be to the caster,” Kira said. “Better safe than sorry. So no, Xavier can’t know why you need the blood.”

I was suddenly hit by an unsettling thought. Xavier and I had gotten together only after he’d started to act strangely. As I listened to Cali and Kira discussing when they’d first noticed the change in his behavior, I realized that it lined up too perfectly to be a coincidence.

*But what does that mean?*

An ominous feeling began to bubble up inside me. I *really* didn’t like the way that Cali and Kira were now talking about “saving” Xavier—like he was in danger here with me and the Samaras, like they wanted things to go back to the way they were when he was with the Redwoods.

*Who says that he needs saving? What if they’re wrong? And if Xavier gets wind of the fact that I’m involved in this or that I doubted him, would he ever forgive me? I’m not about to do anything to jeopardize what I have.*

“This is a bad idea,” I blurted out. “And I want no part of it. If you’re wrong—”

“But what if we’re right?” Cali interrupted. “Don’t you want to know?”

I wasn’t sure that I did.

*What if… What if this possible magic influence is the only thing keeping Xavier with me?*

**Episode 4279**

**Xavier**

I heard Ava arguing with someone in the den. The door was closed, and I lingered on the other side, straining to hear what was being said, but I couldn’t.

“Fuck it, it’s my pack house,” I muttered, then I pushed into the room. I was shocked to see Cali standing with Ava and Kira. “Cali? What are you doing here?”

“Kira blipped me over,” Cali said, gesturing at the witch. “We need a favor.”

I was instantly worried. “What, did something happen to the Redwoods? Are you under attack? Do you need help?”

I immediately thought about the discussion we’d had back at the Redwood pack house, about possible Bitterfang attacks on all our home bases.

“No, Xavier, we’re fine,” Cali said. “Really.”

Cali and Ava shared a look, and my confusion spiked. It almost seemed like they were planning something together, but I hadn’t noticed hell freezing over, so that didn’t seem right. They weren’t at each other’s throats to the degree that they used to be, but they weren’t friends, either.

“We need to know,” Cali said to Ava.

Ava looked annoyed. “Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Then go ahead. Ask him.”

Cali frowned. “Are you sure?”

I looked back and forth between them, picking up on the obvious silent conflict going on.

“Just fucking do it!” Ava snapped. “Damn.”

“Ask me what?” I demanded.

There was an awkward pause.

Cali finally cleared her throat. “This is going to sound crazy, but… Can we have some of your blood?”

“My what?” I looked between the two women. My two mates. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought I’d ever see them planning something together. This had to be another Adéluce hallucination. “Did you seriously just ask for my blood?”

Cali nodded. “Yes, we need it. So… Can we have it?”

*Nice try. I’m not stupid enough to fall for this. And even if it’s* not *a hallucination, I’m too tired to deal with this right now.*

“No, you can’t,” I said. “Why are you even asking?”

The two women exchanged yet another conspiratorial glance. It was clear that they had no plans to give me a straight answer.

“Okay, well, if you’re not going to tell me, I’m out of here.” I turned back toward the door. “After a night like the one I’ve just had, I don’t have time for this bullshit.”

I sighed and left them, my mind still racing, confusion still clouding my brain. I had to go look for Knox, Jesse, and Marissa, but I needed at least one second to breathe. And to figure out how the fuck I was going to search for them.

*What a day. We got totally fucked by the Bitterfangs, the Hackberrys, and likely what was left of the Ironwoods, and now Cali and Ava are in cahoots, trying to* steal my blood*? What could they possibly want with my blood?*

I went to our bedroom, weirded out that Cali was in a room nearby with Ava and Kira, up to who knew what. It felt… *wrong*, somehow. All I knew for sure was that I wanted no part of it.

I was still filthy, so I decided to get in the shower, suddenly feeling the overwhelming need to wash this day off me. I started the shower and quickly got in, wishing that I could wash the memory of today down the drain, too, like it had never happened.

“Out of sorts” didn’t even begin to describe the way I felt. I realized how rare it was for me to feel like a failure—and not in a cocky way, either.

*I know better than most that you win some and you lose some—and I’ve had my share of losses, but never as an Alpha. This feeling is new to me. Doing everything you can and it still not being enough? It’s a hard pill to swallow, seeing people you care about get hurt and knowing that there’s nothing you can really do about it.*

I’d never shouldered *all* the responsibility for having to protect a pack, before. I’d certainly devoted myself to supporting and protecting Cali, but this was entirely different.

*I don’t have a clue where Knox, Marissa, and Jesse even are. Could they be stuck in the palace rubble? Were they captured, or killed?*

If they were alive, and I hoped to hell that they were, I was going to do whatever it took to get them back. I had to show strength and competence to the pack, no matter what.

*But how? That’s the problem. How do I show the pack that I’m strong? How do I prove that they can count on me as their Alpha? How do I shut up naysayers like Blaine, once and for all? How can I do that when, for all intents and purposes, the Bitterfangs have us exactly where they want us?*

The Bitterfangs had numbers on their side. They’d overwhelmed us, which made me think that Malakai had been toying with us in the first battle, making us think he had less firepower than he actually did. It sickened me to think everything we’d been through had been part of some grand plan that Malakai had orchestrated from the beginning.

I shut the water off and got out of the shower. I passed the towel over my body quickly and then dried my hair as I walked back into the bedroom. When I lowered the towel, I saw Ava lying in the bed in a sheer pink slip. I couldn’t help but react to the sight of her lying there, all enticing and beautiful.

I cleared my throat. “Did Cali leave?”

“Don’t know, not my problem.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s funny, because it certainly *seemed* like your problem, earlier. Since when do you and Cali work together on anything? It was weird. I thought I was hallucinating.”

Ava shrugged again and adjusted her position on the bed, her breasts straining against the whisper thin fabric, threatening to spill out of it.

“What is all this, Ava?” I asked, liking it and thrown off by it, all at the same time.

Ava pouted. “What? I can’t show my Alpha some appreciation?”

“Right after teaming up with Cali and asking for my blood, like a couple of vampires?” I grumbled. “Yeah, that really turned me on.”

“Wow,” Ava said. “You’re really turning me down for sex right now, just because Cali’s a weirdo?”

“No, it’s because I need to go search for your cousin,” I said.

She wasn’t wrong about Cali being weird, but I loved that about her. She was *my* little weirdo. Or at least she used to be. I glanced toward the door, still feeling strange about not knowing if Cali was still here in the house. I couldn’t do anything with Ava if there was even a *chance* that she was still under the same roof.

Up until now, I’d been able to compartmentalize things—more or less—but I knew that what I’d been doing with Ava wasn’t okay. Not when I still intended to do my best to end up with Cali. Being with Ava had been working as a coping mechanism, and it was extremely convenient, but now things were different. I’d almost told her I loved her—I *had* told her. Or, I’d told a hallucinated version of her.

I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to get Cali back. I didn’t even know if I’d ever get a chance to try. But more and more, I was starting to feel like a horrible person—and a horrible mate.

*I didn’t have to involve myself with Ava after Adéluce ruined things between me and Cali, but I did, and now look at me. I’m the Samara Alpha—something I won’t easily be able to change, even after I kill Adéluce. If I even* can *kill her.*

It was painful to remember that even though my old life was long gone, my love for Cali wasn’t, and it never would be.

“Xavier,” Ava said, climbing onto her knees on the bed. “Come here. You shouldn’t go out tonight anyway with the Bitterfangs running around. I want to save Knox, Jesse, and Marissa more than anyone, but you shouldn’t go alone,” she said. “Forget everything else but me for a moment, and this.” She ran her hands down her body, cupping her breasts and pursing her lips as she looked at me through her lashes.

My legs seemed to have a mind of their own. I walked toward her, and as soon as I was within arm’s reach, she yanked me down on top of her.

“I don’t want to talk about Cali right now, Xavier,” Ava said. “I don’t want to talk about the Bitterfangs, Greyson, or the Redwoods. I want just a moment with my Alpha.”

She crushed her lips against mine, and I wanted to stop this, but I couldn’t. My wolf wouldn’t let me. He wanted the distraction—and fuck, I wanted it, too.

At moments like this, I remembered why it had been so easy for me to drown my sorrows in Ava, to run to her when Cali was no longer an option. My wolf wanted her, I wanted her, and my heart skipped a beat at the knowledge that I could have her. Right here, right now. Fuck duty, fuck everything else.

Ava’s teeth grazed my lips for a fraction of a second before she bit down, drawing blood.

*What the—Was this her plan all along? To get my fucking blood by* seducing me*?*

I pulled away and looked her right in the eye, daring her to lie to me. “Ava, what the *fuck* did you do that for?”

**Episode 4280**

I was pacing back and forth, nervous as hell and wishing that there was some other way to get the information we needed about Xavier. I was wondering about the magic part of it, too. Would Xavier’s blood really allow Kira to detect the magical influence, once and for all? Whenever magic was involved, there always seemed to be more questions than answers.

I wondered what Xavier could possibly be thinking in the aftermath of our request. He’d looked at me in a way I didn’t like at all—with confusion and a bit of annoyance. It was probably due to the stress of the day… Or at least that was what I kept telling myself. He’d spent the evening fighting Bitterfangs, only to come home and find me and Ava of all people working together to swindle him out of his blood—without even telling him why we wanted it. It was no wonder he’d left in a huff.

I hugged myself tightly, the sheer strangeness of being in the house that Ava and Xavier shared hitting me hard. Ava was with him now, and I wasn’t. God, everything had changed so drastically, it was really no surprise that magic was a possible cause. We just needed Xavier’s blood, and then we’d know for sure.

Kira came walking in, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Ava’s not back yet?” she asked. “I’m surprised. Maybe I should go check on them…” Kira trailed off, looking at me closely. “Are you okay? You kind of look like you’re about to cry.”

“No, no, I’m not,” I said quickly. “I’m fine, really. You’re just lucky you missed all the craziness at the palace. It took a lot out of me.”

Kira sat down beside me. “I’m sorry about how things have turned out. It can’t be easy to know that Ava’s with Xavier right now, doing whatever she can to get the blood from him. I mean, I’m not the biggest Ava fan, but we do need her on this. We can’t do it without her. Just keep telling yourself that—hopefully, it’ll take the edge off.”

“That’s good advice,” I said.

“Good, I’m glad,” she said.

I sighed and put on a brave face. “I really appreciate your understanding, Kira. You’ve been such a rock, tonight. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“Thanks, Cali,” she said, smiling. “That means a lot. For now, why don’t I blip you back home? There’s no sense in you waiting around—especially since we don’t know how long Ava’s going to take. And even when she does bring the blood—if she even manages to get it—it’ll still take me a while to do the test. Trust that you’ll be the first to know when I get the results.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Kira, I think I’ll do that. I’m so tired I can barely sit up straight, anyway.”

Plus, I didn’t want Greyson to worry about me being gone too long. He’d been skeptical about this whole meeting with Kira about Xavier anyway…

*Maybe you should be, too.*

I shook the thought off. I had to put trust in Kira. I had to put trust that we were going to get to the bottom of this.

Kira smiled and squeezed my hand. “Honestly, you look exhausted. Ready to go?”

She stood up, and I faced her, bracing myself. “Ready.”

“Safe travels,” Kira said, raising her hands.

In less than a second, I was back on the Redwood porch. I was feeling dizzy, and I didn’t know if it was because of Kira’s blipping, or because I was literally running on empty. I took comfort in the fact that there were still a few lights on inside, despite the late hour. I had no desire to walk into a pitch-black house.

I took a moment to gather myself, letting the cold wind wash over me. It felt good, and cleared my head a little—and right now, a clear head was what I wanted more than anything.

Thoughts of Ava and Xavier invaded my brain, like they had so many times before. I reminded myself that whatever was going on between them was truly none of my business. Xavier and I were broken up—and Xavier had made it clear with his rarely hot and mostly cold behavior that he wanted it to stay that way.

*I’ve accepted that, right? That they’re together and apparently happy?*

Except that I knew how I felt every time I saw them together.

A small part of me—ugh, who was I kidding? A *huge* part of me—hoped that once we figured out what magic was at play and counteracted it, Xavier might come back to his old self. But did that mean I wanted him to come back to me? Was that even an option, after everything that had happened between us?

I shook those thoughts away, knowing that they were nothing but a stressor for me, at this point.

*I still have Greyson, and he’s more than enough.*

Cradling that thought close, I opened the door and walked into the pack house.

I took in the silence of the house, wondering if I should just go to bed. My body was pretty much screaming at me to do just that.

*I’m exhausted, but there’s no way I’ll be able to sleep right now. Not with all these thoughts running through my head. We just asked Ava to steal Xavier’s blood, for heck’s sake—how can I sleep with something like that on my mind?*

I started toward the kitchen, but stopped when I saw Greyson in there with his mother. They were speaking quietly, and I moved back into the shadows to listen, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

“I heard what happened,” Mrs. Smith was saying. “MacKenzie told me. Thank you for making sure that she got home safely. I don’t know what I would have done if—”

“Don’t even mention it, Mom,” Greyson said. “You love her, which means that I love her, which means that I’ll do everything in my power to protect her—no matter how mean she is to me.”

Mrs. Smith chuckled. “She’s not mean, just direct.”

Greyson smirked. “Whatever you say. You’re blinded by love, so I don’t expect you to understand. I’m just glad that she blipped you away from that mess before things really got out of hand. There’s no way I would’ve wanted you in the middle of all that.”

“I know you want to protect me, but I’ll thank you to remember that I’ve fought in more than a few wars in my day,” Mrs. Smith said, partly teasing, partly serious. “I’m perfectly capable of holding my own in a fight.”

“I know, I know,” Greyson said. “But there’s a difference between what you *can* do, and what you *should* do. Let me take care of that stuff. You don’t need to fight anymore.”

Mrs. Smith sighed. “Well, thank you, Greyson, but know that I’m always here and ready if you need me.”

“Just so you know,” Greyson said, “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you and Big Mac have your dream wedding.”

Mrs. Smith pulled him into a hug, rubbing his back in a way that reminded me of my own mother. Seeing it brought tears to my eyes. Greyson had become such a good son. He’d been so unsure when he’d first learned who Mrs. Smith was, but now he’d accepted it, and their relationship was beautiful to witness.

Greyson was the perfect mix of gentle and strong. He was a good listener, and he always tried to do the honorable thing. Affection for him swelled in my chest, and I suddenly wanted to run to him to feel his arms around me, too. But I waited my turn, not wanting to crash their moment.

They must have sensed that they weren’t alone, because they suddenly moved apart and turned to look right at me.

Mrs. Smith smiled and picked up a steaming mug of tea. “Hi there, Cali. I was just leaving,” she raised the mug. “Going to take this up to MacKenzie. You two have a wonderful night, okay? See you in the morning.”

Once she was gone, Greyson pulled me into a hug, and I melted against him, realizing how much I needed it.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said.

“Me too,” I said. “It was a little stressful to leave the pack house, not gonna lie.”

Greyson took a seat at the kitchen table and pulled me onto his lap. “Well, I’d rather you stayed close for the next couple of days anyway—or until we’ve beaten the Bitterfangs. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I know, Greyson, but I can take care of myself,” I said. “Haven’t I proven that?”

Greyson smiled. “Yes, you’ve proven it. You were amazing today. Hell, you’re the only reason why we got out of there at all.”

I basked in the praise, happy to hear it. While my control over my magic still wasn’t perfect, it had made all the difference today. I wanted to be able to help the pack—that was what I’d always wanted—and it felt good to have actually done it.

*If I want to be a real Luna one day, I have to be able to help my Alpha, no matter what.*

Greyson, seeming to have read my mind, absently trailed his fingers across my fake Luna mark. Then he leaned over and kissed my shoulder. “You know, as horrific as it was, today has made me more certain than ever that I want to make this official one day.”

I smiled. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted. To be with my mate, my Alpha, and to be chosen as his Luna. It’s a dream I’ve had for a long time, now.”

“And I want to give that to you,” Greyson said.

I kissed him deeply and pulled back to look into his eyes.

*If he wants to make me his Luna—*really *make me his Luna—should I make a decision as well? Should I finally, officially, choose Greyson?*

**Episode 4281**

It felt amazing to be in Greyson’s arms talking about the future, but once again, I was torn. Every time I got into this kind of thought process, the *due destini* came and smacked me in the face.

*How can I even think about making a choice? I’ve let the fantasy of becoming a real Luna and leading the Redwood pack by Greyson’s side cloud the reality I’m facing. A choice is impossible. And what kind of choice could it even be, now that Xavier’s removed himself from the equation?*

I wasn’t ready to abandon Xavier yet, even though my mind kept urging me to do just that. My heart couldn’t even fathom it. My indecision was painful for Greyson, and I knew it, but it would only be worse in the long run if I made a choice before I knew all the facts. I could never actually approach being Luna without having made my choice. It wouldn’t be fair to do something like that to either brother.

I thought about Kira’s magic test for probably the hundredth time. If only it had worked on the first try. I only hoped that Ava’s sample would be more useful, though I still had no idea how she was going to get Xavier’s blood without making him suspicious. I remembered Kira’s warning: that Xavier had to stay in the dark about the reason for the test so as not to tip off the person who’d placed the magic on him—if that person existed.

*No, I can’t make any decisions about anything—becoming a Luna, choosing Greyson, any of it. Not until I hear from Kira. Not until I know for sure that Xavier pushed me away of his own free will, and that there’s not some other force at play.*

“Ready for bed?” Greyson asked, picking me up and heading for the stairs without waiting for my answer.

I snuggled against his chest, suddenly overwhelmed by how much I cared for him.

“I’m ready,” I said around a yawn. “What about you?”

“It’s a wonder I’m even still awake,” he said.

Greyson kicked my bedroom door open and laid me gently on the bed before slipping out of his clothes and climbing in with me. He pulled me close and planted a kiss on the top of my head, and before long, I heard his breathing slow as he drifted off to sleep.

My mind was still racing, too preoccupied to let me fall asleep just yet. All I could think was that if Xavier was under some sort of unwanted magical influence, then I needed to know—and if he wasn’t being influenced, then I needed to know just as badly. It was the only way I’d ever be able to make peace with the state of our relationship.

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A short time later, I woke up in Greyson’s arms. I closed my eyes again and oriented myself as the events of last night came rushing through my mind. I hoped that Ava had managed to get a sample of Xavier’s blood, and that Kira was close to getting a result. She’d said that I’d be the first to know if she discovered anything, but worry was stretching my nerves thin as I contemplated what she might—or might not—have found.

Feeling both wide awake and thirsty, I was about to get up to get a glass of water when I noticed that Greyson was awake, too. He hadn’t realized I’d woken up, so I studied him for a few moments without him noticing. He didn’t look happy.

I nudged him gently. “What’s wrong?”

He smiled, but I could tell he wasn’t really feeling it. “Oh—nothing. You go back to sleep. Don’t worry about me.”

I pulled away so I could get a look at his face. “No,” I said simply. “I’m not going to do that. Whatever’s on your mind, you should feel free to discuss it with me. There’s no reason for you to keep secrets. Not now. Besides, I want to help, if I can.”

Greyson sighed. “I just feel like I let the alliance down. Like I failed. I told everyone that Malakai was dead—that the Bitterfangs were little more than a bad memory. And I was wrong. My mistake could end up costing a lot of people their lives. Hell, it might have already. I should have been more thorough.”

“Greyson, please,” I said. “We’ve already talked about this. This isn’t your fault. You verified our victory the only way you could—by tracking down the Bitterfang survivors and bringing back proof of Malakai’s death. What else could you have done?”

“Thanks, Cali, but there’s a lot I could have done,” he said wearily. “I should’ve killed Honora. I should’ve, I don’t know, taken a piece of Malakai’s ‘body’ from the fire to have it tested. I should’ve… I should’ve done *more*.”

“Greyson—”

“And my mess up didn’t end there. I was the one in charge when we lost the palace. Lucian’s a pain in the ass, but he’d be right to blame me for what happened. I led the retreat, after all.”

“I don’t see it that way, Greyson,” I said. “You were voted in as Alpha of the alliance, after all. What, do you think that things would’ve gone better last night if *Lucian* had been in charge?”

Greyson gave a bitter laugh. “He might’ve saved his palace, at the very least.”

I reached up and pulled Greyson close, wishing I could take his pain away. “Greyson, I truly think that things would have been a lot worse last night without you at the helm. We lost a pack house, sure—but we’re still alive, aren’t we? And we have you to thank for that. And besides, what’s that saying? Nothing’s over until it’s over?”

Greyson pressed a kiss to my lips and smoothed a hand through my hair. “I really appreciate your faith in me, but I can’t help but think that things would’ve gone a little better if Xavier had been in charge. Maybe he’s better suited to the job. Just look at where my being in charge has gotten us. Maybe it’s time for him to take over.”

I stared at him. “Greyson, are you serious? Since when are you willing to say that Xavier is the better Alpha? You must really be hurting.”

I hated seeing him this way. He was rarely so dejected, and I hoped that he was just going through a rough patch after the stress of the day before. I wouldn’t blame him, if that were the case. I was dealing with my own feelings, after everything we’d gone through.

“I’m sorry,” Greyson said, turning away. “I’m being moody, I know. Anyway, I didn’t really get a chance to ask how things went with Xavier. Did everything go as planned? You mentioned something about Ava needing to get his blood?”

“Well, things didn’t go quite the way Kira and I were hoping,” I said. “And since we put Ava in charge of the… *acquisition*, I don’t even know if we have Xavier’s blood.”

Greyson looked at me closely. “I’m sure that made you feel great, having to involve Ava in this.”

I winced inwardly, not wanting to expose just how *much* it had pained me. “It’s not ideal, no, but there was no other way to get Xavier’s blood without raising his suspicions. In this case, the ends will have to justify the means. If we get the blood and it proves that Xavier’s under some malevolent magical influence, it’ll all be worth it.

*In a perfect world, Ava wouldn’t be anywhere near Xavier. But this isn’t a perfect world. Far from it. All I can do now is deal with the reality of the situation and hope that Kira’s spell gives me the insight I need to find out what’s going on with Xavier, once and for all.*

“I really wasn’t happy about you going to the Samara house,” Greyson said. “With us right back in the middle of a war, it definitely seemed like a bad idea. I was so happy when I saw you come walking into the kitchen last night.”

“Well, Kira blipped me there and back, so I was never in any danger of crossing paths with the Bitterfangs,” I reminded him. “But I had to go, Greyson. I just didn’t trust Ava to do it on her own. It didn’t even go very well because we sort of got caught by Xavier. It didn’t seem like he knew what we were doing, but that… didn’t go so well.”

“I understand that you had to go,” Greyson said. “And I trust you. I have to, if we’re going to get through everything going on right now.”

“And I’ll do everything I can to hold on to that trust,” I said firmly. “I want you to feel confident in my ability to protect myself, and to make the right decisions.”

“I do, but you know I’ll ever stop worrying,” Greyson said.

“I worry about you, too, so I get it,” I said. “And I know you’re feeling down right now, but I also believe—I *know*—that you’ll lead us all through this.”

Greyson sighed and pulled me tighter against him. “And if I don’t, we’ll lose everything.”

**Episode 4282**

**Xavier**

I wiped the blood from my lip, waiting for Ava’s explanation.

She smiled wickedly. “I got a little carried away, I guess. You okay?”

“I’ll live,” I grunted as she got up and went into the bathroom.

My bottom lip still stung a little. I wiped my mouth again and stared at the red smear on my hand, thinking that under any other circumstances, either one of us drawing blood during an intense make-out wouldn’t have been suspicious. We played rough sometimes, and things happened. But these weren’t normal circumstances, and what she’d done troubled me more than I’d admitted.

*Only minutes before Ava went all vampire on me, Cali asked for my blood—right in front of Ava. When I refused and asked for a reason, they didn’t give me one. Then, as soon as she got me alone, Ava bit me. Is it really just a coincidence?*

Ava stepped out of the bathroom, still a vision in her sheer nightgown. She’d wiped the rest of my blood from her lips. It was crazy to think that we’d just narrowly escaped the Bitterfangs, and yet Ava looked like she’d been lounging in bed all day, pampering herself and preparing for this very moment.

*She’s so damn sexy. Annoyingly so. Every single time I tell myself I’m not going to let things go too far, I take one look at her and start aching for her touch.*

I suddenly thought about how I’d hallucinated Ava’s death, down in Lucian’s wine cellar, and a fresh wave of relief overcame me. I was just so happy that it hadn’t been real. I hoped Ava hadn’t heard what I said. I wasn’t the most sensitive guy in the world, not by a long shot, but I was pretty damn sure that Ava would kill to hear me say those words—so if she really *had* heard me say them, she would’ve been all over me.

*Just like she was a few moments ago…*

She was fixing her hair, and she met my eyes in the mirror and smiled.

I touched my lip where she’d bitten me. “All healed up,” I said.

She drifted over and plopped back down beside me on the bed. “Sorry I got a little aggressive earlier. But no pain, no gain, right?”

She kissed me again, gently this time, but I grabbed her roughly and pulled her close so that I could look her right in the eye. “And you’re sure you didn’t do it on purpose?”

Ava shrugged out of my grasp, like she was offended. “What? No! Of course not! Do I question *you* every time you bite me?”

I slowly shook my head no, considering bringing up Cali’s weird request for my blood. But Ava didn’t give me a chance to mention it. She leaned forward and dragged her breasts along my arm as she feathered kisses down my neck.

“Don’t be mad,” she said between kisses, her lips dipping down to my pecs and then lower still. “Let me make it up to you.”

My wolf surged to life as Ava pushed me down onto the bed, then flashed that wicked smile again.

“I could be in the mood for a little atonement,” I grunted.

“Then that’s exactly what you’re going to get,” she said.

I gasped when she took me into her mouth, her hands tightening around the base of my shaft as she quickly pumped her wet lips up and down my length, stopping at the top and dancing her tongue along my tip before plunging back down and taking me almost entirely into her mouth.

I collapsed onto the bed, weak with pleasure. She splayed her hands across my chest and then slowly dragged them down, gently raking her nails across my abdomen and setting off a string of chills that rocked my entire body.

One of her barely contained breasts spilled out of the top of her slip, and I immediately took advantage, kneading it gently as her mouth kept working on me, obliterating my every thought.

Ava let me pop free of her mouth, and then she straddled me, her sweet scent billowing up into my nose as she held me steady and slowly lowered herself down. I reached up to grab her hips, but she slapped my hands away.

“No touching,” she commanded.

“Then what do you call this?” I moaned once she’d taken me into her hot, slick channel. “Because I’m definitely touching you right now.”

“I call it a very necessary violation of the rules,” she said, then she braced her hands on my chest and began to ride me, rolling her hips and tossing her hair behind her so that it swung in beautiful waves that stole my attention for a few long moments.

I greedily eyed the way her heavy breasts bounced against her chest as she slid up and down on my shaft. She let her speed build, and soon my entire body was rocking with the force of her thrusts. It took me a moment to realize that the guttural moans piercing the air were my own, and even then, I couldn’t stop them.

“I know you like a little variety in your life,” Ava whispered as she turned around, keeping me inside her, and braced her hands on the bed.

Unable to help myself, I plastered my hands against her ass as she glided up and down my shaft, helping to guide her movements. Then, ignoring her directions, I grabbed her hips and brought her down hard on my shaft, sheathing myself in her warmth.

“Xavier!” Ava shrieked, but I held her there and slid her hips backward and forward, the tip of my cock exploring the limits of her depths.

She shuddered against me, her body vibrating deliciously against mine. Wanting to feel her body pressed beneath me, I grabbed her and flipped her over onto her back, then entered her again with a long, smooth thrust. She raked her nails down my back, and I felt the tickle of blood on my skin. I moaned and plunged in deeper, only to retreat and surge forward once again.

She screamed and raked her nails across my ass, drawing more blood—which only intensified my arousal, to the point where I knew I was going to explode at any moment. I kissed her hard, nipping at her lips and savoring the coppery taste of her blood as it spilled across my tongue.

“Yes, Xavier, give me all of you!” Ava shrieked, spreading her legs wide.

I dove deep and stayed there, waiting. But I didn’t have to wait long. The pulse of her orgasm immediately triggered my own, and I bucked against her hips, driving into her over and over again until I froze in pure ecstasy and then collapsed on top of her, spent.

But Ava wasn’t done yet.

“Xavier, yes, oh god, yes!” she screamed, straining against me, clawing at my chest and shoulders until she was finally still.

I rolled off her and pulled her close, amused when I heard her breathing relax almost immediately. She was asleep, and, a short time later, so was I.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I slid out of the bed, leaving Ava asleep. I noticed the blood streaked across the sheets and smiled.

*That could be mine, or it could be hers. Things definitely got a little crazy last night… And I was all too ready to give in to the craziness. After a day like that, we both needed the release.*

It wasn’t love on my part, I knew that, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t felt damn good. It had been the perfect distraction, a way to stop thinking about all the problems I had to face. But now that it was morning, it was time for me to figure out how the hell I was going to bring back Knox, Marissa, and Jesse.

*If they’re even alive.*

Malakai had proven himself to be beyond unpredictable. There was a good chance that if he’d captured them, he’d try to use them as a bargaining chip. Either that, or he’d already killed them.

“Shit,” I muttered.

I was frustrated—not only because I had no way to predict Malakai’s next move, but because we hadn’t killed him back when we’d had the chance. I sifted through a number of options in my head, trying to figure out the right approach, here. The only idea that seemed even halfway feasible was Gabe and me infiltrating the palace alone to search for our missing Samaras.

*It would be easy enough. We’ve done things like that a million times before. It would be dangerous, but I trust Gabe. If we plan it out right, we could do it.*

I was in the bathroom splashing water on my face when my phone rang. I looked at it and groaned. It was Greyson.

*Of course. Our fearless leader is up and ready to issue his commands.*

I answered, not bothering to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “What do you want?”

“I’m calling a meeting,” Greyson said easily. “We’re going to retake the Vanguard palace. Are you in?”

**Episode 4283**

**Greyson**

I turned and made my way back toward the pack house, finishing up an extended patrol. After I’d called to summon the alliance Alphas to the house for a meeting, I’d gone out to check for myself that the Bitterfangs weren’t lurking in our woods, planning another attack. I hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary—and I was relieved, to say the least—but I was still uneasy.

Despite the reason behind the patrol, I’d been excited to go out. Racing through Redwood territory in wolf form had always helped to clear my head. It was one of the few things Xavier and I had in common… Other than Cali.

Thankfully, my brain stayed relatively clear throughout the run—though the reason why I was out on patrol at all had lingered at the forefront of my mind. But even that partial clarity started to dissipate the moment the pack house came into view. The question I’d asked Cali—whether the Redwoods could lose everything to Malakai and the Bitterfangs—was already starting to haunt me again.

Cali had insisted it was impossible that we wouldn’t defeat Malakai. I valued her positivity, but I wasn’t so sure that she was right.

*It’s a possibility, right? That Malakai and the Bitterfangs could take everything from us, just like they’ve done to the Vanguards? Fuck, I was overconfident about the alliance. I really thought we’d destroyed the Bitterfangs and their allies for good. I can’t believe I just took that Bitterfang wolf at his word when he said Malakai hadn’t survived the fall. How could I have been so stupid?*

Cali had tried so hard to convince me that none of it was my fault. I still wasn’t convinced of that, but her support meant the world to me. But at the end of the day, what mattered most was protecting the pack and the alliance, and there was no other way to look at it: I’d failed.

*At least Xavier had the decency not to rub it in my face. Though there’s no guarantee that he won’t take a few digs at the meeting, later.*

I shifted back to human as I reached the house, grabbed my clothes from the porch, and quickly slipped into my pants. I was craving a cup of coffee, and I sailed through the front door as I pulled my T-shirt over my head. I slammed right into Elle, who stopped me by flattening her hands against my bare chest.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, pulling my shirt down over my eyes and noticing the way Elle’s long red hair fell in messy waves over her shoulders. And she was wearing… next to nothing? Just a huge T-shirt, from the looks of it. I assumed she was wearing shorts, too, but if so, they were too small to see.

I resisted the sudden, strange urge to pull her closer. Her hands were still on my chest, and stirring up a strange crop of feelings in the pit of my stomach.

*Must be the sire bond, that’s all. Right?*

I cleared my throat. We were just standing there, staring awkwardly at each other, and I couldn’t pull my shirt down until she moved her hands… I cleared my throat, and she took her hands away, like she’d been burned. We were both staring down at her hands when Lucian arrived.

“What’s going on here?” the princeling asked.

Elle blushed and stepped away. “Nothing… I ran into Greyson. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

I quickly pulled my shirt the rest of the way down. “No big deal,” I told Lucian.

I immediately made a beeline to the kitchen.

“Well, I don’t approve!” Lucian huffed, following right behind me.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a small pack house compared to the palace. It’s bound to happen.”

Elle put a hand on my arm, stopping me. I slowly turned to face her, barely trusting myself to look at her after our little sire bond moment.

“I just want to thank you, Greyson, for letting Lucian stay,” she said. “I know that not everyone is happy about having to share the pack house.”

I smiled at her. “You’re always welcome. You’re still a Redwood.” I shifted my gaze to the hovering princeling. “And the Vanguards are still our allies.”

Lucian swung a possessive arm around Elle. “Speaking of pack houses, I demand to know when we’re going to reclaim my ancestral home.”

I sighed inwardly, trying to force myself to see things from his perspective. “I’ve called a meeting today to discuss it.”

Lucian sniffed. “That’s all well and good, but we need action, not more words.”

“You’re more than welcome to march against the Bitterfangs anytime you want,” I informed him, “but if you want the alliance’s support, and I’m guessing that you do, we’re going to need a proper plan.”

I walked away, putting as much distance as I could between myself and Elle.

I hurried to the kitchen, happy to see that someone had already brewed a pot of coffee. I pulled a mug out of the cupboard and poured myself a big cup, deciding to drink it black—as if the bitterness might push the unsettling thoughts I was having about Elle out of my mind.

She hadn’t even been back in the pack house a full day, and our sire bond was already rearing its ugly head. Even though I’d never been a fan of Elle staying with Lucian, the sooner we reclaimed his palace, the better. I was starting to realize that Elle staying with Lucian was really for the best. At least for now.

I downed the first cup of coffee and then poured another. And another. Feeling clearer, if not a tad wired, I checked the time and then went out onto the porch just in time to see Mace, Porter, Duke, and a very grumpy Xavier emerging from the woods.

“Glad you all could make it,” I said, shaking everyone’s hands but Xavier’s. He was standing apart from the rest, and looking like he’d have preferred to be anywhere else. “Head into the living room and make yourselves at home.”

“Funny you say that when this isn’t actually *your* home,” Xavier grumbled as he shouldered his way past me.

I decided to let that slide—especially since he wasn’t entirely wrong. But mostly, I wasn’t in the mood for a fight. I just wanted to get this over with and figure out what to do about Malakai.

I sent Cali a quick text, asking her to come join us, even though I hadn’t invited any other Lunas. It was better that Rowena and Ava were staying back to watch over their respective packs, since we had no idea what Malakai’s next move might be.

I also just needed Cali by my side. She was always a welcome presence—and I was hoping that having her with me might help counteract my unsettling encounter with Elle.

Cali came downstairs and together, we joined everyone else in the living room. The energy was tense, but that was to be expected. We were all more than a little on edge after yesterday.

I moved to the center of the room, quickly organizing my thoughts before I spoke. “I called you all here so we can figure out how to get Malakai out of the Vanguard palace. Then we need to kill him, and every Alpha who supports him. Ideally, I’d like to coordinate an attack as soon as possible.”

“That’s not the only issue on the table,” Xavier interjected. “Our pack is still missing people—Knox, Marissa, and Jesse. If Malakai’s holding them prisoner and we storm into the palace guns blazing, Malakai might kill them. I need to go in first—before we launch any large-scale attack—and try to find them.”

“I understand,” I said. “I can’t blame you for that. What if we give you twenty-four hours to find them before we go in and hit Malakai with everything we’ve got?”

Xavier nodded, his eyebrows arching slightly in surprise. I was sure he’d expected me to shut him down.

Lucian cleared his throat. “Sure, but Greyson, don’t you think that it might be a good idea for you to step aside?”

I glared at Lucian, working overtime to keep my anger in check. It was just like Lucian to take advantage of my hospitality while simultaneously having the audacity to challenge my role as leader of the alliance.

“Why?” I asked evenly.

“Well… Isn’t it obvious?” Lucian asked. “You told us that Malakai was dead—and what did we do? We let our guard down to the point where the Bitterfangs were able to take us by surprise and completely overwhelm us. I don’t think I need to remind anyone that your mistake”—he pointed to Xavier—“a mistake you *both* made, incidentally, got us into this. Your error has cost us quite us a lot.”

Xavier curled his lip in anger but said nothing.

“Naturally, once you do the honorable thing and step down, I have a succession plan in place,” Lucian continued.

I rolled my eyes. “And what might that be?”

Lucian flashed a slow smile that was absolutely dripping with self-importance. “I propose that I take the helm of the alliance. Are there any objections?”

**Episode 4284**

I was the first to object, and I was surprised when I looked around and saw that I was the only one.

*Are the other Alphas actually considering what Lucian’s saying, or is everyone just as shocked as I am?*

As I looked around the room, I realized that I couldn’t really tell. I wasn’t entirely surprised that Xavier had stayed quiet, but Mace was Greyson’s friend, and Porter had been supportive of him up to this point. Duke had been… Well, Duke. But he’d been useful, too. Why weren’t they saying anything?

I glanced at Greyson and thought about how vulnerable he’d been this morning, talking about the role he’d played in accidentally downplaying the Bitterfang threat. I’d vowed to stand with him then, and I intended to keep that promise. This was my chance to show that I wasn’t kidding around, and that I’d stand with my Alpha no matter what.

“It’s easy to point fingers and lay the blame on Greyson for what happened,” I said, “but don’t ignore how much you all wanted to believe that Malakai was dead. You most of all, Lucian. Greyson and Xavier had barely spread the word before you were sending out invites to your party.”

“A party that you all rushed to attend,” Lucian grumbled under his breath.

I shut the princeling up with a harsh look before continuing. “Greyson went looking for proof of Malakai’s death, risking his life in the process. Before Malakai’s daughter told us that the ring wasn’t actually Malakai’s, we *all* thought we had that proof. And really, that level of proof was the most that any of us could have expected to find—barring Malakai’s literal dead body, of course.” I looked each of the Alphas in the eye. “So, tell me—who here would have done anything differently?”

Lucian heaved a theatrical sigh. “Are we supposed to be moved by this? The Samaras, the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods—you all have a pack house. What if the Bitterfangs had come for your homes instead of mine? Would you still be so gung-ho about supporting Greyson? And let’s say we allow him to continue on as leader of the alliance. What’s going to happen next? Will he allow the Bitterfangs to seize the rest of our territory? And what makes you think that they’ll stop there? Maybe our houses aren’t all they want—maybe they want our packs, too, or our women!”

I gritted my teeth. I’d never wanted to punch Lucian more, which said a lot. He was wrong about Greyson, but I was worried that if he kept talking this way, he might convince the others that he was right. Things were precarious right now, and doubt spread easily at times like this.

Greyson’s confidence had already taken a hit, and Lucian’s words were eating away at it even more when what he really needed was to build it back up so that he could face the Bitterfangs with self-assurance. The last thing I wanted was for him to be stuck in his head when he finally did face off with Malakai again.

Before I could give Lucian another piece of my mind, Xavier spoke up.

“Lucian, shut the fuck up!” he shouted, startling the princeling. “No one wants to hear anything you have to say.”

*Whoa. Xavier’s the last person I’d expect to stand up for Greyson, but thank goodness he’s doing it so I don’t have to.*

“We’re all upset, Lucian, and I get it—you lost your pack house, and that really sucks. But the Samaras might have lost more than that, depending on what Malakai’s done to our missing pack members. We’ve all suffered at the hands of the Bitterfangs, but that’s just it—it’s the *Bitterfangs* who are responsible for this. Not Greyson, not me, not anyone but Malakai, his allies, and his fucking pack. As far as I’m concerned, Greyson made the right call.”

“But—”

“I’m not finished!” Xavier boomed, cutting Lucian off. “And just so you know, the last thing the rest of us are going to do right now is hand our collective fate over to a whiny faux prince such as yourself!”

“How dare you!” Lucian cried, shooting up from his seat. “I fought alongside everyone else! Say what you want, but I did what I had to do, and I helped get you all out of my palace safe even when I wanted to stay behind to protect my home, so don’t you dare—”

“Everyone calm down,” I said quickly. This was escalating fast, and if I didn’t get a handle on it soon, I was worried that Xavier and Lucian might come to blows. Lucian was completely in the wrong, but we couldn’t just dismiss his support. We needed every ally we could get if we wanted a shot at taking the Bitterfangs out for good. I quickly turned to Lucian. “I understand your frustration, Lucian, but infighting and trying to overthrow Greyson isn’t the priority right now. We recognize that you fought alongside us, and we need you to keep doing that, but you’re not helping right now, okay?”

“Fine! But let it be known that I don’t whine!” Lucian whined.

Mace stepped forward, casting Lucian a weary look. “Just want to say that I agree with Xavier. I can honestly say that Greyson did what any of us would’ve done. I can’t say that I would have found better evidence of Malakai’s defeat, so I admit that it could’ve been any one of us beating himself up right now over missing the clues about Malakai’s true intentions.”

I saw Greyson wince at the last part of Mace’s statement, even though I was sure he realized that Mace meant no disrespect.

“My point is, now’s not the time to mess with our leadership. That’ll just throw us into chaos as we work to restructure and adjust. I still believe that Greyson’s the best choice to lead us,” Mace said. “I stand with you, man,” he added, clapping Greyson on the back.

Hearing both Xavier and Mace praise Greyson swelled my heart with gratitude. I could already see the difference on Greyson’s face. He needed the support of his friends, and he had it. I gave Lucian a pointed stare, barely stifling a satisfied smile.

*Take* that*!*

As the rest of the Alphas began to talk strategy, Greyson pulled me aside. “Thanks for defending me, Cali. I really appreciate it. You always have my back, and that means so much to me.”

I shrugged. “No biggie. I told you that I believe in you wholeheartedly, and I meant every word.” I sighed, suddenly longing to get away from the Alphas and the stress of planning. “I hate to bail, but do you need me to stay? I will if you want me to, otherwise I’m going to go relax for a while. I have a feeling we have a couple of really hard days ahead of us, and I’d like to take it easy until then.”

Greyson gave me a quick kiss. “Of course, yes. You deserve some down time. Go. I’ll call you if I need you.”

I was about to head out when Xavier stopped me. I glanced up into his beautiful eyes, wondering if there would ever come a time when I’d be able to do more than just look.

Obviously seeing the intensity of my stare, Xavier looked away before it went on for too long.

“Thanks for sticking up for Greyson back there,” I said. “You know Lucian—always trying to take any chance he can to—”

“I’m not here to talk about Greyson,” Xavier interrupted. “I want to know why you, Ava, and Kira were asking for my blood.”

I swallowed nervously, wondering why I hadn’t expected that he might mention that. It had been a pretty strange request, after all, and we hadn’t given him anything close to a straight answer about why we’d asked for it.

I really hated lying, but Kira had warned me not to tell Xavier the truth, so I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“What did Ava tell you?” I asked carefully.

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “She didn’t. So I’m asking you.”

“Uh…” I looked away from him, scrambling to find the right thing to say—anything that would end this conversation as quickly as possible. “It was to test your mate bond with Ava.”

Xavier cocked his head, studying me. “To test my mate bond with Ava? And you decided to do this because…?”

My throat tightened, and a knot formed in my stomach as I tried to determine the right follow up to my first lie. “Um… I… Because…”

We both turned at the sound of a commotion on the front porch.

Everyone gasped when Ravi threw open the front door and stumbled in with Knox slung over his shoulder. He carried Knox into the living room and deposited him on the couch. “He’s been poisoned!”

**Episode 4285**

**Xavier**

I rushed over to the shrimp, who looked even more crustacean-like than usual as he lay curled in a ball on the couch. His entire body was shaking, and his skin was shiny with sweat. I’d never seen him like this. I could smell blood and dirt and Bitterfang all over him.

*He’s in bad shape, but at least Malakai kept him alive. Up until now, the Bitterfangs haven’t really made a habit out of sparing anyone from our alliance.*

I grimaced when I spotted the telltale signs of silver poisoning on Knox. There was a gaping, bloody cut on his shoulder, and a web of black veins running along his arm and chest. From the looks of the veins, he hadn’t been poisoned all that long ago, but time was of the essence. We didn’t have that long until the silver would spread and kill him.

*I’m glad that Ava isn’t here to see her cousin like this. He’s an asshole and a half, but he doesn’t deserve this. No one deserves this… Except for Malakai and his people.*

“Doesn’t look good,” I said to no one in particular as I crouched by his side and laid the back of my hand on his forehead. He was burning hot, which suggested a pretty severe case of silver poisoning. “It’s a recent wound, but he’s badly poisoned. Things could go downhill any second. We have to get moving on this, *now.*”

“I’ll go get Torin,” Greyson called, sprinting out of the room.

Cali pushed through the crowd. “It’s a silver wound, right?”

No one said anything in response, because every werewolf in the room already knew exactly what had happened to Knox. We all knew silver poisoning well, and our fear of it ensured that we always recognized the signs before any other supernatural possibly could. It was in our blood to fear it, and to do everything in our power to avoid it.

“He was delirious when I found him stumbling onto Redwood territory,” Ravi said. “I picked him up and brought him here as fast as I could. He didn’t say much of anything on the way—he was already out of it.”

“I might be able to cure him with my blood,” Cali said. “It’s worth a try, at least.”

I thought about the time Cali had saved me from Ryker’s silver poisoning—that cheating bastard. She’d saved my life. It was just like Cali to jump right in to do the same for Knox. She never ceased to amaze me, and an unsurprising pang of longing raced through me as I looked up at her. She was too good for this world, and it hurt me to realize that these days, she was too good for me.

“I hope it’s not too late,” Cali muttered, kneeling beside me. “Do you think I’ll be able to save him?”

I examined Knox closely and nodded. “We have a little time. It’s moving through his system quickly—he could be good for another five minutes, or he could go at any second.”

I looked down at Knox’s limp body, realizing that this was maybe the first time I’d ever felt sorry for him. There’d been a time not too long ago when I might’ve secretly wished for him to succumb to his wounds, and I was surprised to find that I didn’t feel that way at all anymore.

I wanted to question Knox about Marissa and Jesse, but he was in no condition to talk. He was floating in and out of consciousness, mumbling incoherently. His skin had paled even more in the short time since Ravi had brought him in, and I knew that he didn’t have long. I didn’t even want to think about how Ava would take the news of Knox’s death, if it came to that. We had to save him.

“Hurry! I need something to cut my hand with,” Cali said.

Without hesitating, I shifted one fingernail into a claw and held it up.

Cali nodded trustingly. “Do it.”

Her words echoed through my head as I clasped her hand—the same one I used to caress and kiss every chance I got.

*Is Adéluce watching? Is she going to punish me for this, too? Is she going to punish Cali? She might see this as a violation of her rules, but surely she can see why I have no choice?*

I looked down at Knox. I could hear his breath rattling in his lungs. He was fading fast. If Cali was going to give him her blood, it had to be within the next thirty seconds.

*Not that Adéluce cares. She’d rather I let him die than share even a brief moment of intimacy with Cali.*

“Come on, Xavier!” she said. “We can’t wait for Torin. I’m Fae; I need to give him my blood to save him!”

Knox’s eyes began to roll back in his head. Shit. She was right. I held Cali’s gaze as I raked my claw across her open palm, drawing forth a stream of blood and a gasp from her lips. Still, she didn’t take her eyes off mine. It was a sign of trust. It was a sign of a connection that wasn’t supposed to exist between us anymore—a connection that hadn’t dulled at all.

An awkward moment passed where I was still holding her bleeding hand even though I didn’t need to. The scent of her blood immediately sent my wolf into a frenzy. Cali let her gaze linger on mine for a second more before she held her bleeding hand over Knox’s wound. A few drops of blood splattered into the gash, mingling with Knox’s blood.

Everyone stood back to watch as Cali’s Fae blood did its magic. The black veins began to fade, and the wound began to knit together. I was hopeful. Knox wasn’t out of the woods yet, but this was a good sign. Then I realized that I was still holding Cali’s hand. My wolf was still going crazy at the contact. Cali’s touch was something I missed more than I could ever explain.

*I’m sure she feels it, too. She’s never made a secret of how much she misses me, and now I’m risking Adéluce’s wrath just to touch her for even a second more. How is it that somehow, it almost seems worth it? If I knew that Adéluce would leave Cali alone and that she’d only punish me, I might never let her go.*

That thought sobered me quickly, and I forced myself to finally let go of her hand. Cali immediately looked up at me, confusion and disappointment warring for dominance on her face.

*Does she feel the same way I do? She has to, right? Drawing blood from someone you care about is such an intimate act, it’s no wonder we got lost in each other. That felt more powerful than the kisses we’ve shared since Adéluce tore us apart.*

Then another thought occurred to me—I had to be careful for that very reason. Adéluce was awful, but she wasn’t stupid, and she never took her eyes off me for long. If Adéluce even got a whiff of what was happening between me and Cali right now, I had a feeling that she’d make herself known.

I caught sight of the open wound on her palm and instinctively reached for her hand. I was going to heal her through our mate bond, Adéluce be damned. I didn’t want to be responsible for causing her any more pain.

But just as our fingers touched, Greyson returned with Torin.

“He’s looking better,” Greyson said as he came to stand over Knox.

“I used my blood,” I heard Cali saying as Torin went to work—though Cali’s intervention had ensured that there wasn’t much for Torin to do.

“I’ll just speed up the healing process,” Torin said distractedly. “Good job, Cali.”

I stepped away from the group, my eyes still on Cali.

“Love, you’re bleeding,” Greyson said. He grabbed Cali’s hand and raised it to his lips, using the strength of their mate bond to heal her with a few quick flicks of his tongue across the wound.

I clenched my jaw, wishing that it were me healing her instead.

*I was the one who drew her blood, so I should be the one to heal her. Now that I think about it, Adéluce probably enjoyed the sight of me cutting her—but I’m sure she’d have a very different reaction to me healing her, or comforting her.*

In the back of my mind, I wondered why there was suddenly so much blood-related angst going on. First Ava and Cali had asked for mine, then Ava had bitten me, drawing more blood, and just now, Cali had used her blood to heal Knox.

Knox suddenly coughed awake and looked around, confused.

I quickly went to his side and crouched beside him. “What happened, Knox? Did Malakai do this to you?”

The young wolf nodded. “Yes,” he said, his voice weak. “And he has a message for Greyson.”

**Episode 4286**

**Greyson**

I still had the taste of Cali’s blood on my lips as I went to kneel by Knox’s side. His comment had caused a hush to fall over the room, and I wanted to hear more. If Malakai had a message for me, I had to wonder why he hadn’t just come and delivered it himself. But Knox didn’t seem to be in any position to elaborate on what he’d said. He’d opened his eyes for only a split second to drop his news before they’d fluttered shut again, and his head had gone slack on the couch cushion.

*He’s just delirious. Ravi said he was pretty out of it when he found him. I should be more worried about the fact that Malakai’s started poisoning people and sending them to deliver messages.*

Xavier reached out to shake Knox. “What about Marissa and Jesse? Where are they?”

Knox’s eyes fluttered open once again, and he took a second to focus before he looked past Xavier to train his eyes right on me. “He wants you,” he rasped. “He wants you *bad*.”

I leaned in. “Who wants me? Malakai?”

I didn’t give a flying fuck what Malakai wanted. If I never had to see the Bitterfang Alpha again, it would be too soon. I wondered what exactly his endgame was, and if he even knew it himself.

Knox nodded. “Yes. He wants to meet with you at Three Devils Point at noon, to negotiate.”

I was very surprised by Knox’s message—and very wary. “I don’t get it. Why would Malakai want to negotiate with us? Negotiate our surrender maybe. He just captured the palace and beat our alliance. He’s got the upper hand. It doesn’t make sense. What could he want to negotiate? Our surrender? Because if so, he should know that’s never going to happen.”

Knox shook his head. “I don’t know any details. That’s all the asshole said before he stabbed me with a silver dagger and sent me on my way.”

Torin stood up and sighed. “If I could interrupt you all with an update—Knox, you’re going to survive this, thanks to Ravi. If he hadn’t gotten you back here when he did, things might have turned out differently for you. And if Cali hadn’t given you her blood, the poison would’ve spread too far for us to neutralize it.”

“Which is what I don’t understand,” Cali interjected. “If Malakai wanted Knox to deliver a message, why would he poison him and risk him not living long enough to actually bring it to Greyson?”

Xavier scoffed. “Because he’s deranged. Why else? Don’t even bother trying to figure out what makes that asshole tick. It’s a waste of time. His only purpose here is to create chaos.”

“Now *that* wouldn’t surprise me,” Porter said. He’d been standing off to the side with Mace and Duke, watching the scene unfold. “I can’t really make sense of his motives, otherwise.”

Knox had regained back a bit of his strength, and managed to sit up. “First, he tried to get me to spy on the alliance. He offered to let me go unharmed if I agreed to report on everything the alliance gets up to. When I refused…” Knox trailed off and gestured at the healing wound on his arm.

I was glad that he’d refused, though I was sorry that he’d almost paid the ultimate price for doing so. It was clear that Malakai had a plan in mind that we weren’t seeing.

“But what about the others? Marissa and Jesse?” Xavier pressed. “They’re gone, too. Do you know what happened to them? Were they with you?”

Knox opened his mouth to answer, then abruptly turned away.

Xavier shot me a questioning glance. “Knox?”

“You have to answer him, Knox,” I said. “Xavier’s been worried sick about the three of you. Ease his worries a bit, man.”

Knox let out a pained sigh. “They killed Jesse, okay? Tore him to bits right in front of me.”

There were a few seconds of heavy silence.

“Shit,” Xavier said. “Are you sure?”

Knox nodded. “I’m sure. There wasn’t really any reason for it. They’d already captured us, and at that point, we definitely weren’t a threat…” He trailed off and stared out the window, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth, like he was trying to keep himself from crying.

“I know why he did it,” I said grimly. “Malakai wanted Knox to see it. That’s the only reason why he kept them alive at all instead of just killing them like he has everyone else from the alliance he’s managed to get his hands on. Malakai wanted to play mind games with the Samara prisoners, fuck with them, and that’s exactly what he did.”

“He has to pay,” Xavier said darkly. “We can’t just let him do whatever he wants to people we care about.”

“And what about Marissa?” Ravi asked.

Knox shook his head. “I don’t know. I didn’t see her.”

“Then that means she may still be alive,” Ravi said. He turned to Xavier. “We have to go get her, before it’s too late.

“And what about Armin?” Lucian asked bitterly, still pouting after our earlier conversation. “Or does he not matter because he’s a Vanguard pack member?”

Cali rolled her eyes at him and looked like she was about to say something in response, but I shook my head. There was no point in playing into Lucian’s attempts to bicker.

“I can’t say,” Knox replied. “I never saw him.”

He paused for a moment, as if deciding how to say what was on the tip of his tongue. Finally, he looked at me. “Greyson, you should stay away from Malakai. He’s absolutely determined to kill you.”

“What else is new?” I asked, pinching the bridge of my nose.  “Malakai’s had it out for me from the moment we met—before that, even. All you’re telling me is that nothing’s changed.”

“I don’t know, the way he was talking just seemed different,” Knox said, shaking his head. “He’s obsessed, Greyson.”

Cali looked at me. “What are we going to do?”

I didn’t answer right away. I was still trying to figure out exactly what Malakai’s game was. “I’d have a better idea of what to do if I understood what the hell Malakai really wants—other than to kill me, that is. What I truly don’t understand is why he’d go through all this. Why wouldn’t he just attack us?”

Knox’s expression brightened. “I have an idea. What if I go back to Malakai and tell him that I’ve changed my mind? That I’ll spy on the alliance after all? Only I’ll be a double agent and get enough information on the Bitterfangs to help the alliance.”

“Or Malakai will suspect you immediately and kill you,” I countered. “He poisoned you and sent you our way, and you’re proposing to just go back to him good as new and suddenly wanting to do his bidding? Doesn’t make sense.”

“I disagree,”  Xavier said, giving Knox a look. “For all Malakai knows, Knox is just some power-hungry kid looking to make an impact by any means necessary, which wouldn’t actually be all that far from the truth. I think it’s a great idea. It’s better than going in guns blazing—at least at this point, when we don’t quite know if we can handle what we’re up against.”

“I think it’s a stupid idea,” I said bluntly.

“And I don’t,” Xavier said.

I still wasn’t in the mood to get in a shouting match with my brother—especially after he’d stood up for me when Lucian had attempted to overthrow me. But this really did sound like a bad idea, and I didn’t want Knox’s blood on my hands.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Xavier,” I said, “but this just doesn’t feel like the right move. Besides, Knox just told us that Malakai brazenly murdered Jesse just to make a point—imagine what he’d do to Knox if he actively betrayed him.”

“I’m willing to take that chance,” Knox interjected.

I looked between the two men, wondering why in the world they’d want to take such a stupid risk, but then I realized that it was none of my business. I was the head of the alliance, but Knox was part of the Samara pack, and Xavier was his Alpha. This decision was Xavier’s to make.

I threw up my hands and sighed. “But I know this isn’t my choice to make.” I looked at Xavier. “It’s yours. So, are you okay with this? Sending him into the lion’s den for a plan that might not work?”

“It’ll work,” Xavier said. “And yes, I’m good with it if he is.”

I looked at Knox. He’d regained all his color now, and looked seconds away from jumping out of his skin with excitement. I didn’t get why he was so eager to return to Malakai after the man had poisoned him and sent him off as a wounded errand boy, but that wasn’t my problem.

“If you two think it’s a good idea, then fine,” I finally said.

“And what about you, Greyson?” Cali suddenly asked, putting a hand on my arm and forcing me to face her head on. “Are you going to go negotiate with Malakai? Even though it’s almost definitely a trap?”

**Episode 4287**

Greyson shrugged at my question. “We treat Malakai’s offer to negotiate like it’s a trap, no matter what,” he said. “That’s the only way we can approach it.”

“Makes sense, as it most likely *is* a trap. This is Malakai we’re talking about.” I sighed. “I don’t know, all of this worries me. Jesse’s death, Knox’s poisoning, what he put Russell and Julia through… The man is pure evil. What else is he capable of?”

“He’s capable of anything, I think that much is obvious,” Porter said. “As long as we keep that in mind, maybe we’ll actually be able to get one over on him.”

“Agreed,” Mace said. He turned his attention back to Greyson. “I’m curious—why do you think Malakai chose Three Devils Point?”

“It’s supposed to be neutral territory. Maybe he thinks it’ll make us feel less threatened and more likely to show up,” Greyson said. “Who the hell knows? Tactically, it’s probably an advantageous position for him, too. Cali’s right to be cautious about him. We need to take him seriously as a threat.”

Xavier scoffed. “Malakai might have us on the run right now, but he won’t have the edge for long. All we need is one win over him, and then we’ll get back on track. We’ll show him why we’re the wrong packs to mess with.”

I appreciated Xavier’s confidence, the situation seemed a little more complicated than that to me. If what Knox had said about Malakai’s obsession with killing Greyson was true, he’d do anything to make it happen. Malakai knew as well as we did that if he got Greyson out of the picture, it would be a huge blow to the alliance.

“Greyson, what did you mean when you said that we’d treat the meeting like a trap either way?” I asked, frowning.

Greyson turned to look at me. “When we go to meet Malakai—”

“There can’t be a ‘we,’” Knox interrupted. “Malakai wants Greyson, and Greyson only. He made that clear right before he stabbed me. If we roll in there five packs deep, he and the Bitterfangs will attack without hesitation.”

“So it’s *definitely* a trap,” I said. “Why else would he want you alone?”

Greyson paused to think. “Then I’ll do what he wants. I’ll go alone to meet him at Three Devils Point.”

“There is *no way* I’m letting you do that,” I said flatly. “That’s exactly what he wants. He’ll kill you, Greyson—you have to see that.”

“Cali’s right,” Xavier said. “Malakai’s not going to suggest anything that isn’t weighed heavily in his favor. If you go there without any backup, he’ll take advantage. Don’t fall into his hands that easily.”

“Sounds like a death wish to me,” Lucian grumbled. “But what do I know?”

“I’m not saying I’ll *actually* go alone,” Greyson said. “I want the allied packs to stand by, just in case he tries anything.”

“Did you just say *in case* he tries anything?” I demanded. I’d heard enough. Greyson didn’t seem to be taking this seriously, but I wasn’t going to stand by and let him make such a colossal mistake. “There’s no ‘if’ here, Greyson, there’s only ‘when.’ I guarantee that Malakai has planned for you to do everything you’ve just outlined—especially bringing the rest of us along to wait in the wings. He’ll be prepared for that. He’s tricked us before, right? What makes you think this isn’t another one of his tricks? I don’t want you to die, Greyson. Please don’t take this lightly.”

“I have no intention of dying, Cali,” Greyson said simply. “And I’m not taking it lightly. I’m just trying to pull a little trick of my own. Fight fire with fire. If we orchestrate things properly, he won’t even have an opportunity to get the jump on me. It might be the only way to deal with him. Malakai might have me in his crosshairs, but I’m not sure he and I are all that different in that regard. I want to kill him, too, and this could be my best shot.”

I shook my head briskly, not even wanting to entertain a plan that I knew in my heart wouldn’t work. “If we send you alone, even with the alliance hiding out nearby, Malakai could kill you before any of us even realized you were in trouble. At least let me come along. I’ve got my sword and shield, and—”

Greyson flashed me a look that stopped me cold. There was no point in arguing. I wasn’t going to be able to convince him. He’d made up his mind. I sighed and stepped back to observe, hoping that someone else would be able to talk some sense into him. Greyson usually listened to me, but his need for a win over Malakai was so strong, it was clouding his judgment. That didn’t mean I was going to give up trying to talk some sense into him, though.

“Don’t forget, you agreed to give me time to search for Marissa at the Vanguard palace,” Xavier said. “For all I know, Malakai killed her like he did Jesse, but I still have to try to get her out.”

I didn’t like Xavier’s plan, either, but I wasn’t in a position to voice my concerns about what Xavier’s choices anymore, no matter how much I wanted to. That was Ava’s job. At least for now.

I just couldn’t shake the feeling that Greyson’s and Xavier’s plans were both way too dangerous. Given our history with Malakai, I knew there was a good chance that they’d end up in over their heads. I knew it was a hard pill for them to swallow, but Malakai had been one step ahead of us since the beginning, and there was no reason to think that would suddenly change. It was frustrating that neither Greyson nor Xavier seemed to realize that.

“We should get going soon,” Xavier said. “While Greyson is busy meeting with Malakai, I’ll go search for Marissa. If we play it right, we might even be able to get some information that could help us reclaim the palace while we’re there. Malakai won’t be there to stop us, since he’ll be with Greyson. Maybe we can get the jump on whatever Bitterfangs might stay back to guard the place.”

I sighed. I was really starting to lose my confidence. I couldn’t help but feel like this meeting was spiraling out of control. How was I supposed to even weigh in on important decisions when all I could think about was my mates?

*I shouldn’t let these feelings get in the way of my duty as Luna, but how can I stop myself? I love them both, and I want them to be safe. That’s the only thing that matters to me. I want Malakai and the Bitterfangs gone, just like everyone else. I feel sorry for Marissa and want her back safe… But all of that still pales in comparison to my concern for Greyson and Xavier.*

“You should choose who you want to join your search party for Marissa,” Greyson suggested to Xavier.

“And Armin,” Lucian cut in. “Thanks for showing how much you care about my loss,” he snapped, glaring at Greyson. “It’s my palace and my pack member. I’m coming, too. Besides, I know the palace better than anyone. You need me.”

Elle stepped forward. “If Lucian’s going, then I am, too.”

“And you know I’m behind you, brother, along with my pack,” Duke added. He slapped a hand on Lucian’s shoulder.

Ravi was lingering on the fringes of the group, looking tense, his jaw set. I really felt for him. I’d witnessed Ravi’s interest in Marissa at the summit. The people Ravi cared about always seemed to die. Hopefully, that wasn’t going to be the case with Marissa.

“I’ll organize the Three Devils Point team,” Greyson said. “With any luck, we’ll come out of this in a better position that we’re in now. If we can claim this victory, it might be the catalyst to shift things in our favor.”

“I’m not sure how that could be the case. The Bitterfang pack is huge and organized, and it feels like they’re going to know every move the alliance makes,” I grumbled before I could stop myself. I knew I wasn’t being the most positive person, but I had to be the voice of reason if no one else was going to.

Greyson and Xavier turned to look at me, their expressions unreadable. They didn’t look angry, just a little hurt. But I didn’t regret what I’d said. They needed to be mindful of the stakes, here, and I wasn’t sure that they were. My mates were strong, smart, and deadly, but sometimes that wasn’t enough. We’d seen the proof of that every time we’d gone up against the Bitterfangs.

“Have a little faith, Cali,” Greyson said, squeezing my hand.

I said nothing. I was just so scared for Greyson. Aside from my own feelings, I just knew that if Malakai killed him, then the entire Redwood pack would be next.

**Episode 4288**

**Xavier**

I didn’t want to waste any more time—not when I was worried that we might already be too late. Malakai had killed Jesse in cold blood, and it wouldn’t take much for him to do the same to Marissa.

While the others were busy ironing out the details, I went over to Knox.

“Hey, did you see anything else?” I asked. “Do you know where he was holding you prisoner? Is there anything you remember that I could use to save Marissa?”

I was almost certain that he’d told us everything he knew, but there was a chance that something had come back to him now that the haze of the silver poisoning had lifted from his mind.

Knox paused for a moment, as if searching through his memory banks. “I was overpowered by three Bitterfangs who I thought were going to kill me. Instead, they tied me up and left me in one of Lucian’s charming dungeon cells. The next thing I knew, they dragged me out of there and forced me to watch as they killed Jesse. Soon after that, Malakai gave me the message he had for Greyson. You know the rest. That’s all I remember.”

I wished Knox’s info was more useful, but I supposed I’d have to use the little I had to go on for now. It wasn’t like there was all that much I needed to know—I just had to get into the palace and kill any Bitterfangs that got in my way. I didn’t exactly need a lot of intel to do that.

“Let me spy on them,” Knox pressed. “I can get all kinds of information that’ll help us beat those fuckers. I—”

“I am ready to go,” Lucian interrupted. “Time is of the essence, Xavier—surely you can see that. I want to get back to my palace and Armin before any more damage is done, and you want to save your Samara wolf. I struggle to understand what we’re waiting for.”

“Chill,” I said. “I’m not ready to storm the palace just yet. It’s too risky. If Marissa and Armin are still alive, we need to get to them *before* there’s any major fighting at Three Devils Point. Also, I want to make sure that you know I’m in charge, here.”

“And I want to make sure *you* know that it’s *my* palace, and I don’t need your permission to reclaim it,” Lucian shot back.

“If you value Armin’s life as much as you keep trying to convince us all that you do, then you cannot and will not do anything until we know the prisoners are safe,” I snapped. “Is that clear?”

Lucian sniffed. “Spare me the lecture. I would never intentionally do anything to put Armin in danger. All other concerns aside, Aysel would never forgive me.”

I wasn’t sure about Lucian’s protestations of loyalty, but I was fairly sure that Aysel enjoyed her time with Armin. Since the two of them had started their little affair, Aysel had been a little less primed to throw herself at Greyson—or anyone else, for that matter. That alone was a reason enough to treat Armin like a national treasure.

“Listen Lucian, trust me on this,” I said. “I need your word on this—you’ll do nothing until I give the go-ahead. Agreed?”

Lucian said nothing.

I got in his face. “*Agreed?*”

I could sense everyone in the room looking at us, wondering if we were going to start fighting. Weirdly enough, I didn’t actually *want* to fight with Lucian. This wasn’t the time or the place. But I also needed to make it clear that he wasn’t in charge of this mission in any way, shape, or form.

Lucian finally nodded, and took a few steps back to put some distance between us.

“And if you go back on your word, I swear—”

“Save it,” Lucian said with an eye roll. “A Vanguard wolf never goes back on his word.”

I snorted. “Save your bullshit for someone who might fall for it. In the meantime, stay the fuck out of my way.”

Lucian had the gall to look offended. “What have I done to offend you?”

I sighed. “Lucian, I don’t have the time, patience, or desire to get into that right now. The list is way too long, and we have shit to do. But just to give you something to think about, one Alpha to another—don’t ever question my brother or me when you would’ve done the exact same thing in our place, or, more likely, fucked it up even worse. Got it?”

“Is there a plan in there somewhere, or is the plan just to yell at Lucian all day?” Duke asked, strolling over to join us.

“If Lucian was capable of listening, I wouldn’t have to yell at him at all,” I snapped.

“Whatever,” Duke said dismissively. “So, what’s the move?”

“Yes, oh great Xavier,” Lucian added snidely. “What *is* your marvelous plan?”

“The plan is this,” I said curtly. “Lucian, you’ll come with me and Gabe to infiltrate the palace. Duke will be in charge of a group of Samara, Aspen, and Vanguard wolves, along with Ava, Mikah, and Aysel, who will be waiting outside the palace.” I looked at Duke. “We’ll call you in if and when we need you. But do *not* make a move until you hear from me. If we can do this thing stealthily without stumbling into an all-out battle, then that’s what we should do. We need to be smart about this.”

“I hate to be the voice of doom, but what if we don’t hear from you?” Duke asked. “Because… Well, look what happened to Jesse, along with every other non-Bitterfang-aligned wolf that Malakai and his band of assholes have gotten their hands on. They kill first and ask questions later.”

“I get what you’re saying, Duke, and I totally agree,” I said. “Things could get rough in there, and I might get taken out. I don’t expect that to happen, but we all know that it’s best to expect the unexpected. So… If that happens, Lucian is next in line to take over.”

It pained me to say that, but I certainly couldn’t put Gabe in charge. He was a Rogue and not officially in the alliance. I hadn’t seen Duke in action enough to know how well he’d be able to lead under pressure, so the princeling was the most logical choice. Lucian practically *lived* under my skin, but in this case, he was right. The Vanguard palace was his home, and I couldn’t make the call for him—no matter how much I wanted to. If I were out of the picture, it wasn’t like Lucian would follow anyone else’s orders, anyway.

“Great. Let’s go,” Lucian said. “We’re wasting time.”

“Lucian, I’m not going to let you rush me,” I ground out. “We have to plan this out properly. Besides, you have to give me a chance to tell the Samaras what’s happening. How about I meet you all back here in about an hour or so?” I turned a pointed glance on Lucian. “That work for you?”

“Fine,” Lucian grumbled.

“If you’re good with it, Lucian, then so am I,” Duke said.

“I’m not *good with it*, but I don’t seem to have much of a choice,” Lucian grumbled. “We’ll see you soon, Xavier.”

With that, the princeling stalked off to do whatever he did when he wasn’t busy getting on everyone’s nerves.

As I headed for the front door, Ravi intercepted me. “I’m coming with you and Gabriel.”

“And I know exactly why,” I said. “Marissa.”

Ravi didn’t argue, and there was no reason for him to. It wasn’t like I had any right to judge him for it. I’d gone on many a mission just to save the woman I loved. My heart panged as I thought about Cali, wishing I’d be coming home to her after we saved Marissa. There was nothing I wanted more. But there was no point in dwelling on that. I had more pressing issues to attend to—such as the werewolf currently blocking my path to the door.

“I have to help Marissa,” Ravi continued. “And if you refuse, I’ll just go anyway.”

I admired Ravi’s drive, but not his threat. “I understand where you’re coming from, man, but let’s get one thing clear—if you come along, it’ll be because I allow it. I know how loyal you are to the Redwood pack, but I’m not a Redwood anymore, and there are a lot of Redwoods who no longer trust me because of that.”

I looked Ravi in the eye, searching for any lingering remnants of his old loyalty to me. This was an important and dangerous thing we were about to do, and I had to go with my gut—that Ravi would listen to and obey me because he wanted to save Marissa.

*But what if things don’t go as planned? What if something bad happens? We don’t even know what we’re going to find at the palace. The place could be empty… Or it could be teeming with Bitterfangs. I’m betting on the latter. What if they’ve already killed all their prisoners? Honestly, I’d be more surprised to get there and discover that they’ve spared them. Knox barely made it out alive.*

I kept my gaze riveted to Ravi’s as I asked him the question that I knew he didn’t want to hear. “What happens if Marissa doesn’t make it out alive?”

**Episode 4289**

I hated this. It was the calm before the storm, and I couldn’t help but feel like a hurricane was about to clobber us all. Greyson had no plans to bring me with him when he met with Malakai, and that didn’t surprise me. But I hadn’t talked to him about letting me come along with the rest of the pack to serve as his backup, yet.

*He has to let me do* that*, at least. They’ll need my magic… But he* did *put Porter and Mace in charge and didn’t even think to mention me. I know they’re Alphas, and he’s likely trying not to put the pressure of a war on me… But he also said before that he has faith in me, and he put me in charge of the pack the last time he left, so he must just be assuming that I’ll come along. It wouldn’t make much sense for him to leave me behind.*

I spotted Artemis arming herself in the corner of the room and ran over to her. I watched her strap all manner of weaponry to herself for a few interesting moments before I finally spoke. “What’s going on? You look… well-armed.”

Artemis looked up at me, her jaw set in concentration. “I will be once I find my other crossbow. Just getting ready for the attack. You can never be too prepared for one of those.”

Alarmed, I asked, “What attack?”

“Cali, come on. *What attack?* You know that Malakai is a murderous, lying, evil, vindictive—”

“I get it. But what’s this about an attack?”

Artemis arched an eyebrow at me. “Cali. The attack is what all the Alphas have been talking about this entire time, what is inevitable here with this whole scenario. I listened to the whole thing, and I have to say, it doesn’t sound good. Chances are, Malakai’s lying and setting a trap for Greyson. That’s why we’re all going to be hiding in the woods nearby, ready to swoop in, right? That’s the plan.”

“*Oh*. I get it now. It might happen. Maybe not?” I knew it was a naïve thought the second I expressed it. I hadn’t allowed myself to think about how bad the battle would be once the “negotiations” between Malakai and Greyson fell apart, but I supposed Artemis was right. If all hell broke loose, it would definitely be a problem. We would have to act, and act fast.

“Yeah, right, the *potential* attack. Aren’t you going?” Artemis asked as she slid a dagger into her hip holster.

I sighed. “I’m planning to, but I haven’t talked to Greyson about it yet. I should’ve brought it up when he shot me down about joining him with Malakai, but there was so much going on that I didn’t get a chance.”

“Oh, I doubt that you have anything to worry about on that front,” Artemis said. “You’ve proven yourself time and time again, and Greyson knows that. He’d be stupid to leave you behind. I’m sure he’s expecting you to come.”

I smiled. “I appreciate that, sis.”

I paused, wondering if I should admit to Artemis how I really felt about the whole thing. I didn’t want her to think I was scared or making a big deal out of nothing—our pack was always embroiled in some fight or another, after all… But there was something about this meeting with Malakai that just didn’t sit right with me. It almost felt like Malakai might be positioning himself to make a big, decisive move.

“What is it, Cali?” Artemis asked. “You’re struggling with something. It’s written all over your face.”

I let out a long breath. “I just have a horrible feeling about Greyson going to this so-called negotiation with Malakai.”

Artemis’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry… I didn’t mean to say all that stuff about Malakai.”

I waved that off. “Everything you said was accurate, and exactly *why* I have the bad feeling. I think Greyson could get in over his head really quickly, and I don’t want to see that happen. Even though he’ll have backup waiting for him in the woods, that doesn’t mean Malakai couldn’t catch him by surprise while he’s out there alone.”

Artemis pulled me into a hug. “I know you’re worried, but Greyson’s a smart guy, and a great warrior. He knows what he’s doing. In my experience, every great fighter has a sixth sense about danger. If Greyson senses that something is wrong, he’ll act on it. I think you’re selling him short.”

“That’s the last thing I want to do,” I said. I believed in Greyson, and Artemis was right—he was an amazing fighter. I took a deep breath and tried to let Artemis’s reassurance soothe my fears, but I still felt uneasy. “I just wish that there was more I could do. If only Knox had given us more useful information…”

“Sucks that he couldn’t, but I know someone who can,” Artemis said. “What about Julia? She might know something we can use—some weak point of Malakai’s that we can exploit? The guy isn’t invincible. We just need to find out where his kill switch is.”

I pondered this. “Maybe… But it feels wrong to use a daughter against her father.”

Malakai was bad news, but he was still Julia’s father, and she’d been in pretty bad shape about his supposed death, back at Lucian’s party. It was a complicated situation, and I didn’t want to make things harder for her.

“Typically, yes, but not in this case,” Artemis said. “He was ready to kill her, and probably still will, given the chance. He’s sent his pack after us countless times, he burned down Lucian’s gaudy palace, he’s threatened you and everyone we care about. The guy has to be stopped, and if Julia’s the key to doing that, we have to use her.”

Artemis was right. Julia probably still had some mixed feelings about her father—who wouldn’t, in her shoes? But Malakai was a danger to her and everyone else, and that was all that mattered. I just hoped she’d see it that way.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go find her.”

We ran upstairs and knocked on the door to the room Julia was sharing with a few others. Russell opened it, his expression grim.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you doing?”

“I’ve been better. Looking for Julia?” he asked.

“Yes, how’d you know?” Artemis asked him.

“Just a gut feeling, I guess,” he said. He gestured to the bed, where Julia was lying with her face buried in a stack of pillows. Apparently, she’d been better, too. “I can’t even begin to console her. She just keeps blaming herself for everything. I keep telling her that it doesn’t make sense for her to shoulder the blame for something like this, but she won’t listen.”

“Well, she needs to stop,” I said. “This is no one’s fault but Malakai’s.” I went and sat on the bed beside Julia, squeezing her shoulder. “Did you hear me, Julia? None of this is your fault. You know that, right? It’s okay to be sad about all of this, but I don’t want you to feel like you’ve done anything wrong.”

Julia turned over to look at me, her eyes puffy from crying. “How can this *not* be my fault? If I’d never come here, none of this would be happening!”

“But you did come here, Julia, and we’re glad that you did,” I said firmly. “Your father made the choice to terrorize everyone because of that—it has nothing to do with you. But if you want to do something to help stop your father, now’s the time.”

Julia blinked away more tears and shook her head. “Cali, there’s nothing else I can do. I tried to give myself up to him, but he didn’t even care.”

I looked at Artemis, unsure of how to proceed without upsetting Julia further. Artemis nodded encouragingly.

“But what if there *is* something you can do?” I asked.

Julia looked up. “Like what?”

“Can you tell us anything about your father that might help us defeat him?” I asked.

Julia frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Artemis jumped in. “There has to be something he doesn’t want anyone to know. Some weakness we can exploit.”

I took Julia’s hand. “I know this is hard, but you have to think about it. Greyson’s about to face off with your father, and I’m scared that if we don’t find some way to give him an edge, he might not make it out of the meeting alive.”

Julia shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself. A few fresh tears went rolling down her cheeks. “I—I’m not sure.”

“Okay,” I said. I hadn’t had much hope that this idea would work, but somehow, I now felt even more defeated than I had initially. “Get some rest, okay?” I said to Julia. I looked up at Russell. “You, too.”

I got up to leave, but Julia grabbed my arm.

 “Wait! There is one thing!”

**Episode 4290**

**Ava**

I tried to stay calm as I looked out the kitchen window, but I wasn’t doing a good job. Every scrap of movement in the woods caught my attention, and disappointment rushed through me every time I realized it wasn’t Marissa.

I’d been worried before, but now it was getting bad. Xavier had texted me about Knox a few minutes ago, and I was relieved that my cousin had survived his bout of silver poisoning, but I was heartbroken over Jesse. He’d always stood by me and the pack. He’d had his share of doubts about Xavier at first, like many of the other Samaras, but he’d come around.

*He certainly didn’t deserve to die at the Bitterfangs’ hand. And we don’t even have his body to give him a proper burial. It’s just not right. Fuck the Bitterfangs! If they even touch a hair on Marissa’s head, I’ll make them regret it. Malakai is such a piece of shit. I hope Xavier kills him before he kills anyone else.*

My heart twinged again. I hadn’t built up the nerve to tell the pack about Jesse, yet. I wanted to wait for Xavier so that he could share the news with them. He was their Alpha, and we all needed to be together for that kind of news. I was happy that Knox was safe, and I was hopeful that we wouldn’t have to share the news of Marissa’s death with the pack, either. But I wasn’t feeling all that positive.

I jumped at the sound of someone calling my name.

“Ava, hey!” It was Kira.

I took a breath and smoothed out my emotions as much as I could. “What’s going on?”

“I wanted to update you on Xavier’s blood,” she said.

I nodded, thinking back to the night before. I’d gone and given Kira the blood from Xavier’s lip. He’d fallen asleep and almost woken up, but I’d said I was getting water. I hated lying to Xavier like that. My feelings for him had never been a lie, so using them to get something from him—something he’d already refused to give—hadn’t been the best feeling.

“I’m working on figuring out what’s going on,” Kira said impatiently. “Thanks for getting the sample to me. It should almost be done, and maybe we can get to the bottom of what’s going on.”

That sounded good. Then maybe I’d finally be rid of this teamwork thing with Cali. “Things got a little rough, so hopefully you had plenty of it. If I’d drawn any more than that, Xavier would’ve gotten suspicious.”

Kira nodded, not reacting to my “rough” statement. Her expression was blank.

*Oh, come on. This would be a lot more fun if she squirmed a little. I know she still has a crush on Xavier. It’s futile, but cute. Still, the fact that she’s not reacting at all may be all the assurance that I need that it bothers her. Most people would have* some *sort of reaction after a statement like that.*

If there was a chance for me to flaunt my relationship with Xavier in front of people other than just Cali, why *not* take advantage? I’d worked hard to get him back, and even harder to keep him. I wasn’t above throwing the fruits of my labor in anyone’s face—especially someone who obviously wasn’t my biggest fan.

I sighed. “When will it be ready?”

“Soon. We can go check it now. Follow me,” Kira said.

She led the way to her room. I sat on the bed as she fiddled around with things on her desk. She pulled out a vial that she’d put the blood in last night. It looked like she’d put it in some kind of… blue solution, but the blood itself was still a bright red.

Kira nodded, examining the blood closely. “This looks good.”

“What’s the blue shit for?” I asked.

“It helps keep the blood fresh, but it has to intermingle with it for a few hours first. It will help me isolate the blood and any magical properties for the spell.” She swirled it around for a moment. “We should be all set.”

“So… Now what?”

“Now, I cast the spell.”

I cocked my head. “And all this blood, vials, and whatever is *really* supposed to tell us what kind of magic is attached to Xavier?”

Kira nodded, already pulling out a bunch of witchy-looking things and getting to work at her desk.

I sidled up behind her, watching Kira literally do her magic. I felt a pang of jealousy, thinking how this was something I couldn’t do for Xavier. I couldn’t solve whatever was *maybe* happening to him, so I needed the help of a witch and *Cali* to figure it out. This had to actually work.

“And when you do this,” I said, “then you’ll know what kind of magic it is? Would you know if it was a curse?”

Kira shook her head, leaning close to a bottle of shimmering white powder that she mixed into a tube of funky-smelling liquid before dropping some of the blood mixture inside. “That’s why I’m casting this spell.”

Kira turned back to her altar and continued mixing and muddling and doing all sorts of things that I could barely keep track of. I didn’t really see how this was going to help. It seemed like quite a lot of steps to see if something was wrong with my mate.

I nodded slowly, hesitant. “Uh-huh.”

Kira stopped again and looked at me. “What?”

“I have a feeling that some people”—*Cali*—“might think that magic is the reason why Xavier’s with me.”

“What?” Kira asked.

“You heard me. And I’m not stupid. I know that you and Cali are hoping that’s the case, of course. You’ve never liked me. And you might be a Samara now, but you still feel some type of loyalty to the Redwoods and Cali, right?” I said. “So is that it? Are you both trying to prove that my relationship with Xavier is based on nothing but magic?”

Kira shook her head. “No, not at all. I’m only trying to figure out if there *is* magic at work here—nothing more, nothing less.”

I crossed my arms. “I don’t believe you.”

She sighed. “And I don’t care if you believe me. For the woman who ended up as Xavier’s Luna, you’ve got some serious insecurities.”

I glared but didn’t argue. Mainly because she wasn’t wrong. “Maybe so, but I have good reasons to be insecure—and Cali’s one of them.”

I wasn’t going to stand there and pretend that Cali hadn’t been doing everything in her power to drag Xavier back into her clutches. I saw the way she always looked at him—like a lost puppy. It was pathetic.

“Cali, Xavier, and Greyson are involved in a *due destini*,” said Kira bluntly. “From my understanding, the pull of that isn’t just going to disappear.”

Kira turned back to her work, leaving me feeling prickly.

*Was that another dig at me? Is the pull of the* due destini *really that inevitable? Will I lose Xavier to Cali no matter what? Is that what this magic test is really all about—proving that the* due destini *is all-powerful, and only magic could pull Xavier away from Cali?*

What would I do then? Losing him wasn’t an option. I’d just gotten him back after going through *hell*.

I watched Kira work, biting my lip and fighting the urge to say something scathing that would hit both her and her little friend Cali close to home. But I decided against it. There was no need for me to get angry. No need for me to act insecure and prove Kira right. No matter what happened, I was never going to let Xavier go.

*Cali will have to pry Xavier out of my cold, dead hands. And regardless, I’m still Xavier’s* first *mate. Their* due destini *can do its thing, but it will never change the fact that I was here first. Xavier was mine long before Cali came and dazzled him with her lame Fae-ness.*

“Stand back,” Kira said. “I’m about to cast the spell.”

I knew enough about magic to heed the warning. I stepped back, listening and watching anxiously as Kira began to perform the spell. The witch closed her eyes and lifted her hands, twisting them through the air while she chanted three words I didn’t understand over and over again.

The concoction that Kira had created began to bubble, and the blood on the white cloth slowly formed itself into a perfect circle and started to glow. It was mesmerizing. I’d seen a lot of magic performed, but this was definitely something. Whether it was special or would work was another story. I had to hope we would get our answers and that it wouldn’t be something I didn’t like.

Kira stopped chanting and then stepped back to where I was standing, and together, we watched as the glowing circle glowed brighter and brighter until finally, it burst into flames.

**Episode 4291**

**Greyson**

Mace shook his head as I finished filling him in on the details of my plan for my noon meeting with Malakai.

“I just don’t know, man,” he said, looking doubtful. “I’m not sold on the idea.”

“Me neither,” Porter agreed. The three of us were sitting in the study, and the grey morning light was filtering in through the window. “It sounds like you’re taking a big risk here, exposing yourself to this guy. He’s deranged, Greyson. He’s demonstrated no compunction about killing anyone he perceives as a threat—hell, even an inconvenience. He’s brutal. He doesn’t care who dies, but he does seem to be really focused on getting rid of you.”

I sighed. “I know it’s risky, and I know this is most likely a set up. But I also know it’s also a chance to see the enemy up close and try to find out what Malakai is really after. And—if the opportunity presents itself—to kill him.”

“*Kill him?* Shit, man,” Mace said, rubbing a hand along his jaw. “You do that, and the rest of the Bitterfangs will immediately kill *you* in retaliation. And then all hell will break loose.”

I glared back at him. “So what? Do you really think diplomacy is the way forward here, Mace? Look around, man! You think hell hasn’t *already* broken loose?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Mace countered. “I know things are bad, I’m just—”

“I don’t know if you should try to assassinate the guy during this negotiation,” Porter said. “And if that’s the only reason why you’re going to this meeting—”

“It’s not the only reason,” I snapped. “Listen, yelling at each other about this isn’t getting us anywhere. We could go around in circles about this all day. I hear what you’re both saying, and your concerns have been noted. I know this is a risk, but it’s one I’m going to take. As for the rest of it, I’m just going to have to play it by ear. And I promise you—” I added, as Mace opened his mouth to retort, “I won’t do anything drastic unless the moment calls for it.”

Mace glanced at Porter, then nodded. “Okay. Fine.”

“Fine,” Porter said. “Agreed.”

“And in the meantime,” I went on, “I’m going to find out what Malakai is offering. If he’s offering anything at all.”

“Yeah, okay,” Mace said.

“And remember, we’ll keep our packs ready, and if I give the signal, they’ll attack. There’s no other option on the table as far as I can see; it’s kill Malakai. That’s it.”

There would be bloodshed, but it came with being an Alpha. That was my role: to lead my pack in battle when necessary, and to ensure that we came out on top. This wasn’t the first time I’d been in this position. I’d been willing to fight and kill to protect my brothers and Cali from Silas, and I was willing to do the same thing to protect my pack from Malakai.

Mace and Porter nodded. “Okay, then. We have a plan,” Mace said.

“Let’s get moving, then,” I said, getting to my feet. But before I could take a single step, there was a loud knock, and then the door burst open.

Cali burst in. “There you are.”

Behind her were Julia, Russell, and Artemis.

“What’s going on?” I asked, confused.

“Julia has something to say,” Cali said, looking around at the assembled Alphas.

“Julia?” I repeated. I wasn’t sure how she fit into any of this. The best thing the kid could do right now was stay as far away from Malakai and the rest of the Bitterfangs as possible.

“Go ahead,” Cali told Julia, pulling her forward.

Julia looked terrified as she turned to face Mace, Porter, and me. Her face had drained of blood, and she was visibly trembling with fear.

“Go ahead,” I said, trying to be encouraging.

Russell stepped forward and took her hand.

Julia looked at him, then took a deep breath and began. “Okay. You already know some things about my father. Like how much he hates anything that isn’t… conventional. Including the way Cali is a *due destini* mate,” she said, glancing apologetically at Cali. Cali gave her a kind smile. “But my father doesn’t feel that way simply because it goes against his beliefs about werewolves. It’s also because he distrusts magic. It’s something he can’t control and knows nothing about. He’s taken drastic measures to keep it away from the pack.”

Russell nodded. “Julia once told me about a witch who offered her services to the Bitterfang pack. Malakai pretended he was interested and asked her to join them, then he had her killed.”

Julia shuddered at the memory. “My father told our pack that he’d done it because she was a witch, and witches don’t belong in werewolf packs. He said that wolves and witches were natural enemies, and it was our duty to exterminate them. But later, I heard him telling my mom that he would never allow a witch into the pack because their magic was a threat. If you ask me, I think he’s terrified of it. But he’d never admit that.”

I took this information in, thinking hard. This certainly helped explain a lot about Malakai and his deeply held hatred and prejudices. But even so, I wasn’t sure how this information was going to help us.

Julia must have guessed at this line of thought, because she kept talking. “The Bitterfangs are savage fighters, but we were never trained to fight magic. My father always taught us to scorn magic, and that true power came from werewolves, but the truth is, he just doesn’t have the slightest idea *how* to fight it. He doesn’t understand magic at all.”

“Then we should be doubling our efforts to use magic instead of just the strength of our wolves,” Cali said. “If magic is something he hates—fears, even—we should be using it tenfold.” She looked at me, her eyes bright. “Big Mac, Adair, Artemis, and I can all direct our magic toward him. Maybe even Dani and Torin can—”

“Cali, stop,” I said, putting up a hand. “No. We’re not doing that.”

“Greyson—”

“*No*,” I said firmly. “Can you please just respect what I’m asking you to do right now?”

Cali took a deep, angry breath. “Julia just gave us an important piece of information, and your pack members with magic have turned into the best weapons you have, and I don’t think—”

“Cali, did you not hear what Russell said?” I asked sharply. “Malakai once killed a witch because he felt threatened—and that was a witch who’d offered to *help* him. Think about it, love. What do you think he’d do with Big Mac, given the opportunity? Or Artemis? Or Torin? Or you?”

I could see the frustration playing out across Cali’s face, but I wasn’t going to budge on this. I knew what Malakai was capable of, and I wasn’t going to give him even the slightest chance to hurt Cali, or her sister, or my mother’s fiancée.

Cali’s jaw worked. “Will you at least let us come to the meeting with the rest of the pack as your backup?”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the anxiety that was clawing its way up my chest. This conversation was killing me. All I wanted was to tell Cali to stay at the pack house, with at least half the pack standing guard over her. I wanted to know that she was safe—but I could see the determined look in her eyes, and I knew that option wasn’t in the cards.

Nothing I could say would keep her from coming, and—truth be told—she’d become a good fighter. She’d been training hard, and, with Adair’s help, she’d gotten better at controlling her magic. She had her blasting, her sword, and her shield. She’d proven herself in battle, and I knew I couldn’t tell her to stay behind.

But I also hated the idea of her being anywhere near the Bitterfang Alpha. I knew Malakai was salivating for a chance to kill her.

I pushed a hand through my hair. “As long as you promise not to do anything unless I give you the signal. Me or Porter or Mace.” I gave her a hard stare. “Agreed?”

She met my stare and nodded. “Agreed.”

Xavier appeared in the doorway of the study. He looked around at the motley assortment of people, then at me. “Okay, I’m back,” he said. “It’s time to go.”

**Episode 4292**

My heart fluttered anxiously in my chest as I stood on the porch and watched as Xavier sprinted away from the pack house. Lucian, Elle, Ava, Gabriel, Mikah, and Ravi ran by his side, flanking him. They stopped where the edge of the property met the trees, the wolves shifted, then they all took off into the forest.

The freezing winter wind whipped around me as I stared after their retreating forms, thinking about how badly I’d wanted to hug Xavier before he left. How I’d wanted to go to him, and pull him close, and to tell him to be careful on his mission.

But he’d left quickly, and without a word of goodbye. He hadn’t given me the chance to say anything, either. All he’d done was shoot me a quick glance over his shoulder before heading out the door with the other three wolves. Which left me wondering—as I’d wondered so many times in the past few weeks—if I’d ever see him again.

His plan to sneak into the palace was beyond dangerous, but I understood why he was doing it. One of his pack members was dead, and another was being held prisoner in the palace by Malakai. Xavier was going after Marissa because that was who he was. I knew he would’ve done the same thing for any of the Redwoods, when he’d been a part of our pack.

I took a sharp breath—I couldn’t even believe I was acknowledging that. Xavier wasn’t a part of our pack—*my* pack—anymore, and it hurt like hell to it. When this was over, he’d be going back to his own pack—to the Samaras. And to Ava.

“Hey, Cali, are you all right?”

I looked over to see that Artemis was watching me. I hadn’t even heard her walk outside.

She frowned at me. “You look pale. Are you okay?”

I drew in a shuddering breath. “I doubt any of us are ever going to be okay again, after this.”

Artemis’s expression was grave. “You’re freezing. Let’s get inside.”

As we walked back into the house, the clock in the foyer struck the quarter hour, and I felt my anxiety ramp up. “Oh god.”

“What?” Artemis asked.

“We’re running out of time. We’re going to have to leave with Greyson, when he goes to meet Malakai.” I’d fought to be able to go along for this mission, but I still felt my palms start to sweat.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about what Julia told us about Malakai,” Artemis said. “About how he’s scared of magic. If he truly *is* afraid of magic, I can’t help but feel pretty satisfied to know that we must scare the crap out of him.”

I gave her a small smile. “I guess that *is* pretty nice. It’s kind of flipping the script. We’ve all been so afraid of him this whole time, but now we know he’s terrified of what we’re capable of.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Artemis chuckled, then glanced up at the clock. “I’m going to go find Rishika.”

“Hey,” I said, putting a hand on her arm. “Don’t you worry about her?”

Artemis looked confused. “Of course I do.”

“It’s just…” I shrugged. “I guess I just ask because I don’t see you express fear very often. I feel like I’m always walking on a tightrope or something. Teetering on the edge between loving my mate and being scared to death that something’s going to happen to him that I can’t control or prevent.” I swallowed down the bitter taste rising in the back of my throat. “How do you cope with the fear?”

Artemis smiled at me. “Because I know who Rishika is, and I trust her, and I know what she’s capable of. And—for me—I learned in the Fae world that I can’t worry about things I have no control over. Which, as it turns out, is most of life. All I can do is just try to be where I’m needed.” She shrugged. “It’s not perfect, but it’s the best I can do.”

I nodded. “I get that. And I’m going to be there for Greyson.”

Artemis wrapped her arms around me. She didn’t often give out hugs, but they were warm and filled with comfort.

“Listen to me,” she said softly. “We’re *going* to defeat Malakai.”

“Yeah,” I said, though I didn’t mean it.

I wished I could share Artemis’s optimism, but it just seemed unreachable. Malakai had managed to outmaneuver us at every turn so far. But maybe Julia’s revelation about him and his fear of magic would be the decisive difference. If only I could figure out how to weaponize the information…

“I’m going to go,” Artemis said.

I watched her walk up the stairs, then turned and looked around. I wanted to find Greyson before he left for his meeting with Malakai. There was no way I was going to let Greyson slip away without a last hug and a kiss. He had to know that I believed in him, in this plan, and more importantly, that I loved him. So much.

I needed this to go well for us. If it didn’t… I couldn’t bear the thought.

Greyson wasn’t in the living room or in the kitchen, and before I headed upstairs to check the bedroom, I popped my head into the study near the front door and found him there. He was alone, standing by the window, looking out at the grey sky, his face taut with worry.

I stepped into the room and must have been moving quietly, because when I wrapped my arms around him, he flinched in surprise and looked down.

“Oh,” he said. “You surprised me, love. I didn’t hear you come in.”

I frowned. Greyson was deeply observant, so he must’ve been extraordinarily deep in thought not to have heard me walk into the room.

He put his arms around me, holding me close. We stayed like that for a long moment, just enjoying the silence and the feeling of being together, in each other’s arms.

Then Greyson looked down into my eyes. “You’re going to be careful out there, right? I mean, really, really careful?”

I tipped my head back to look right at him. “Funny, I was going to ask you the very same question.”

The tension on his face broke for a moment and he gave me a small smile, then leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. We’d shared many kisses in the time we’d known each other, and they’d all meant different things. This one began gently, but it deepened as we reached for each other. He pulled my bottom lip between his teeth, and I pressed myself to his chest. His hands traveled down to my hips, holding me there. I wanted to memorize every part of him, just in case. I kissed him with passion and anxiety and hope and want.

I never wanted it to end.

When we finally came up for air, Greyson’s smile was more natural.

“I’m going to take that kiss with me,” he said, his voice low. “It’ll help me get through this meeting.”

I smiled up at him. “Well, I can give you a few more if they’ll help.” And I reached up on tiptoe and kissed him again. “I love you,” I whispered, my lips against his.

“I love you, too,” he said.

“I’m going to be with you the whole time,” I told him. “I’ll never leave you. You can count on me.”

His grip on my waist tightened. “I know,” he said. Then he let go of me, stood up straight, and stepped away. “I have to get ready.”

My heart started to pound with fear. “Wait, will I—are you—you’re not going right now, are you?”

He reached out and took my hand. “I won’t leave before I see you. I promise.”

He squeezed my hand, then left the study.

I stood there for a moment longer, enjoying the tingling sensation the brush of his hand had left on my skin. His touch always made me feel like that, as though I’d just been touched by electricity.

I gave my head a hard shake—what the hell was wrong with me? I had to snap out of this reverie. Greyson wasn’t the only one who needed to get ready.

I headed out of the study and was about to go upstairs when, just in front of me, the air blurred for a moment. There was a crackle in the air, and then Kira appeared out of nowhere.

“Oh my god!” I exclaimed, jumping back. “Kira, you scared me!”

She looked around, and when her eyes landed on me, it was clear that she’d found who she was looking for. Her expression was tense—she was clearly agitated—and my thoughts went to the magic test we’d wanted to perform. Had she been able to do it?

My stomach clenched. “The test?” I asked fearfully. “Did you get his blood? Do you have the results?”

**Episode 4293**

“The test?” I asked again, more frantically. “What happened? Did we get his blood in the end?”

Kira didn’t answer my question. Looking agitated, she glanced around, then grabbed my hand and hauled me into the study I’d just walked out of. She slammed the door shut and turned to look at me.

“Okay, so we did get the blood, but the test didn’t quite go to plan.”

I stared at her for a moment. “What does thatmean? How *did* it go?”

“The test literally burst into flames,” Kira said. “Which at first I thought maybe was how it was supposed to go, but no. It destroyed everything.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I mean, *that* doesn’t seem great. Is Xavier okay? Does it mean he’s in some kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Kira said, beginning to pace the small room. “I really don’t know. You have to understand, I’ve never dealt with anything like this before. This is new territory for me.”

My head was spinning, but I fought to think clearly. “Okay, I can’t make sense of this, and neither can you, but I know someone who might be able to.”

Kira stopped pacing. “Are you thinking of…”

I nodded. “I think it’s time to bring in the big guns—Big Mac. What do you think?”

Kira raised her hands in surrender. “I have no problem with that. I’ll take all the help I can get.”

I walked out of the study. “Let’s go find her.”

We headed upstairs and found Big Mac in her room, the door half-open. The witch was sitting at her desk and seemed to be working on a spell. She was surrounded by bowls of crushed herbs, little piles of stones, and open books. She looked sharp and alert, and I was glad to see she seemed to have recovered from her injuries from the palace fight.

I knocked softly on the door. “Big Mac? I hope we’re not disturbing you.”

“You obviously are, but come in anyway,” she said. When she looked up, her eyebrows rose. “And Kira’s here, too. What do you need?”

“We’ve got a problem.” I looked at Kira. “A spell result we can’t explain.”

Kira took over from there, filling Big Mac in about the blood she’d collected, the spell she’d attempted, and the fiery result. What she thankfully left out was the purpose for it. I didn’t need Big Mac’s snarky opinion on Xavier. I could hear her now: *And what makes you so sure about that? Maybe he just makes bad decisions, Cali.* I knew something was up; I knew it in my gut.

No one was going to tell me otherwise.

“—and then—*poof*—it just went up in flames,” she finished, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I’ve never had anything like that happen to me before. I’m sure I did everything right. Do you have any idea what could’ve caused it to explode like that?”

Big Mac looked thoughtful, then she shook her head. “And you’re sure you didn’t skip the—”

“I didn’t skip the cleansing beforehand,” Kira said. “I never do.”

“Then I don’t know what went wrong,” Big Mac said with a shrug. “I’ve never had anything like that happen to me, either. It’s very strange.”

I felt a wave of disappointment crash over me. I’d really thought Big Mac would be the answer, here.

The older witch narrowed her eyes at Kira. “What about before the spell—before you started? Did you feel anything then?”

“What do you mean?” Kira asked.

“Before the blood ignited, did you feel anything?” Big Mac pressed.

Kira frowned. “Well… I have been thinking about that, actually, because yeah—I did feel something.”

“What was it?” Big Mac asked, leaning forward.

Kira’s frown deepened. “The best way to describe it is that it felt like the magic was fighting me.”

I glanced between the two witches. “Like it was fighting you? What does that mean? Are you talking about the magic residue you sensed on Xavier or, like, your own magic?”

Kira shook her head, looking worried. “I’m really not sure. But the bottom line is that the blood sample Ava got for me to run was destroyed after the fire—obviously—so I wasn’t able to get any kind of result.” She looked over at me. “I’m sorry, Cali. I know how much you wanted answers on this.”

“Don’t apologize,” Big Mac said sharply. “You can’t teach people to expect perfect results from a witch. Magic is as much art as science, and sometimes there are external factors that come into play. It doesn’t sound like you did anything wrong.” She was quiet for a moment, thinking. “I’m intrigued by the idea that the magic you were working with was resisting you—or fighting. Maybe if you show me the spell, we can come up with some kind of explanation for what happened.”

“Oh, that’d be great,” I said, feeling relieved.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Kira said. “And if we figure anything out, Cali, I’ll let you know.”

“Great, thanks,” I said.

I headed out of the room. I was glad they had a plan, but this was just one more thing to worry about. I’d really hoped that Kira’s test would provide me with some answers and prove once and for all what I had suspected—that there was something driving Xavier to do what he’d been doing.

I knew what the evidence suggested, but I just couldn’t believe it. It *wasn’t* that Xavier no longer loved me—it couldn’t be. I’d felt his love in his kiss, seen it in his eyes during our stolen glances.

But then a painful idea pierced through my thoughts as I walked down the hallway. I believed that Xavier was still in love with me, and that some outside force was causing him to behave the way he had—but what if I was wrong? What if I was just blinded by our mate bond? What if he really was in love with Ava?

Gritting my teeth, I took a deep, shuddering breath. I wasn’t going to let myself go there. I refused to give in to such dark thoughts. I was going to trust my gut and not jump to any conclusions until I had some real evidence, one way or the other. Kira’s test had been a bust, and a test that proved nothing ruled nothing out. I just had to stay positive about Xavier. Especially now, with so much negativity lurking around us.

As I headed for the stairs, I saw Jay and Lola walking toward me.

“Hey,” Lola said grimly, a far cry from her usual bubbly self.

“How are you two holding up?” I asked.

Jay shrugged. “Same as everyone else, I guess. Greyson wants everyone outside. That’s where we’re headed now.”

My stomach clenched with fear, but I nodded. “Okay. I’m coming, too.”

The three of us walked down the stairs, and as we walked out the door, I realized that Greyson was about to leave to meet Malakai.

A jolt of fear shivered up my spine as I stepped onto the porch. Greyson was standing there, flanked by Mace, Porter, Rowena, and Paige. The Cobalts must have blipped with Rowena—that was turning out to be pretty convenient, having a witch as a Luna. They were all looking out at the packs, assembled in the yard.

Lola and Jay went down the porch steps to join the packs, and I stood next to Greyson and looked out over the sea of faces, my heart swelling with pride. We’d all come together once again, despite all the egos, infighting, obstacles, and lost battles.

Greyson stepped forward. “Thank you all for being here,” he called, his voice booming out over the assembled packs. “You don’t have to be—every person standing here has made a choice, and we thank you. Your loyalty to your pack and the alliance will not be forgotten.” He paused for a moment, and the only sound was the whistling of the wind, whipping through the pine trees. “Malakai has asked for an audience with me, and I’m going to indulge him. We all know this mission is a gamble, but it’s one that I feel I have to take. I would be a liar if I told you that this isn’t going to be dangerous. It is. But I take a lot of comfort in knowing that you’ll all have my back out there.”

The silence of the morning was broken when a huge cheer erupted from the assembled packs. They yelled and cheered and whistled in support.

Greyson smiled and put a fist to his heart. They did the same to him.

Then he turned to me, and the smile remained on his face. “I know you’re worried, love, but it’ll be okay.”

He pulled me into a tight hug, then bent to press a tender kiss to my lips.

“Be careful,” was all I managed to say.

“I love you,” he said. And then he stepped away and walked down the porch steps.

I watched as he crossed the frozen yard and walked into the woods, off to meet Malakai.

**Episode 4294**

**Xavier**

I led the Samaras toward our rendezvous point, with Ava, Ravi, Gabe, and Mikah at my side. Lucian would be there with Aysel, Elle, Duke, and some members of the Aspen pack.

I glanced over at Ava, whose jaw was set. I was glad to have her by my side, though she seemed on edge. I figured it was probably just nerves—and I couldn’t blame her for that. It was hard not to feel overwhelmed, given everything we were going up against.

But—I looked over at her again—I couldn’t help but feel that it was something else. Ava didn’t really *get* nervous, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more going on with her.

Not knowing what it was made me feel edgy, and it didn’t help that I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali. I just kept thinking about how much I’d wanted to talk to her before I left the Redwood pack house. How much I’d wanted to pull her into my arms and tell her that everything was going to be okay. How many times had I done that in the past before leaving to do something risky? Dozens? Hundreds?

But that didn’t matter. The *past* didn’t matter, thanks to Adéluce.

Maybe that was what was going on with Ava—maybe she sensed something going on with me. If that was true, then I needed to push Cali out of my mind. It wasn’t fair to Ava. We were about to walk into a hornet’s nest, and I couldn’t go in thinking of Cali. I had to think about Ava and Marissa and the safety of the rest of the Samara pack. They had to be my sole focus.

As we approached the rendezvous point, Ava’s sharp silence started bugging me more and more.

Finally, I turned to her. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes met mine. “Are you?”

That wasn’t the response I’d been expecting, and I was momentarily thrown. Her gaze was searching—like she wanted to know something, or wanted something, but wasn’t saying what.

I gave her a smile and a small shrug. “I mean, for a guy about to lead a suicide mission? Yeah, I’d say I’m okay.”

Ava gave me a tiny smile but shook her head. “Don’t joke about that, X.”

“Just got a little energy to burn. But I’m fine,” I assured her. I glanced over my shoulder at the pack, walking behind us. I spotted Perrie with her parents, which reminded me of something else I wanted to tell Ava. “Listen, I was thinking about something on the way over here. I’m not into the idea of sending Perrie in to fight when we reach the palace.”

“No?” Ava asked, surprised. “Why not?”

“She’s too young,” I told her. “Too inexperienced.”

“I guess…” Ava said slowly.

“What do you think about using her as a scout instead?” I asked. “We can send her back and forth to report on how things are going with Greyson.”

Ava thought about this for a moment, then bit her lip, looking unsure. “I don’t know about that, either. I get what you’re saying about not wanting her in the fight, but I’m not sure about the idea of sending her out through the woods on her own when Malakai is out there, either. With all this going on, that feels like a risk, too.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s true.”

I looked around, scanning the pack, and my eyes lit on Zipper, walking next to Blaine. Zipper was laughing, of all things, and I rolled my eyes.

I still wasn’t sure that bringing Blaine along with us had been the best idea. The guy was still a problem and clearly wasn’t happy about having me for his Alpha—not that I cared about his opinions.

“What do you think about Blaine?” I asked, nodding toward him.

Ava gave him a dark look. “I don’t trust him. Not yet. What about Zipper?”

I chewed on that idea for a moment. Zipper was an ass, but it wasn’t like I had a lot of options for someone to send. The Samaras didn’t have a lot of bodies to spare, and sending Perrie alone did feel too risky. I could only hope that giving Zipper some responsibility might inspire something in him.

“Perrie, Zipper,” I called, motioning them forward.

They both jogged to catch up with Ava and me.

“What’s up, Xavier?” Perrie asked.

“I have a mission for you two,” I said. “I want you two to be my scouts. You’ll move back and forth between us and the Redwoods, carrying news.”

“You got it,” Perrie said quickly.

But Zipper scowled. “Aw, man. Really?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Ava asked sharply. “You can’t be a scout?”

“No, it’s just…” Zipper shrugged. “I was just hoping to see some action today, you know?”

“I really don’t,” Ava said coldly. “We need you with Perrie. You need to do your best to protect each other and avoid the action. It’s vital that we know what happens with Greyson and all the others at Three Devils Point.”

Zipper sighed heavily. “I guess I can do that.”

I stopped walking long enough to clap him on the shoulder and look him squarely in the eye. “Zipper, I need you to do this. I’m choosing you—I’m trusting you—to do this. For your pack.”

Zipper blinked once, then again. He nodded—emphatically. “Okay, Xavier,” he said, new determination in his eyes. “You got it. You can count on me. I’ll have Perrie’s back if she has mine.”

Ava and I watched as they headed off, away from the rest of the pack.

She looked at me, a smirk on her face. “Well, you just managed to convert one more doubter to your side.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know how much I really did. Zipper always seemed to be on the fence. I don’t think he’s a bad kid—I just think he’s a born follower who found himself in a bad situation.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ava said, chuckling to herself. “But you saw the look on his face when you put your hand on his shoulder. He’s going to be loyal to you forever. He’ll probably get your face tattooed on that shoulder.”

“The real problem is Blaine,” I said darkly, glancing at the thorn in my side. “But he’s also a problem for another day. Okay, where are the others?” I asked as we stopped and looked around the clearing.

There was a rustle in the underbrush, just to the right. Already on edge, I crouched down, ready to shift—but I stood up straight again when Lucian stepped out of the trees.

“It’s you,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“Hello to you, too,” Lucian said grumpily.

Elle stepped out of the trees to join him, and after a moment, the rest of his group emerged, too. On my left, I heard the sound of more people approaching, and Duke and the Aspen pack members appeared.

“Thanks for coming, everyone,” I said grimly.

“You should take a moment to prepare them for what’s coming,” Ava said quietly, turning to me. “Remind them of the plan. Marissa’s life depends on everyone being on the same page right now.”

“I know,” I said heavily.

I felt a new weight settling on my shoulders. This whole plan was my responsibility. It had been my idea to try to sneak a select few of us into the palace to rescue Marissa, with the rest waiting outside in case anything went horribly wrong. If it *did* go badly, the blame would—rightly—fall on me. I had to make sure this plan worked.

I looked around, letting my gaze sweep over the assembled wolves. The day was cold and grey, but every face that looked back at me was alight with purpose and determination. I was glad to see that no one looked like they’d been forced to be there, or that they’d have preferred to be somewhere else.

“Thank you for coming,” I said again, louder this time. “Listen to Duke and be prepared for anything—there’s no way to predict what we’re going to find inside or what’s going to happen out here. But keep the main objective front and center—we’re here to get Marissa and Armin, and you’re going to be on the ready out here in case something goes horribly wrong. That’s what we’ve come to do, and anything else—like a few dozen dead Bitterfang wolves? Well, that would just be icing on the cake.”

Most of the wolves cheered at this. They were sick of the Bitterfangs and growing tired of this conflict. When I glanced at Lucian, I saw that he looked grim and determined. I knew he was pissed—he wanted his palace back.

I turned to Duke. “Okay, Lucian’s going to lead us back to the tunnel entrance. Once we leave, give us thirty minutes to make it back out.”

Duke nodded. “Got it. One question?”

“What?” I asked, shaking my hands out and rolling my shoulders—I was ready to get started.

Duke raised his eyebrows. “What do you want us to do if you don’t make it out?”

**Episode 4295**

**Greyson**

I’d left the pack house earlier than I needed to, and I was running faster than was necessary, but I wanted to get to the Three Devils Point ahead of Malakai’s requested time. I didn’t want to roll up after he’d already arrived. Arriving early meant I’d be there by the time he got there, and that would put me in a position of power—which I needed. It would also give me a chance to look around for any signs of a pre-laid trap.

Dropping my head, I ran faster. The trees were quiet and still as I moved, leaping over frozen streams and fallen trees. The confidence I’d felt earlier continued to build as I ran. That was the power of my wolf form—breathing as a wolf always filled me with strength and reminded me who I really was. I was no more fully wolf than I was fully human—I was a werewolf, and I felt most at peace when both those sides were in harmony.

I stretched as I leapt across a wide patch of black ice. I was glad to have this time alone to think and center myself. Still, even though I was running by myself, I knew I wasn’t fully alone. I thought about the packs who’d be waiting for my signal from the shadows, watching my back. I could only hope that my signal wouldn’t be necessary, though I wasn’t about to rule out the very high possibility that Malakai had something nasty planned for me.

My thoughts went to Cali, who was with the backup group. I knew that she—like the rest of them—would be ready to attack if anything happened to me. I felt myself tense at the thought of her being in danger, but I tried to push the thought away. I couldn’t think like that anymore. Cali was a capable fighter, and as much a part of the Redwood pack as Rishika or Jay. She had skills that we needed.

It just would’ve been a lot easier on me if she wasn’t also my mate, and if I didn’t love her so damn much. If something happened to her, I would lose it, that much I knew. And I didn’t know what I would do then. Would I be able to lead as Alpha the way I needed to?

*Let’s hope you never have to find out.*

I arrived at Three Devils Point, leaving the security of Redwood territory behind. I slowed my pace, sniffing the air and looking around carefully, trying to pick up on any Bitterfang scents. Were they here yet? It didn’t seem like it.

Knox hadn’t been able to say exactly where at Three Devils Point I was supposed to find Malakai. I looked across the barren, windblown ground. I supposed the middle was a safe bet. And if that wasn’t where he was, I didn’t doubt that Malakai and I would find each other eventually.

I shot a glance behind me, looking back the way I’d come. I wondered if Mace and the others had already reached their hiding spot. Hopefully they were getting settled with no surprises of their own.

I wasn’t nervous, but I did like to be prepared. That was hard to do with someone like Malakai, who never gave any indication of what the hell he was going to do next. It was like playing chess with a monkey—maybe he’d make a move, or maybe he’d flip the board over and start throwing shit. I just never knew.

My plan to protect myself now relied on two factors—being able to handle Malakai if he tried to kill me, and, if that went badly, surprising the bastard with the brute force of the werewolves I had waiting in the forest. If we could surprise him, we could maybe get the edge over him. We’d had a chance at one point at the Vanguard palace, but we’d lost it. We just needed a chance again, and our plan might be able to achieve it.

But the plan wasn’t without flaws, I knew that. But I trusted Mace to be careful when he was hiding himself and the rest of the packs in the trees, but if Malakai sensed they were here, then we were all fucked. No element of surprise. No getting one up over him.

No killing him.

I was certain that Malakai wasn’t coming to this meeting alone. He wasn’t that overconfident. No, he was calculated, and his own pack and those of his allies were definitely going to be out there somewhere, ready to pounce. And there would be no telling how many Bitterfangs he’d bring, but I did suspect he wouldn’t leave the Vanguard palace—his new prize—unattended.

We just had to hope that we could pull our own ambush off.

I looked into the quiet trees and thought again of Cali. Was she hidden well enough? I’d made it clear to Mace that he needed to position the pack far enough away that Malakai wouldn’t be able to sense them. I didn’t want Malakai sensing any of our wolves, but least of all Cali. He would immediately target her.

*Cali?* I called. *Can you hear me? Love, if you can hear me, let me know. Cali?*

Would she respond? My stomach twisted—I wanted her to. I wanted to hear her voice before all of this went down. Just in case.

*Cali?*

There was no answer.

The wind was strong and growing stronger. I wondered if a storm was rolling in, or if the wind always blew this hard in the area. None of the packs spent much time out at Three Devils Point if they could help it. It was nothing but a rocky outcropping of land, bare of all but the hardiest of plants—they were so hard and spiky I could feel them biting at my paws as I stepped across them.

I circled the area, moving slowly and pausing whenever I thought I heard something or caught a scent on the wind. Luckily, none of them were my pack’s or our allies’. But there was nothing there. Aside from the bitterly whipping wind, there was no movement or sound, and no recent scents. If the Bitterfangs were gathered nearby, they were keeping enough distance that I wasn’t detecting them.

I hated the murderous bastard so fucking much. He’d wanted this damn meeting, and he was late for it? It felt like I should’ve seen this coming.

I was just heading back to the center of the plain when I finally heard something. It was a low, shuffling rustle, and when I turned, I saw him.

Malakai’s wolf appeared in the trees, then stepped forward into the clearing.

Somehow, he looked even bigger than I remembered, though that realization didn’t faze me. He didn’t intimidate me—I’d always found that the bigger the wolf, the harder the fall. And he *would* fall.

We stood in silence for a long moment, looking at each other, sizing each other up. Finally, Malakai took a step toward me, and I took a step toward him. Then he took another step, and I took another step. This went on until we stopped, a few yards between us.

Malakai’s gaze was assessing. *I’m surprised.*

*About what?* I asked, fighting to keep the fury out of my voice.

*I didn’t think you’d come, Greyson Evers.*

*Then you don’t know me as well as you think you do*,I said coldly.

*I suppose that’s possible*, Malakai conceded.

Until that moment, I hadn’t known it was possible for a wolf to smirk, but that was what he was doing.

I was getting annoyed*. I didn’t come here to chat, Malakai. Knox gave me your message.*

Malakai’s eyes glittered dangerously*. I assumed as much. Lived long enough to tell you, did he?*

*He did*, I confirmed. *Though, if there is a next time, I’d suggest you try a more conventional method of communication. The kid almost died.*

*Yes, yes*, Malakai said lightly. *Silver will do that. It’s the damnedest thing, isn’t it? But you managed to save him. How nice.*

I was growing more agitated—and irritated. *What’s this about?* I demanded. *Why did you want to see me?*

Malakai regarded me for a moment, then stepped closer. *You’ve seen what the Bitterfangs are capable of.*

*Yeah, I’ve seen*, I confirmed, disgusted.

He tilted his shaggy head. *Yes, and that was just a sample of what we can do.*

*Did you come here to threaten me?* I asked.

*I came here to make you an offer*,he said. *If you want to prevent further death and destruction to your pack and the rest of the packs in your little alliance, you only have one option.*

My heart was pounding. I didn’t like where this was going. *And what option is that?*

*You’re a smart boy, Greyson Evers. What do you think it is?* *Pledge your loyalty to me by kneeling before me—or die.*

**Episode 4296**

Hidden in the trees, I watched—horrified—as Greyson’s wolf bent low before Malakai. What was he doing?! I had to clap my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming. It looked like he was submitting to the Bitterfang Alpha. But *no*—that couldn’t be. There was no way. He would never ever do that.

Would he?

I blinked hard, like I was trying to wake from a nightmare. This *couldn’t* be happening. I was breathing hard, but I had to be careful not to make any noise. I wasn’t even supposed to be here. But when Mace and the rest of the packs and I had arrived at the location Mace had scouted, we’d waited… And waited. And waited.

There had been no signal from Greyson, and I’d felt like I was crawling out of my skin with worry. I’d had no idea what was happening to him, or if he was okay. He had said he’d let us know if he needed backup, but after a while longer, I just hadn’t been able to stand it anymore, so I’d snuck away from the packs to see for myself what was going on.

But this… I’d never expected *this.*

I was far enough away from the two Alphas to stay hidden, but that meant that I was too far away to hear whatever it was they were talking about. My pulse pounded in my ears as I stared at them, willing the picture in front of me to change.

There was a rustle of leaves behind me, and I spun around, ready to blast whoever was sneaking up on me—

“*Julia*,” I breathed, lowering my hands. “What are you doing here? You were supposed to stay back at the pack house!”

“I know,” she whispered with a shrug, looking apologetic, but still determined. “I know I broke the rules, but he’s my father. I want to know what’s going on.” She tried to peer over my shoulder. “So—what’s going on?”

I didn’t know what to say. I was still in shock from seeing Greyson bow down before Malakai. “I don’t really know,” I managed to whisper, “but you need to leave. If your father finds either of us here, it won’t end well.”

Julia shook her head, looking more determined than I’d ever seen her. “No. I’m not leaving until I talk to my father.”

I stared at her in shock. “You want to *talk* to him? After what happened last time? Julia, I really don’t think that’s a good idea. The man wanted you and your mate dead.”

I didn’t like reminding her of something so horrible, but clearly she needed to be. Malakai might’ve been her father, but he was also a monster. I needed to protect her.

Julia opened her mouth to respond, but I didn’t wait for her to answer. I grabbed her arm and pulled her away, deeper into the forest. I needed to get Julia away from this place before Malakai could see or hear us.

“Listen,” I said, striving to keep my voice low, “I understand that you feel responsible for what happened, Julia. I get that you want to fix things, and that Malakai’s your father. I really am sympathetic to what’s going on with all of that. But you need to understand that Greyson is my *mate*, and he’s the one risking himself on behalf of you, and Russell, and the entire alliance. I can’t let you intervene—it might make things worse.”

Julia looked at me, her eyes wide. Then she nodded. “I understand, Cali. I—I just want to help.”

I looked around, making sure that I was still on the right path. I was anxious to get Julia and myself back to a better-hidden vantage point, where Malaki would be less likely to sniff us out. “I get that, too, but the best way for you to help out is to stay safe and not become a distraction—”

There was a noise from behind us. It was sharp and loud, like a stick snapping in half.

With a sharp intake of breath, I shoved Julia behind me and called my magic to my hands. I waited until they started to tingle, then raised them, scanning the trees.

There was a rustle of underbrush, and I trained my eyes on the spot. I tried to stay calm and confident, but my heart was pounding, and I was holding my breath as whoever was there drew closer.

Feeling edgy as hell, I got ready to fire off a warning blast when Rishika—in her wolf form—appeared from the trees.

“Rishika?” I gasped, lowering my hands. “Where the hell did you come from? What are you doing, sneaking around like that?”

Rishika shifted back to human. “I think the better question might be, what are *you* doing sneaking around out here? I noticed you were missing and went looking, then I picked up on both your scents,” she said, nodding at Julia. “What are you doing out here together?”

I groaned. “We’re *not* out here together. I was going crazy waiting with everyone else, so I went to see what was going on with Greyson and Malakai. And while I was doing that, this one came sneaking up on me. People keep doing that today,” I added dryly.

“What are you even doing here, Julia?” Rishika asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be at the pack house?

“Yes, she is,” I said, speaking over Julia as she opened her mouth to answer.

“You need to get back,” Rishika said firmly. “*Now*.”

“I know, but I really feel like I need to—”

“Do I need to remind you what happened the last time you tried to intervene?” Rishika asked her, raising an eyebrow. “Or, more specifically, what happened to Russell?”

Julia’s face paled. “Oh god.” She looked down and nodded. “Okay. I’ll head back.”

Rishika and I watched her leave, not looking away until she’d disappeared into the trees.

“Okay,” Rishika said with a sigh. “You and I should get back into formation with the others.”

“Hang on,” I said, putting a hand on her arm to stop her. “Before we go back, there’s something I need to show you.”

Rishika frowned. “What is it?”

I took a shaking breath. “Come with me.”

I led Rishika back the way I’d come, so we were closer to where Greyson and Malakai were still meeting.

When we were close enough to see, Rishika stopped in her tracks and drew in a sharp breath. “Oh god, no. What am I looking at.”  
 I felt a knot in my throat. I had been half-hoping Rishika would be able to offer some kind of explanation for what I’d seen. “I know. I don’t understand it either.”

Rishika couldn’t tear her eyes away from the bizarre scene, but she shook her head. “No, it couldn’t be what it looked like. Greyson would never yield to Malakai.”

“I know,” I said, tears filling my eyes. “I know he wouldn’t. Of course not. Which means that something’s going on. Can you hear what they’re saying?” I asked, hoping that Rishika’s extra sensitive hearing might be able to pick up the conversation.

Rishika listened hard for a moment, biting her lip in concentration—but then she shook her head. “No, I can’t hear them. They’re too far away.”

I looked desperately at the two Alphas, weighing my options.

Rishika must’ve guessed what I was thinking, because she shook her head. “No way, Cali. We can’t risk getting any closer—we’d give ourselves away.”

I felt my anxiety building. “But there has to be *something* we can do, right?”

Rishika looked out at where Greyson stood before Malakai, as though in supplication. She looked miserable but shook her head. “Greyson made it very clear that he didn’t want anyone doing anything unless he gave the order. Or unless Malakai attacked him. And he’s not doing either of those things… At least for now,” she added grimly.

“Rishika—” I started, but she shook her head.

“I think the best thing we can do is go back and tell Mace and the others what’s going on.”

I knew she was right, but I also know that I didn’t want to just turn my back and walk away from Greyson right now.

Rishika was already turning back, and I thought about what Greyson would want me to do in this moment. He’d want me to protect myself, and the pack.

I shot one last look at Greyson and was just starting to follow Rishika when I heard a sound that made me stop in my tracks.

It was Julia’s voice, and she was screaming her father’s name.

Rishika and I whipped around just in time to see Julia sprinting out of the trees and running toward her father at top speed.

“*Jul—*” I started, but Rishika clamped a hand over my mouth before I could finish the word.

“*Don’t make it worse!*” she hissed.

Malakai looked shocked for a split second, then he snarled at his daughter. And, in that moment of distraction, Greyson lunged for Malakai’s throat.

**Episode 4297**

**Xavier**

*What do you want us to do if you don’t make it out?*

Duke’s question hung in the cold winter air, but only for a moment.

“We’re going to make it out,” I said without hesitation. And we carried on.

It wasn’t long before Lucian was leading Elle, Ravi, Aysel, Ava, Gabe, Mikah, and me toward the tunnel that would take us into the palace, and I took a moment to ask myself how much of my answer to the Aspen Alpha had been truth, and how much had been bravado.

As we approached, I saw that there were two Bitterfang guards stationed at the mouth of the tunnel.

*Fuck.*

I shouldn’t have been surprised to see this—I would’ve done the same thing, in Malakai’s position—but it made our job harder. I gestured for the group to gather behind a copse of trees that hid us from view.

I turned to Lucian. *Are there any other tunnels? Any other ways in? You’ve got a lot of windows.*

Lucian shook his head. *No, this is the only way in that doesn’t involve going through somewhere super obvious.*

Dammit. I’d been afraid of that.

*Okay*, I said with a sigh, *I think we should flank the guards. Lucian, Ravi, and Mikah, move in from the east side. Ava, Gabe, and I will take the west.*

Gabe turned to Mikah, presumably mind linking with him. I could almost hear his voice as he likely said, *We’re going to flank the guards. You, Ravi, and Lucian will come at them from the east.*

Mikah frowned. “I don’t think we need that many to attack,” he said, speaking aloud. “There are only two guards. They’re sitting ducks, and we have something they don’t—the element of surprise. We know they’re there, but they don’t know we’re here, right?”

*He’s got a point*, Gabe said, turning to me.

*We don’t have time for this*, I said, starting to get annoyed.

“Don’t worry,” Mikah said, as if he could sense my annoyance. “Gabe and I can dispatch them easily enough.”

I shook my head. *Gabe, tell Mikah that we appreciate his offer, but this really isn’t his fight.*

Gabe conveyed my message, but it didn’t seem to have the intended effect on Mikah.

He looked over at me, his jaw set in a determined way. “Listen, Xavier, I didn’t come to the Samara house just to enjoy the view. I came to help.”

Gabe looked over at me. *He’s right. And don’t worry, Xavier—we’ve got this.*

I’d spent too much time with Gabe to not worry when he told me not to worry, so I watched anxiously as he and Mikah made their way toward the tunnel.

But I knew I could trust Gabe, so I tried to force myself to relax and let them take the lead.

They stopped before they walked out of the densest part of the woods, bending their heads together to speak. Then Gabe nodded, and Mikah stepped forward.

He waited a beat, then stepped out from the trees and ran toward the surprised guards at a human pace—with no evidence of his vampiric speed or grace.

“You need to back off!” one of the guards snarled at him. “I’m only going to tell you this once before—”

“Vampires!” Mikah shouted as he staggered toward them, clutching his neck as though he’d just been bitten. “Vampires! I was just attacked by vampires!”

The guards looked at him for a moment, then at each other, clearly baffled. It was obvious that they were out of their depth.

Mikah moved closer. “*Look!* Look what they did to me!”

The Bitterfangs peered curiously at Mikah, and then—in a flash—he lunged, grabbing one of the guards and sinking his fangs into the man’s neck.

The second guard yelled and stumbled back, but at that moment, Gabe came roaring out of the trees—in his wolf form—and attacked, ripping into the second guard’s neck. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Mikah released the first guard, who collapsed at his feet in a heap, equally dead. The entire encounter had lasted less than fifteen seconds, but it had been shocking, and was something I was sure I would remember for the rest of my life.

Mikah kicked the guard off his feet, gave Gabe a pat on the head, and walked over to where the rest of us were still waiting, now frozen in shock.

“Well?” Mikah asked, wiping blood from his mouth. “How’d we do?”

Gabe trotted after him, still managing to smirk, even as a wolf. *Just like old times, right, Xavier?*

I couldn’t help but chuckle, even after the brutality I’d just witnessed. *I don’t know if we ever had old times quite like* that*, Gabe. Okay.* I turned to look at Lucian. *Our way is clear. Take us into the palace.*

Lucian nodded. *Follow me.*

We padded silently toward the tunnel, none of us looking at the dead Bitterfang guards as we passed. Lucian led us to the tunnel entrance, and I stayed close behind Elle, who followed Lucian.

I was looking around, all my senses on high alert. Gabe and Mikah had been efficient and highly effective in their kills, but they hadn’t been as quiet as I would’ve hoped. There had been plenty of scuffling, and even a few screams—though the whole thing had happened so quickly, I couldn’t be sure of what I’d heard. But it was possible that if there were any other Bitterfangs inside the tunnel, they might’ve heard the commotion.

I shot a glance over my shoulder, taking in my backup. Ava was right behind me, as usual, followed by Aysel, Ravi, Gabe, and Mikah. I had to admit, we were a motley crew, but I also knew that together, we were more than enough to accomplish what we’d set out to do.

*Watch out up here*, Lucian said as we reached a section of the tunnel that was littered with stone and rubble. He slowed his pace and looked around. *I don’t even want to* think *about how long this is going to take to repair.*

His home maintenance concerns aside, I could see that the damage was significant, and that this wasn’t the only part of the tunnel that had been damaged by the cave-in. Rubble littered the ground, and large cracks ran along the walls. It seemed stable enough as we moved through it, but I remembered Phil—the pack house handyman—telling me that once you had horizontal cracks, you were looking at structural damage.

We moved in silence for a while, but then Lucian stopped.

*What’s going on?* I asked.

*We can’t go this way*, he said shortly.

I wasn’t appreciating his attitude. *Why not? What are you talking about, man? We* have *to go this way*, I said.

Lucian shook his head*. Look up there, Xavier*, he said, tipping his nose down the tunnel. *The path is completely blocked. There’s no way for us to get through.*

I blew out a frustrated breath. *What happened?*

*Hell if I know*, he said, the words uncharacteristically crass. *It’s either part of the initial damage, or maybe it was done deliberately by the Bitterfangs. Either way, we can’t get through.*

I looked at the wall of rubble. Lucian was right—it looked impenetrable.

Ava stepped up next to me. *We could dig our way through.*

*We might not have to*, Lucian said. *There’s another tunnel.*

*What?* I said quickly*. I thought you said there wasn’t another way into the palace.*

*There’s not. There’s just another tunnel that shoots off from this one*, he said haughtily. *Follow me.*

He led back the way we’d come for a short distance, then he squeezed through a narrow crevice I hadn’t noticed the first time we’d passed it.

*What is this?* Ava wondered as we followed him.

*It will lead us to a storage room*, Lucian said. *It’s where I keep the artwork that’s not currently in rotation within the palace—so please, when we go in, don’t disturb any of the paintings. They’re crated, of course, but I’d rather not have any of you touching my collection.*

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to Lucian to worry about paintings at a time like this.

We kept walking down the passageway, which was just as cold and damp as you’d expect an underground passageway to be. I was trying not to lose my patience. We’d already wasted enough time as it was with this entire plan.

*How much farther?* I asked.

*We’re getting close*, Lucian said. *It’s right around the bend here.*

*Finally*, said Ava.

Lucian turned the corner first, then stopped in his tracks. Annoyed, I looked past Lucian to see what was stopping us. Had the tunnel been sealed off or something the way the other had been?

No. It was worse.

We’d reached the storage area, so the tunnel at the very least had worked. The problem? It was completely full of Bitterfang wolves.

**Episode 4298**

**Greyson**

This was it—this was my chance to end this. Possibly the only chance I was going to get. I’d played along with Malakai, pretending to agree to his outrageous demand. The fact that he’d fallen for it at all proved he was deranged. No Alpha in his right mind would ever submit to another, which meant that Malakai wasn’t in his right mind. That he was delusional was hardly a surprise, but it took diplomacy off the table for good. I knew I had no choice but to attack.

But I also knew I needed to wait for the right moment. So I’d waited while Malakai blathered on about how the Bitterfangs were the only real werewolves—the pure ones, the ones who were carrying on the purity of the blood—and how if I were to bring my pack to join them, along with the packs of the alliance, we would form the most powerful and feared pack the world had ever seen.

Honestly, when he’d first demanded that I submit to him, I’d thought he was joking. He wasn’t known for his sense of humor, but I just hadn’t been able to believe that he was serious.

But as he’d spoken, it had become painfully clear that he was serious.

And that was when I’d made up my mind. I had to strike.

“And by combining these powerful packs, we could rule the world, Greyson,” Malakai had been saying. He was lecturing me like I’d paid to hear him give a speech.

And then Julia had appeared.

She wasn’t supposed to be here, but I didn’t have time to dwell on that, because Malakai was looking at his daughter. So this was the moment.

I lunged.

I caught him off-guard, but it only took him half a second to get his bearings.

He was on top of me in an instant. We grappled and snarled, vying for control. I batted my paw across his face—claws outstretched—and blood dripped down from beneath his eye. He growled in return and snapped at me. His bite didn’t land, but his lethally sharp teeth grazed my shoulder, ripping the skin and drawing blood.

Fighting him, I knew I had to expect the unexpected. Malakai was a master of the Bitterfangs’ unusual fighting style. He was managing to get a few strikes in, but I was determined not to let him get the upper hand. He lunged, trying to knock me off my feet, but I shifted my weight and let my shoulder take the force of his blow. When he collided with me, it sent shockwaves through my body, but he didn’t manage to push me off my feet.

I knew that if I could end him now, there was a chance the Bitterfangs and their allies would disband without his leadership. I also knew there was a chance they’d attack me in retaliation.

And then—as though I’d made it happen just by thinking about it—I saw a mass of Bitterfang wolves emerge from the trees and swarm toward us. And it wasn’t just Bitterfangs—it was Hackberrys and Northwinds, too.

Fuck.

My mind raced as I considered my very limited options. I needed to kill Malakai *now*—like, in the next few seconds—or I was going to be torn apart by the incoming tide of wolves. There was no way I was going to be able to fight them all. There were just too many of them. And if I was going to die, I was going to take Malakai with me.

I lunged for Malakai’s throat, barely missing my target, but our bodies crashed together with the force of two cannon blasts, and we fell hard to the ground.

*Get up!* I screamed at myself, and was just scrambling to my feet when I heard someone screaming my name.

*Cali?*

I turned to look over my shoulder and saw her—*Cali.* She was sprinting toward me, followed by Rishika and Mace and the rest of the assembled wolves. I didn’t know how to explain what I was seeing. I’d never given them a signal—how had they known to come?

But my thoughts were abruptly interrupted when Malakai lunged at me and sank his teeth into my side, just above my rib cage.

I howled, shocked by the sudden pain, which tore through my body like a wildfire. I thrashed, just managing to shake the Alpha off me. But his grip was strong, and I felt my flesh ripping as Malakai was thrown away.

With a snarl of pain and pure rage, I turned to attack, but before I could move, a blast of magic struck the ground between Malakai and me. It landed like a lightning strike and sent a cloud of winter-damp dirt flying into the air. It obscured the air like smoke, and I coughed, squinting through it, trying to find Malakai in the sudden haze. All around me, I could hear the sounds of a savage fight—snarls of fury and howls of pain as wolves were injured, or worse. I sent out a desperate wish that those weren’t *my* wolves howling—but before I could worry about them, I had to see about Malakai.

The dust was settling, and now that I could see clearly, I realized that the Bitterfang Alpha was gone.

I stared, dumbstruck, at the place where he’d been standing.

“Greyson! Oh god, Greyson!” Cali came sprinting over to my side. “Are you hurt?”

*I’ll heal*, I told her, still stunned. *Where did Malakai go?*

“What?” Cali asked.

I looked at the chaos around me, then back at the spot where Cali’s magic had struck the ground. There was a pit in the frozen earth, three feet deep.

*What’s going on?* I asked, shaking my head*. How did you know to come?*

*We heard the fighting, Greyson*, Mace said, walking over to me. He was limping slightly, and his left side was stained with blood.

*Are you okay?* I asked him.

He nodded as Porter walked over with the rest of the packs. *It’s nothing. We got lucky. It’s not like they actually retreated because they were scared. It feels strategic.*

*I made the call, and I’d make it again.*

I nodded. *Thanks. You saved my ass*. I pressed myself against Cali’s side.

*I’m glad you’re safe, love*, I told her through our mind link.

She nodded and took a shaky breath.

Mace looked around. *Okay, they pulled back, but where the hell did the Bitterfangs go?*

I shook my head. *We should send out a few scouts to find out. It’s possible they want us to follow their retreat—maybe to lure us into a trap.*

*I’ll go*, Rishika said quickly.

*Rishika’s going to see where the Bitterfangs went*, I told Cali, who was looking around at the wolves as we spoke through the communal mind link.

She nodded and translated for Artemis.

“Then I’m going, too,” Artemis said immediately.

*We’ll go, too*, added a Cobalt wolf, nodding at the wolf next to her.

*And us*, said one of the Blue Bloods.

*Okay, that’s plenty*, I said. *Just find out where they’re going and check to see if they’re really retreating or just regrouping somewhere. Keep your eyes open and don’t let yourselves get cornered.*

The wolves nodded, and they—along with Artemis, perched on Rishika’s back—headed off into the trees.

When they were gone, Cali turned to look at me. “Okay, what the hell happened with Malakai?”

*What do you mean?*

She looked shaken. “I saw you, Greyson. It looked like you were submitting to—”

*I wasn’t*, I interrupted her. *It was just a ploy. And how did you see that, anyway? You were supposed to be too far away.*

She didn’t answer that question, but she looked at the wound on my side. “That looks pretty nasty, but it looks like it’s healing.”

I gritted my teeth at the reminder. The Bitterfang Alpha had tasted my blood. I planned to do the same to him.

“I was so scared, Greyson,” Cali said.

I looked up at my mate. *I know. It’s just too bad Malakai managed to slip away—again. But he won’t for long.*

Everyone’s senses were on high alert, and when we heard approaching footsteps, everyone looked over in alarm. But it was just the scouting team returning.

*It looks like the Bitterfangs are retreating for real*, Rishika said, stopping to let Artemis slide off her back.

Everyone took a moment to absorb this information. I wasn’t so sure I was buying it myself. I agreed with Mace; it felt more strategic. On purpose more than anything. Maybe to show us that they *could* walk away.

*Maybe they’re heading back to the palace*, Mace suggested.

*That would make sense*, Rishika said. *It’s currently their base of operations.*

I translated all this for Cali, and her face turned ghostly white.

“Oh god,” she breathed.Her eyes had gone wide as saucers. “We have to go after them.If they’re going to the palace, we’re going to have a big problem! They’ll find Xavier and the others!”

**Episode 4299**

Greyson, Mace, Porter, and Paige were looking out at their packs. I couldn’t hear what they were saying through the communal werewolf mind link, but judging by the way the packs jumped into formation, I had a feeling they were being instructed to pursue the Bitterfangs.

Greyson bent down. *Let’s go.*

I hopped onto his back, Artemis jumped onto Rishika’s, and we headed into the trees. There was no path, but the wolves didn’t need one, and Greyson was sprinting fast enough the cold wind cut through me like a knife.

I held on to his grey fur with all the strength I had in me, but inside, I wasn’t doing well. It felt like I was going to cry or throw up. Maybe both.

It had been bad enough watching Greyson fighting Malakai. Mace had stood in front of me when they’d started—a warning not to move—but I hadn’t been able to just stand there and wait for Greyson’s signal. He’d needed help, and I’d rushed out, but I’d been so sure I wouldn’t get to him fast enough. I’d meant to hit Malakai with my magic. I’d wanted to kill him, or at least stun him badly enough that Greyson could attack, but I’d only managed to hit the ground in front of him.

It had been enough to scare him away—but that had only sent him and his savage army running straight toward Xavier.

I gripped Greyson’s fur even tighter. If anything happened to Xavier, I would be beside myself. Would it, in some way, be *my* fault? On some level, I knew I’d had no choice in the moment. I could’ve either let Malakai continue to hurt Greyson, or acted. And I’d chosen to act. For better or worse…

I understood all of that *logically*, but it didn’t make me feel any better. The only thing that would make me feel even the slightest bit better would be to catch up with the Bitterfang army and stop them. If they caught Xavier there, they’d kill him.

*Xavier’s not there alone*, Greyson said, apparently sensing what I was thinking about. *He’s got a solid group of werewolves with him, plus Mikah. They’ll have his back. And we don’t even know for sure that the Bitterfangs are heading back to the palace, but if they are, the others will be there waiting.*

*Yeah*, I said dully. I could only hope that was how things would play out.

Despite how frantic I felt, I allowed myself a small smile, thinking of how easily Greyson had picked up on my worries about Xavier. I knew issues concerning his brother and me had always been awkward for Greyson, but maybe we’d moved past that now. Or maybe the war itself had just overtaken any of our issues for the time being.

*Yeah, that seems more likely…*

Rishika and Artemis were running ahead of us, and as they crested a small rise, they slowed down. Greyson caught up.

“What’s going on?” I called out, but when we drew closer, I saw why they’d stopped.

Duke was on the other side of the hill, with a group of werewolves from the Aspen pack. He and Greyson were looking at each other, clearly communicating via mind link.

“What’s he saying?” I asked.

*Duke almost mistook us for Bitterfangs when he heard us coming through the woods*, Greyson told me.

“That would’ve been bad,” I said with a shudder. We didn’t need to be fighting ourselves along with everything else.

Greyson listened for a moment longer. *He and the others were circling back to their vantage point when they picked up the Bitterfangs’ scent, so they came to investigate. I’m just telling him what happened at the meeting with Malakai.*

I nodded and waited impatiently for a moment.

*Greyson, we really do need to keep going*, I urged. *They’re not safe in there.*

Greyson nodded but didn’t reply. I felt his muscles tensing beneath me, which made me think—though I couldn’t know for sure—that there was some kind of disagreement going on between him and Duke.

I heaved a frustrated sigh, irritated that I couldn’t hear what was going on. I felt out of the loop, which was always dispiriting, but felt especially treacherous in this moment. I hated that I’d need to interrupt Greyson in order to find out what the hell was going on.

And I couldn’t stop thinking that every moment we stood here and chitchatted with the Aspens was another moment Xavier was at risk of being discovered by the retreating Bitterfangs. Couldn’t everyone else *see* that?

I shifted my shoulders, then flexed my fingers. Then I rolled my neck. I was so tense, I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin.

*What’s going on?* I finally exploded, unable to wait a moment longer. *Greyson!*

*Duke’s telling me that Xavier went into the palace with Lucian and a small group. Xavier told Duke to wait thirty minutes before moving in, unless Xavier returned by then.*

*So has it been thirty minutes? What’s Duke doing out here?* I demanded. I felt like I was going out of my mind with worry.

*There are still a few minutes to go*, Greyson said.

Seriously?!

I was beside myself. *Okay, well, I’m sure Duke is keeping track of time with his werewolf watch, or whatever, but no matter what Xavier said before he went in, he clearly wasn’t expecting Malakai and the rest of the Bitterfang army to come back to the palace while he was inside! So we need to make some independent calls and get into the palace! We have to help him! Now!*

Greyson nodded. *Hang on. Let me just tell Duke.*

I ground my teeth, frustrated once again to be left out of their conversation.

*Okay*, Greyson said after what felt like an hour of silent discussion.

*Okay what?* I asked desperately. *What are we going to do?! Time is of the essence, Greyson.*

*I know, love. Duke agreed*,he said. *I explained the situation, and Duke agreed. We’re moving in.*

“Thank god,” I breathed, the tight knot of anxiety in my chest loosening just a fraction.

Greyson started to move again, and I tightened my grip on his fur, but it was hardly necessary—Greyson was moving slowly, and very cautiously.

*Why are you going so slow?* I asked.

*I’m sorry, love, but we still need to watch out for traps. Now more than ever.*

I looked around, and almost immediately realized I had no idea what the hell I was looking for. Would the Bitterfangs have put out any silver traps? They had silver capsules on some of their wolves, so it didn’t seem impossible…

“Cali!” Artemis called over to me as she and Rishika caught up to me. “Cali, what’s going on? What’s the plan?”

“I’m not sure there *is* a plan,” I admitted.

“What are we doing, then?” Artemis demanded.

“All I know is that Xavier is inside the palace, and that’s where we’re headed.”

“Why?”

“It’s only him and a few others. There aren’t enough of them, and they won’t stand a chance if the Bitterfangs discover them there,” I said.

Artemis took this in, then nodded. “Okay. But we should use the tunnel to get into the palace.”

“The tunnel?”

“Yeah. That way, we can sneak in. And it’s not out in the open, so the wolves will have an easier time tracking Xavier’s scent.”

“Okay, that’s a good plan.” I looked down at Greyson. *Did you catch all that?*

He nodded. *I did. It’s a good plan. I’ll let Duke know that that’s what we’re doing.*

We changed course, veering slightly to the left, so we weren’t heading directly toward the palace. As we headed for the tunnel entrance, I realized that I hadn’t really given myself a chance to think about everything I’d learned from Kira. Ever since she’d shown up to tell me that her test had gone up in flames, it had just been disaster after disaster, and I hadn’t had a chance to process the possibility that he really was being influenced by some kind of magic.

But this wasn’t the right time for contemplation, either. Right now, all I could concern myself with was saving Xavier. We just needed to get to him and make sure he got out of the palace alive. My heart was beating so hard, I could feel it in my throat, and I had to wonder if I’d always feel this way about him. So much had passed between us, but—when the chips were down—I couldn’t help but feel as though he still carried a piece of my heart around with him.

Would that ever change? Would time dull the sharpness of the pain I felt whenever I looked at him? Would I wake up one day to find that I’d simply given up on my mate? Was that even possible?

Would the *due destini* ever let that happen?

**Episode 4300**

**Xavier**

Instinctively, I drew back into the narrow passageway, hoping to hell the Bitterfangs hadn’t sensed us yet.

I glared at Lucian, who—like the rest of us—was inching backward, trying to stay quiet. *I thought you said this was a storage space!*

*It is!* Lucian snapped back. *That’s what it’s always been. How was I supposed to know the Bitterfangs would be here? It’s not as though I’ve been in complete control of my palace, recently!*

I ground my teeth. I knew this wasn’t Lucian’s fault, but we were in a really tight spot, and—if I needed to blame someone—it always felt good to blame Lucian.

*Can we go back farther down the tunnel?* Elle asked nervously. *Go out another way?*

I eyed the Bitterfangs in the storage room and took a quick count of what I saw. There were five of them, and my search party consisted of plenty of werewolves and a vampire, so I didn’t hate our odds.

*Listen*, I said, *we’ve made it this far, so we might as well keep going. I’d hoped to sneak into the palace, but sometimes you just have to play the hand you’re dealt. And anyway, look at them*, I added, tipping my nose toward the Bitterfangs.

The werewolves were in human form, sitting at a card table they’d obviously dragged down, playing a hand of cards. They clearly weren’t battle ready.

All of a sudden, I heard footsteps moving toward us in the tunnel. I prepared to lunge, but then I saw Knox’s wolf as he approached us.

*What the fuck are* you *doing here?* I mind linked, agitated at the surprise.

*I know it wasn’t the plan, but I wanted to come and help find Marissa*, he replied.

I wanted to be pissed at the shrimp, but honestly, his timing wasn’t terrible. Another number for us would make this fight that much quicker. *Fine, but no more surprises*, I said firmly.

Knox nodded, then exchanged a glance with Ava, who gave him a nod, as well.

I looked back at the Bitterfangs. *I think we have the advantage*, I said.

Then, suddenly, the guard dealing the cards to the other three stopped what he was doing and looked up, frowning.

“Hey, are any of you picking up on any wolf scents all of a sudden?”

The other guards didn’t look concerned, but one sniffed the air.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to tell down here; everything is so musty.”

Lucian huffed. *It is* not *musty. This storage room is temperature and humidity controlled. These ragamuffins wouldn’t know the ideal temperature for preserving oil paint if it danced naked in front of them—*

*Lucian!* I yelled through the mind link, cutting him off. *Relax!* I shot him a glare and then turned to the others. *Okay, we’re doing this. But we’re going to have to make it quick, so no messing around.*

I maneuvered myself to the front of the group, took a deep breath, and then charged around the corner and toward the guards.

Their reaction time said a lot about the complacency of the Bitterfangs, and how secure they must have felt holding down the palace. Of course, we’d dispatched the guards at the tunnel entrance, but we couldn’t have caught these guards more by surprise if we’d materialized out of thin air while wearing clown costumes.

After a shocked moment, they pushed back from the table and tried to shift, even as they scrambled to get their feet underneath them.

I didn’t give them a chance to orient themselves before I attacked. I was the first to strike, driving the guard closest to me into the table, sending the playing cards flying.

He managed to shift and snapped at me, but I easily dodged the strike and pinned him underneath me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucian cornering another guard, a savage look in his eye. This look was probably fueled by the perceived slight—the guards would never know it before they died, but they never should’ve called the princeling’s storage room *musty*.

Sure enough, Lucian lunged forward and made swift work of the guard. The man fell limply at Lucian’s feet, his blood spilling across the floor, and I made a mental note to never impugn the princeling’s art collection.

Lucian had turned his attention to another guard, and Elle joined him, fighting viciously by his side. I wasn’t surprised to see it—the mate bond would do that. To my left, Ravi was fighting another guard, a massive grey wolf who was powerful, but slow as hell. Even so, Ravi was struggling against the wolf’s strength—at least until Ava jumped in and bit the grey wolf’s tail, making him yelp. This gave Ravi a window, and he took it, sinking his teeth into the wolf’s throat. The massive wolf’s howl turned into a gurgle as he began to choke on his own blood. Seconds later, he slumped over, still and dead.

Ava leapt at me, landing just in front of me and intercepting another wolf, who was lunging toward me. She hopped onto the wolf’s back and ripped into the back of his neck, killing him with one savage bite.

Four down, one to go.

I looked at the wolf I had pinned, then sank my teeth into his throat. Warm blood filled my mouth and I yanked up, ending the wolf’s life before his heart could get out another beat.

I stepped off him and spat the blood from my mouth, then looked over just in time to see Aysel pin the last wolf beneath her and slash her claws across his abdomen, eviscerating him.

The sound of the wolf’s guts falling onto the stone floor of the storage room was disgusting, and I shook my head. Leave it to Aysel to kill someone with such a dramatic flair.

*Aysel*, Lucian complained. *Look at the mess you’ve made—*

*Shut up*, I snapped. *Everyone stop talking. I need to listen.*

Lucian fell silent, and I listened hard. We’d been loud—maybe too loud. The space was small, and we’d been crashing and growling and snarling for at least a couple of minutes. We had to have attracted the attention of more Bitterfangs.

But I didn’t hear anything. Not a sound, not a footstep. No one sounding the alarm or calling for backup. The palace was quiet—eerily so. I’d always hated how big the palace was, but maybe the size of the place was finally working to my advantage. Maybe no one had been close enough to hear the fight.

*Look at this*, Lucian said, turning to look at a painting that was hanging on the wall. *Is that* blood *on the Goya? You’ve got to be kidding me! I just had that cleaned.*

*We’ll have it cleaned again*, Aysel said. *You know Maarten never asks any questions.*

*Who’s Maarten?* Elle asked.

*My art restorer*, Lucian said. *He does wonderful work, though he is getting older, and I worry that he might not be up to the task—*

*Shut up!* I said again, growing testier by the moment. *Who the fuck cares about a bunch of paintings, Lucian? That’s not why we’re here! Where are the damn dungeons?*

*I see your point, Xavier, but it* is *a Goya*, Lucian said huffily.

*If Marissa and Armin are down here somewhere, we need to find them,* now,I snapped. *It’s not going to be long before someone finds these guards—or the ones we left by the tunnel entrance.*

*Yes, fine, this way*, Lucian said, leading us through the storage room*. It’s through here.*

As we started out, I began to feel a little bit hopeful. The tunnel mission hadn’t gone *exactly* as I’d envisioned it, but we’d still made it into the palace, and the dungeons were clearly the best place to start a search for prisoners.

*Xavier!* Ava called.

She sounded excited, and I turned to her. *What’s up?*

*I’ve got Marissa’s scent. Can you smell it?*

I took a deep breath*. Yeah, now I can. We’re getting closer.*

*I smell it, too*, Ravi said. *Let’s go!*

We moved forward, and after a couple hundred feet, we ran into another guard. This one was alone, in his human form, asleep. He was snoozing in a chair.

I took a deep breath. Marissa’s scent was all over the place. I recognized the area, too. We were close to the dungeons that Lucian had once thrown us into.

Ava growled deep in her throat, and Ravi leapt at the sleeping guard. He woke with a start as they crashed to the floor, but he couldn’t do a thing to prevent Ravi from pinning him to the ground.

I shifted back to human form. “Where is she?” I demanded. “Where’s Marissa?”

The guard struggled under Ravi’s weight. Then he stretched his head down, and I’d only just realized what he was trying to do when I heard the telltale pop of a silver capsule.

“Shit,” I muttered.

The guard started to shake almost immediately, and foam poured out of his mouth.

I bent and grabbed the dying guard. “Tell me! Tell me what you’ve done to her!”

The guard’s eyes were already starting to glaze over. “It’s too late. You’re too late.”

An instant later, he went limp in my hands—dead.

**Episode 4301**

I dug my hands into Greyson’s fur and hung on as we raced toward the Vanguard tunnel. My heart was thundering with each step closer. I couldn’t help but worry about what we were going to find when we got there. I was so worried—Xavier was in trouble, so of course I was—but I just hoped that he and the rest of the team were okay. I hated that we were separated now. We should have all stayed together. There was safety in numbers, and maybe if we’d all banded together, this threat wouldn’t have been so dangerous. I kept feeling like we were always one step behind.

What was it going to take for us to gain the upper ground again? I hoped that the tunnel plan would work.

As we neared the tunnel entrance, Greyson started to slow and motioned for Rishika and Sage to do the same. I waited for them to do something or pick back up again, but they continued to slow until they were barely moving.

I didn’t want to kick into Greyson’s haunches like he was a goddamn horse or something, but we needed to keep moving—why the hell was he stopping?

*Greyson, what’s going on?* I mind linked to him. *We have to hurry up. They could be in trouble as we speak.*

His voice slicked into my mind in an instant. *I know, but we have to be smart about this. We were caught off-guard back there, which means the Bitterfangs have something planned, but we don’t know what that is. Do me a favor and tell Artemis to slide off Rishika’s back?*

I did as he asked, and Artemis disembarked. Then he nodded to Rishika and Sage, who each peeled off to the side, made a U-turn, and started to head back the way we came.

*Where are they going?* I asked.

*They’re backtracking to make sure that we were not followed*, he told me*. We’re going to stop here for a few minutes, so you should stretch your legs while you can.*

Even though I didn’t want to stop, I understood that we had to be cautious. I just hoped that we *weren’t* followed and that the two of them would be okay. I slid down off Greyson’s back and stretched my arms above my head. I walked over to Artemis and said, “They’re double-checking we weren’t followed. I guess it’s a good time for us to touch base about the plan. How are you feeling about it?”

With a frown, she replied, “I always like a good stealthy entry, myself. It gives me time to assess the enemy.” She was gripping her bow tightly as she spoke, as if she was imagining shooting a bunch of Bitterfangs.

“Yeah, I agree, but I’m worried,” I told her.

She tilted her head. “Worried about what?”

“The Bitterfangs. If they do have some kind of plan, won’t they have guards everywhere? What if Xavier never even made it inside?” My throat was starting to tighten as I thought about it. “I mean… What if he’s hurt?”

Artemis put a comforting hand on my shoulder, and I took a deep breath to try and calm myself down. “That’s why we’re here, right? If Xavier *is* in trouble, then we’re going to help him. He and his pack won’t be alone for long, and we have some damn good fighters.”

“Yeah.” I nodded at her and smiled. “That’s true. Thanks.”

After a few minutes more, Rishika and Sage came running back through the woods, moving so quietly and slowly that if I hadn’t seen them with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have known they were there. They went over to confer with Greyson. I didn’t immediately interject myself, but not long after they met up, Greyson’s voice whispered into my mind, *Hey, Rishika and Sage say the coast is clear. There’s no one on our tail, so we can advance toward the tunnel without fear of an attack from behind.*

*Great. Let’s go. We’re not far from the tunnel entrance.* I turned and looked at Artemis. “It sounds like we’re ready to—”

*Cali.* I looked over at Greyson, and he was staring directly at me now, his calm but fierce eyes searing into me. *Maybe you should stay here while Rishika, Sage, and I check it out first.*

I shook my head at him. *I don’t think we should split up. These Bitterfangs are intense. Our greatest advantage over them is sticking together.*

Even though he was in his wolf form, I could see him do that funny little Greyson side-shuffle he did when he knew he couldn’t argue with me and hated it. *Yeah, that’s true. Okay, but stay with me the* entire *time.*

*Of course.*

I climbed onto Greyson’s back again, and we finally set off once more, slower this time and as silently as possible as we approached the side of the palace with the tunnel entrance. My heart squeezed when I laid eyes on the scorch marks left behind on the earth from the flaming arrows that were shot at us after the banquet. As much as I loved dodging something that could both sear *and* stab me, I was *really* hoping the Bitterfangs didn’t have any of those today.

Finally, we started to emerge from the forest like an evening mist. The tunnel entrance was only a handful of feet away. I was filled with a sense of relief at having made it this far. Now that we were here, we could turn words into action. We were close. We *could* help Xavier and the others if they were hurt or had their backs against the wall.

I started to lift myself up off Greyson’s back so I could crane my neck to try and get a line of sight on the tunnel entrance, but before I could, Greyson froze and then took a step back. He waited for a moment, then continued to take slow steps in retreat until we were back inside the cover of the shadows of the forest.

*Why are we backing up? What’s going on?* I asked with a frown.

*It’s the Bitterfangs*,Greyson replied. *I can smell them.*

If we were close enough for Greyson to smell them so easily, I should have been able to see them, but I couldn’t. At least not at first. But as I started to peer through the dark, I could see the shadows of two humans—no doubt unshifted Bitterfang—emerging from the tunnel’s mouth. That on its own was concerning enough, because it meant we wouldn’t get the stealthy entrance we were hoping for. But then my eyes found something else. Something much worse…

It was the form of a limp and broken wolf being dragged out by the two Bitterfangs.

A gasp escaped my lips before I could slap my hands over my mouth. My heart dropped as fear crippled me. What if the body they were dragging was Xavier? I tried to prepare myself to see the worst as they crept farther out, allowing us a better view of them. But once the Bitterfangs and the body they were dragging were more visible, I didn’t recognize the body as any one of our allies.

I let out a breath of relief and then asked Greyson, *Can you hear them better with your wolf hearing?*

*I can. They’re talking about finding the guards of the tunnels. They’re all dead.*

The small bead of relief I had spread out to every corner of my body. *Does that mean that Xavier got through safely?*

*Yeah, I think so.*

It felt good knowing that at least *that* had gone well. At least Xavier had made it past this step, from what we could tell. It didn’t mean that there was nothing to be worried about, but now we needed to shift our focus.

*So, I guess now the question is, with all these Bitterfangs here, how are we going to get inside?* I asked.

Greyson swung his head back and forth, probably trying to answer that question himself. *I’m not sure. Maybe there’s another side entrance or something?*

Before we could make any decision, the two Bitterfangs who had been dragging the body stopped and turned toward the forest. I stilled, and I could feel Greyson tense below me. Did the Bitterfangs hear us somehow? We weren’t making any noise at all! We weren’t even moving.

All of a sudden, there was a deafening roar, and half a dozen wolves came bolting out of the tunnel to join the two human Bitterfangs who were standing just beyond the tunnel’s entry. They all faced the forest, each with bloodlust on their faces. I was overcome by shock. How the hell did they figure out we were here?

Finally, one of the human Bitterfangs cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted toward us, “We know you are there! Don’t do anything stupid. Come out now, before we have to make you!”

**Episode 4302**

**Xavier**

What was left of the guard’s life pooled in white foam with silver strands around his mouth, and then he died. I released him, letting him fall into a heap on the ground, and stood back.

“Fuck,” I hissed. Those capsules were becoming a pain in my ass, and the fact that we’d found Marissa’s scent—but not Marissa—was making me nervous. She’d been here, clearly, but the guard’s dying words were that we were too late.

Hopefully that didn’t mean what it sounded like, and he was just trying to discourage us.

Looking around at everyone, I said, “We had better move. We don’t want more guards to come and find us. We can’t stay in one place for too long while we’re here. The Vanguard palace is like a maze, especially down here. If we aren’t careful, we’ll find ourselves staring down a dead end.”

“I’m not one to agree, but he’s right,” Lucian said. “I don’t think even *I* have explored all the places down here.”

As much as I couldn’t stand the princeling, the one thing we were relying most heavily on was his knowledge of the palace. For him to say that he didn’t even have the full lay of the land down here didn’t feel like a good sign to me.

“Should we split up?” Aysel asked quietly.

Splitting up didn’t seem to be working for us lately, but then again, sticking together wasn’t garnering much better results. We had to cover a lot of ground, and I wanted to spend as little time down here as possible.

I nodded at her and said, “Fine. Lucian, you take Gabriel, Mikah, and Elle. I’ll take the others with me.”

Lucian gave me a tight nod. “Very well. You’ve already said as much, but you need to keep your bearings down here, otherwise you’ll very quickly find yourselves lost. If you *do* happen to lose your way, look for these.” He pointed at an “X” that had been carved deep into the stone wall. “They’ll help you.”

“What are they?” I asked, frowning at them. If they were meant to be markers, they weren’t very cleanly marked. It looked as if a child had made it.

“They’re markings that I made when I used to play down here as a kid. I was sick of getting lost for hours, so I made these carvings to lead me back to the exit,” Lucian explained.

Oh, so a child *had* done it.

It was a little morbid to consider a young, spoiled Lucian playing down here in what was essentially the palace’s dungeon and crypt, but Lucian’s past was a deep, dark hole that I didn’t want to go down. And if he hadn’t spent time down here, we wouldn’t have this helpful little marker right now, so I’d take it.

With Aysel, Ravi, Knox, and Ava in tow, I went in one direction, while Lucian, Elle, Gabe, and Mikah went in the opposite direction. I was trying to keep my breathing calm and my senses heightened. It really felt like someone could jump out at us from anywhere, and this wasn’t the best venue for a fight. I wanted to avoid any further confrontations as much as possible.

“Xavier.” I looked over and saw that Ava had come to walk beside me. There was a look of concern in her eyes as she asked me, “Why do you think Marissa’s scent is all over the place? Could she have just been here? Or maybe… *parts* of her have been here.”

I scowled, realizing that Ava was already thinking the worst. I glanced over at Ravi, whose jaw was set. It definitely wasn’t something he wanted to hear, and I didn’t either. I refused to let it go to that definitive place.

“No, we can’t think that she’s dead,” I said. “We have to believe that she’s okay—Armin, too.”

Glancing back, I saw that Aysel was walking intently behind us. Her eyes were casting up and down the walls as if this place was foreign to her. She almost seemed uncomfortable, but I didn’t bother asking.

Ava continued to look worried, but regardless, she lifted her shoulders resolutely and said, “You’re right. Marissa is a good fighter. She wouldn’t go down that easily.”

“A *very* good fighter,” Ravi said sharply.

“Exactly.” I nodded. “We just have to find her.”

We continued walking the twists and turns of these cave-like corridors for what felt like forever. I’d been telling myself to keep a close eye on my surroundings so I could keep track of where I was, but every single tunnel looked exactly the same to me. Not only that, but apart from our muted breaths, we hadn’t heard anything at all in quite a while. Even though it didn’t feel possible, it was almost as if we were somehow going *deeper* underground. But then again, maybe that was just my imagination playing tricks on me.

“Ugh,” Aysel broke the silence finally from behind us. “I always hated it down here.”

I looked back at her and asked, “Did you not also play down here with your brother?”

She looked at me with a scowl as if I’d insulted her great ancestors. “No way. My parents told me that there’s a deep hole down here that you can fall into, and you’ll never stop falling. I used to have nightmares about it, just falling and falling forever. It was enough to scare me away.”

Even though I assumed it was just a spooky story that Aysel’s parents told her and Lucian in an attempt to keep them from playing down here, I still found myself stepping a little more carefully and letting my eyes scan the ground every few minutes. It obviously hadn’t scared off Lucian, and he didn’t mention that we needed to keep an eye out for an endless pit of despair. But just in case—I’d long since learned to expect the unexpected from the Vanguards.

We continued walking for another ten or fifteen minutes when I finally heard something from down the tunnel. I threw up an arm to stop the whole party, and we all perked our ears to listen. It sounded like running feet. Moving quietly, but quickly, I followed the sound with the others close behind me, when I finally saw a wolf racing down the hallway.

And my heart leapt when I saw who it was—Marissa. She was alive!

I started to call out to her, but the second her eyes landed on us, she howled out a warning, and seconds later, I saw them—six Bitterfangs chasing her.

So much for avoiding a fight. “Shift!” I screamed out, and then I immediately did so myself.

The rest of the party shifted behind me, and then we met the Bitterfangs head-on. With Marissa, there were five of us to their six, but I was three men’s worth on my own, and Ava was right behind me in terms of the manpower she could handle. The two of us led the charge, meeting the Bitterfangs as they raced toward us. We hopped around Marissa, giving her a much-needed break, and I tackled the front-running Bitterfang, pinning him to the ground. One tried to jump over me, but I quickly slashed my claws up and sent him falling backward.

While Ava took down a third Bitterfang, I bit into the throat of the one I’d pinned and snatched its throat out. Ava was working to do the same as I jumped up, moving in tandem with Marissa, who’d doubled back to help me tear into two more.

Howls filled the air as I damn near ripped one’s leg right off his body, while Marissa raked her claws across a fourth’s face.

With Aysel and Ravi working as well, the five of us very quickly overwhelmed the Bitterfangs. They were so much more focused on having greater numbers of fighters over quality, that their fighters weren’t well trained. They acted on pure instinct as opposed to the wolves of the alliance, who had been honing their skills and learning to work as a team over time. After seeing how we demolished the first four guards, one who’d remained untouched dragged the one I’d sent flying back to his feet, and they took off, realizing that only death awaited them if they stayed.

For all intents and purposes, we were the first string battling with cannon fodder—victory wasn’t hard to secure, but *fuck* was it loud.

As everyone shifted back to human, I noticed that Marissa was struggling to stand upright on her two feet, and when she moved, it was with a limp. I could see blood trickling down her side and leg.

Ravi rushed to her side, putting an arm around her waist. “Are you okay?”

Marissa looked up at him, shock on her face. She let out a sob and fell into Ravi, embracing him. Ravi wrapped his arms around her, the two of them staying like that for a moment. They broke apart, some tears in her eyes, and her voice was hoarse as she said, “It was a hell of a fight, but I’ll survive.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“As soon as the battle started, half the guards went to join everyone above. I knew that it might be my only chance to escape, so I took it.” Then she looked down at her injuries. “Well, more specifically, I fought for it.”

“Smart. Do you know where Armin is?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen him since they took me down into the dungeons, but…” She lowered her head. “Jesse is dead.”

“We know.”

Her brow furrowed. “How do you know?”

“Knox told us what happened,” I said, gesturing at him. Marissa’s expression changed, as if she’d just noticed him there.

“*You*—” she started.

“Wait, everyone quiet,” I said quickly, holding up a hand. I whirled around. There were wolves approaching.

The footsteps picked up, and I stood at the ready until I recognized Lucian’s scent just as the other Alpha turned the corner. He saw us standing in a group and then raced toward us. “You found her!” When he reached our small group, he asked, “What about Armin? Do you know where he is?”

Just as I was opening my mouth to explain, Marissa reeled backward and crouched low like she was going to shift. “What the fuck is *he* doing here?”

She was still focused on Knox.

“He came to help rescue you,” I said.

She snarled. “Ha, I’m sure he did,” she said sarcastically. “He didn’t come to help anyone! He’s the one who killed Jesse!”

**Episode 4303**

**Xavier**

Before any of us had really had any chance to process what Marissa was saying, she’d half-shifted and lifted her claws into the air. Her eyes were piercing and angry, and a growl emanated from deep within her belly, roaring to the surface.

“How dare you show your face?”

“No!” Knox yelped, holding up his hands. “You know they forced me!”

Knox certainly had failed to mention that *he* was the one who killed Jesse, but based purely on how skittish he’d been since we saved him, it was possible there was truth to his story. Regardless, the last thing we needed right now was infighting. If Knox was a traitor, I’d leave him right fucking here with his neck slashed, but we needed all the allies we could get if he hadn’t turned.

I stepped between Marissa and Knox, holding up my hands to Marissa. “Stop, now.”

She gasped at me, and Ravi stepped in to wrap an arm around her shoulders. “You’re defending him? After killing his *own* pack mate?”

“They gave me no choice!” Knox whimpered.

Marissa suddenly flashed out her right claw, screeching it against the wall. “You always have a choice!” She lowered herself, as if to lunge, but Ravi quickly set his hands on her shoulders and held her back. “Let me go!”

Ava and Mikah quickly came forward to help pull Marissa away from Knox. While they had her restrained, I turned and looked at Knox, making sure to bare *my* teeth as well, so that he knew I was serious. “Explain. Now.”

Knox was downright shaking now. “They put me and Jesse into this ring and said we had to fight. They said that only one of us could live. I *had* to do it, Xavier! If we didn’t fight, they’d have killed us both.”

That sounded like it held water, but I wasn’t in the right place mentally or physically to deal with it. If we set up camp to negotiate between these two right now, then we were *all* going to die.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” I barked. “Let’s just get out of here first, and *then* we’ll deal with this.”

Now shouting, Marissa was fighting against Ravi’s hold. “You should have died with honor before you killed a pack mate!”

Anger boiled up in my gut, and I turned and glared at Marissa, silencing her and even making her back up. “Do you want us to be found by the guards?” I asked in a low, menacing tone.

That finally got Marissa to calm down. She’d obviously been through a lot as a prisoner. She’d seen two of her pack mates fight to the death and endured god only knew what other tortures. Her typically cool, calm demeanor had been stripped away—she was now ragged and worn. I felt bad for getting sharp with her, but I needed her to calm down before more guards came. Because if they did, what happened between Knox and Jesse would be the least of our problems.

“We have to get out of here,” I said.

“What about Armin?” Lucian demanded.

“Fuck.” It felt like we were taking one step forward and two fucking steps back right now. Between finding Marissa and now this issue with Knox, I’d forgotten we still had another wolf to find. But we’d found one missing pack member alive, so it was possible Armin could be, too.

“That’s right,” I said. Taking in Marissa’s state, I knew she wasn’t in any position to hang and fight further. She needed to get out of here, or she’d collapse from exhaustion, so I looked at Ava and said, “Can you, Ravi, and Elle help Marissa get out of here? Just go—follow the X’s.”

Ava frowned, and I could see her wanting to argue with me, but instead, she took a deep breath and nodded. “Be careful.”

“You too,” I replied, then I looked at Lucian. “Can you go with them?” The princeling frowned, obviously not liking the fact that he couldn’t stay with us and help search for his second-in-command, but before he could argue with me, I said, “You know these tunnels best.”

He conceded, giving me a tight nod, and then I watched as Lucian led Marissa, leaning against Ravi and followed by Elle and Ava, back down the tunnel and out of sight. Once they were gone, I took a quick inventory of who I had with me now—Aysel, Gabe, Mikah, and Knox. I’d be lying if I said I had *total* confidence in this group—Knox was still quite shaken, and Aysel wasn’t a fighter—but hopefully we’d be enough to track down Armin and get the hell out of here.

“All right. Two groups again. It worked well last time, but be wary. I’m sure that those guards that got away earlier went for backup. We’ll have trouble soon, I’d imagine. All we’re looking to do is find Armin, meet back up, and get out. Aysel, Gabe, and Mikah, you three stick together. I’ll take Knox with me.” If push came to shove, Gabe and Mikah could certainly take care of themselves and defend Aysel, and worst-case scenario, if Knox just needed to stay out of my way, we’d be fine. “Move swiftly, move quietly, and move with purpose.” I nodded at Gabe, Mikah, and Aysel. “Go.” They were off in an instant, leaving Knox and me alone, and I was quick to set us off as well, hoping that we could find Armin quickly and leave.

After creeping along in silence for a few minutes, Knox looked over at me and grumbled, “You have to understand that they gave me no choice.”

“Now’s not the time, Knox,” I replied.

But he wouldn’t let up. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop, looking at me with nervous eyes. “I know you’re going to believe the worst about me, but I swear, I wouldn’t have done it if I wasn’t forced!”

I let out a sigh. Knox looked like he was going to have a nervous freaking breakdown right now. “Look. Nothing is going to happen right now.”

The other wolf was sweating profusely and shaking like mad. “This place is just hell. You don’t know what they did to us. The Bitterfangs are brutal. I—They—”

His breath was shortening, and his eyes were starting to flare manically—he wasn’t *about* to have a breakdown, he was *having* one. It was probably triggered by Marissa’s accusations and  exacerbated by continuing to creep along these dark passageways. This was *not* what I needed to be dealing with right now, but I also knew that I couldn’t leave him panicking like this.

Setting my hands on his shoulders, I looked Knox in the eyes and said, “Knox, it’s okay. Breathe.” He took a forced and shaky breath, then nodded, but he was getting worse by the second. “I shouldn’t have kept you down here. That is on me. You need to leave.”

“B-But I want to help.”

“Right now, the best help for me is to know that you’re out of here and safe, okay?” I told him, and he nodded in agreement. I twisted him around and pointed back the way we came. “Follow the X’s. Be careful.”

He started off, but then he stopped to look back at me briefly and whispered, “Thank you.”

I waved him off. “Go. Hurry.”

With that, Knox took long strides down the hallway, leaving me alone.

I knew I had to proceed extra carefully now, so I crouched low and moved with haste, as stealthily as possible. It was my hope that if I kept quiet and kept my senses on high alert, I’d be able to pick up some sign of a prisoner being kept or a familiar scent.

But there was nothing.

Continuing to move, I was frustrated at first to only hear the sound of my own feet tapping against the ground, but then I heard another strange, tapping sound—like someone following me. I slowed, and so did the other sound. Then I stilled, and the sound stopped. After taking a breath, I whipped around, shifting as I went, prepared to face any attacker, but there was only the long hallway in front of me.

What the hell? What was that sound then?

I turned and shifted back to continue on, when the empty passageway was filled with a familiar, stomach-churning laugh. “Oh, you should see your face.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” I growled. Just then, Adéluce strode out of the shadows at the end of the hallway. “I’m busy.”

A grin curved across her face from ear-to-ear. “I just thought this was an opportunity that I couldn’t miss.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. I did *not* have time for her games. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, Xavier, you really shouldn’t have split up from your mates. How will you choose now?” she asked me.

I shook my head, confused. “What the hell are you talking about? Choose what?”

Rather than responding, Adéluce just snapped her fingers and then disappeared, and that was when the screaming started. Loud and shrill, echoing off the stone walls, and worse, I recognized the screams.

From one direction, I could hear Cali. She was screaming in agonizing pain, like someone was killing her. My whole body tensed up, and I felt like if I didn’t get to her right now, the next time I saw her, she would be in a casket.

And from the other direction was Ava. “Xavier! Help me!” I’d heard that panicked tone in her voice before. Whatever danger she was facing, she needed me.

I looked one way and then the other, unsure of which way I should go.

**Episode 4304**

The enemy wolves were staring in our direction, waiting for someone to step forward out of the darkness. I still had *no* idea how they knew we were here, but I probably needed to stop trying to figure out what was going to happen next in this twisted fucking tale of woe. Very few of these things made sense, and it did me no good to dwell on it—I just had to survive and keep the people I loved alive as well.

*What do we do?* I mind linked to Greyson.

*Climb down off me. I’ll go talk to them alone so that they don’t know the rest of you are here.*

My stomach dropped. *What? No! What if they attack like Malakai attacked you?*

He turned his head so that I could look into his eyes. *I need to try and end this without bloodshed. To give Xavier and the others time to either take the palace and rescue the prisoners, or escape.*

Fuck, I hated this. It felt like we were just trading pawns at this point—we had to put someone directly in the line of fire just to save someone else. It felt completely counter-productive. Still, I couldn’t deny that Greyson’s plan was the best one, and if I wanted to see Xavier come out of this alive, it might be the only way. We couldn’t make any truly rash moves with all our friends inside the palace.

So, I reluctantly slid off Greyson’s back and watched as he shifted back to his human form. He turned and looked at Mace and nodded at him, quietly saying, “Will you come with?”

Mace nodded and shifted back to human as well, and I was at least grateful that Greyson wasn’t going out there all by himself.

Slowly, and as non-threateningly as he could move, Greyson stepped out of the woods with Mace just behind him. The Bitterfangs quickly closed the distance between them to meet him. The one at the front nodded his head toward the woods. “Tell the others to come out of the trees.”

“We’re only here because we want peace,” Greyson responded. “Your Alpha said he’d speak to us.”

I frowned at the phrasing, as if *we* were the ones who had attacked Malakai and not the other way around, but maybe Greyson was just making stuff up to try and confuse the Bitterfangs and buy time. If so, it seemed to be working, as they all looked around, confused, almost as if they were expecting their Alpha to come out and clarify things.

When no one came, however, the front guard looked at Greyson and growled, “You aren’t allowed in the palace, and whoever you sent inside to kill our guards will be captured in time, if they haven’t been already.” A horrific smile crossed his face as if he was already imagining them being captured and tortured as we spoke.

“We didn’t send anyone,” Greyson told him. “Whoever is killing your guards must be Rogues.”

Thankfully, that seemed to confuse the guards even more. I should have known that Greyson wouldn’t just walk up to the Bitterfangs and surrender. He *always* knew how to turn a bad situation into an opportunity. Given how confused the guards were, it was clear his delay tactics were working.

At least no one had attacked yet, which was another good sign. For a few glorious, painless seconds, I actually let myself breathe and think that maybe things might not go from zero to sixty as they had been doing.

And then “sixty” came limping out of the tunnel in the form of what appeared to be our allies escaping from some danger deeper inside. As I zeroed in on them, I realized that Lucian, Elle, Ava, and Ravi were guiding Marissa, Ravi basically holding her upright, and because there were no Bitterfangs *inside* the tunnel—because they’d all come out to search for us—Ava and the rest had thought the coast was clear. Something they were now discovering was absolutely untrue, as they exited and saw the Bitterfangs staring down Greyson.

With no time to react or distract the Bitterfangs any further, the Bitterfangs closer to the back of the group noticed our friends coming out, and that was the end of Greyson’s brilliant negotiations. One of the Bitterfangs shouted, “I knew it!” and then in the blink of an eye, everyone was shifting, and fighting had begun.

*Shit*.

Artemis and Rishika quickly took charge of leading the others out of the forest. I ran alongside my sister with my mate in my sights—I had to get to him as soon as I could, so that I could help him before he had to face a dozen Bitterfangs alone. While Artemis and Rishika broke away to go and help the group coming out of the tunnel, I ran up and joined Greyson and Mace in the battle.

I threw my arms out on either side of me and quickly summoned up my sword and shield. I was getting better at wielding them, and I could feel magic brimming through me and all around me, prepared to help me fight to defend my mate and my friends.

As I whipped out my sword, the Bitterfangs who had hoped to get the jump on Greyson and Mace were just as surprised to see me coming. They jumped back to avoid being hit by my glowing blade, and that gave Greyson and Mace the opportunity to jump them first instead. Both men were fast and had closed in on two Bitterfangs before they even had the chance to blink.

I didn’t want to get in the way, so instead, I used my shield to defend them from any other attackers hoping to pile on. I saw one of them leap into the air, aiming for Mace, intending to land on top of him, but I slid between the wolf and Mace and held up my shield. The Bitterfang was unable to react in time and ended up clattering against the shield. Just as quickly, I then pulled my shield back and stabbed my sword out, catching him right in the chest. He instantly backed away from my sword and headed back into the fray.

The other Bitterfang, seeing that Greyson and Mace could more than handle themselves, started to back away as well.

*They’re retreating*,I mind linked to Greyson. *I think we might actually be able to win and push them back. If we can get inside, we can find Xavier and the others.*

*That’s the best plan. We need to continue pushing them back and try to—*

But then he was cut off by a loud, echoing howl.

When I looked back toward the palace, horror filled me as more Bitterfangs came pouring out of the tunnel—at least twice as many as we had just faced. I glanced around and saw that the others were as exhausted as I was, and these new Bitterfangs were fresh and ready to fight.

But I couldn’t afford to give up; I refused to stop fighting or to leave anyone behind.

I readied my shield to face them, and in a moment, Greyson was at my side.

*Cali, if it gets bad, I want you to run*, he mind linked to me.

I shook my head. *No. I’m fighting beside you.*

*Dammit, Cali! I don’t want you to get hurt!*

*And I don’t want you to get hurt, so you’d better fight hard. I’m going to.*

Magic started to flare from my fingertips, and I shot out a burst of magic just as a Bitterfang leaped at me. He crumpled to the ground, and Greyson jumped forward and quickly finished him off. A rush of pride filled me, but it was short-lived as two Bitterfangs jumped forward to replace the first one. They were smart and charged at Greyson and me separately, splitting us up so that we couldn’t do the same thing again.

I switched between using magic blasting straight from my hands, using my sword, and using my shield—I was fighting with every shred of might and magic I had. Another wolf came flying at me, and I managed to fire off a burst of magic in his direction, but it immediately made me feel light-headed. I started to waver, and I watched as the glow of my shield began to fade. Gritting my teeth, I pushed all my strength into it to keep it materialized, but doing so was taking everything I had left.

Both my strength and my magic were rapidly waning.

The snarl of teeth snapping called me to attention, and I only just managed to whip around and get my shield up as a wolf jumped on me and tackled me to the ground. I couldn’t attack her—I had nothing left in me to do so—so all I could do was literally hold the wolf back by magic, her jaws snapping in the air just inches from my face.

“Cali!” Artemis called from a distance. “Hang on! I’m coming!”

My arms were shaking, and my vision was getting blurry. I was weakening by the second, and I knew my sister wouldn’t get to me in time.

And then in a mist, my shield dissipated into magical specks against the sky, and there was nothing left to keep the wolf from me. She descended on me without a second thought.

**Episode 4305**

**Greyson**

Although the chaos was loud to the point of being deafening, Cali’s shout of fear rose far above all of it. After slashing the neck of a wolf I was facing down, I looked over just in time to see a wolf pinning her to the ground. Cali got up her shield in time to protect herself from the wolf’s teeth, but I could also see her magic wavering. It wasn’t going to hold for long.

As quickly as I could, I raced toward her, her name ringing across our mind link. But a different wolf ran between us and rammed his head into me, knocking me back. Rage filled me at the thought of losing my mate, or even an *ounce* of pain coming to her. I ripped into the wolf standing in my way, taking him down as if he were no stronger than a piece of paper. I saw nothing but Cali.

Horror filled me as I watched Cali’s shield fail her, allowing the wolf attacking her to descend toward her. Cali looked like she couldn’t do anything to fight back.

*No!*

A loud roar bellowed out of me as pain filled every inch of my form at the idea that I was about to watch my mate die in front of me. I wasn’t going to make it to her in time. I could see Artemis charging toward her, but she wouldn’t make it in time either.

Was I really about to watch Cali die before my very eyes?

Just as Cali’s attacker was about to finish her off, Paige lunged at her, tackling the wolf and knocking her away from Cali, then tearing into the wolf and tearing her throat out. Relief filled me so aggressively that it made me temporarily dizzy, and I watched as Cali shakily got to her feet. She turned around, and I followed her gaze to where Duke was leading his cavalry out of the forest.

There was a loud snarl behind me, and I spun around, quickly slashing my claw out at a Bitterfang trying to advance on me and sending him skittering off to the side with a yelp. With Duke and his troops here, the numbers were evened, and I was feeling a slight bit better about the onslaught of Bitterfangs—we might actually be able to handle them now.

Duke ran to my side, and I mind linked, *Thanks for handling this out here.*

He nodded at me. *Of course. We took care of the Bitterfangs on the other side of the grounds, but more are sure to show up soon. We handled them, but if more forces come over here, we’re going to be outnumbered four to one.*

Fuck.

Looking around at my worn-out fighters, I knew we’d never survive an assault like that. I glanced over at the tunnel, wondering if it was still smart to go inside where god only knew how many more Bitterfangs there would be. There were already so many more than we expected.

For the moment, I just needed to get to my mate. I fought my way over to her and nudged my head against her hip to bring her attention to me. I leaned my weight against her, and she took the hint and fell against me, taking a moment to rest.

*Are you okay?* I asked her.

She nodded. *I’ll live.*

Yeah, I was definitely going to make sure of that. As the fight continued, I refused to leave her side and made sure that I was defending her, even more than I was trying to actually fight the Bitterfangs. While she was still trying to catch her breath, Cali didn’t get in my way, but as soon as she’d gathered herself and realized what I was doing, she pushed me toward the main fray.

*I don’t need your help. Go! Lead the battle! Figure out how to get us inside!* she demanded.

Even if I was interested in leaving Cali’s side—which, regardless of her frustration, I wasn’t—a quick look around proved that it might not even be an option. I glanced at all the visible entrances to the palace, and they were all swimming with Bitterfangs. I suspected the entrances I couldn’t see were in the same state. I couldn’t think of any way to feasiblyget inside right now. It just didn’t seem possible with so many Bitterfangs to fight off. They’d always have fresh troops to replace the ones we were knocking down, while we were getting more and more exhausted.

*It’s a losing battle*,I told Cali. *We can’t take back the palace right now.*

A wolf came rushing at Cali, and I thought she might collapse, but she grunted, dug her feet into the ground, and whipped her arm out. I was worried she was just going to try and fucking *haymaker* a wolf, but as her arm slid through the air, her sword appeared in her hand and slashed the wolf, sending him falling away with a whimper.

*I don’t care if we take back the palace*, Cali said. *We need to just get Xavier and the others out!*

She was right—I knew that, but I cast a grim look at the tunnel and all the enemy wolves between us and the palace. I just could not see a way to make it inside safely, and I didn’t want to put the pack more at risk by making a move to infiltrate the palace.

Right in the middle of trying to decide what to do, Duke’s earlier warning came to fruition, and more Bitterfangs began to pour around the corner of the palace from the other side of the grounds. He didn’t lie when he said that we’d be outnumbered four to one. By my best guess, it was even worse than that.

The wolves of the alliance weren’t the kind to back down, and we certainly gave them a run for their money. Each of us was taking on two Bitterfangs, and some of us were finding success. Cali had found a second wind, or maybe third or fourth wind; from where, I wasn’t sure. She was alternating between expertly slashing and stabbing with her sword, and knocking other wolves back with her shield. Similarly, Artemis was working as a sniper, catching wolf after wolf in the chest with her magical arrows. Whenever one of our allies saw an enemy wolf stunned by magic, they’d take the opportunity to take them down, and if there were more of us, or if the magic users weren’t already so tapped, we *might* have had a shot at winning.

But we were starting to slow *way* down, and the Bitterfangs were noticing it.

As we started to fall, larger groups of the Bitterfangs were able to pile up on our stronger fighters who were still standing. Duke and I, as Alphas, were *huge* targets, and at one point, I found myself staring down about three Bitterfangs at once, all looking as if they had just freshly joined the fight. They were slowly closing in on me, which gave me an unintended advantage. If they attacked me all at once, I’d have a pretty tough time knocking them all down. But not all the Bitterfangs were well trained. Maybe they were part of his allied packs, or from whatever ass crack he pulled them out of, but they didn’t all have that Bitterfang edge to them. These three, though? They were definitely Bitterfang, through and through.

But I couldn’t help but wonder. Had Malakai banked on overwhelming us with numbers alone? Right now, taking that risk was proving worthwhile.

*Rishika!* I mind linked, hoping she could help me out with these. When she didn’t answer, I glanced around, and I spottedher a handful of feet away from me, half carrying Ravi off the field. He was injured.

Damn—that was two of our best fighters down.

Time seemed to slow almost to a halt as I scanned the battlefield. Bitterfangs were pouring out of every opening there was like roaches. Our allies were fighting with the last shreds of their strength. My heart ached with sorrow as I recognized some fallen Aspen and Blue Blood wolves scattered around. I couldn’t believe that we had so massively miscalculated coming back here, but now wasn’t the time for blame—I had to get the packs out of here *now*. I needed to make sure that I could get as many people back home as I could.

*Cali.* I looked over at her, where even she was fighting for breath and constantly summoning and re-summoning her sword and shield, as her exhaustion kept putting them out.

*Shit. How long can she do that for?*

*We need to get out of here. We have to retreat. This battle can’t continue this way*,I mind linked to her. *We’ll all die. We need to regroup and figure out what to do—*

*No!* Cali’s voice thundered through my mind. *I’m not going. I’m not leaving without Xavier.*

**Episode 4306**

**Xavier**

I was caught between Cali’s and Ava’s screams, pulled in both directions. If I could split myself in half and run to both, that’s what I would do. I didn’t want to choose between them, but if I could only save one, if I *had* to choose, the choice was clear.

I took off in Cali’s direction.

“Cali!” I screamed down the corridor. “Caliana! Answer me!”

Her screams echoed off the walls, ringing in my ears. It sounded like she was being tortured, murdered, in so much pain. I was filling up with dread as I feared rounding a corner and coming upon her bloody corpse.

“Xavier!” My heart stuttered, and I screeched to a halt. “Xavier! Please!” Ava’s voice was bellowing at me from the other direction now. It was a mix of sobs and screams like she was in pure agony. Knox had told me how bad he had been tortured in here, and clearly, Ava was being subjected to the same treatment now.

*Fuck*. I was going to lose Ava because of this. If she died, it would be all my fault. I turned around and looked down the hallway, “Ava!”

“It hurts, Xavier!” she moaned. “Please. Help me!”

My feet started to move on their own, preparing to carry me back in the other direction toward my Luna, but then I heard Cali again. This time, it wasn’t a scream, but a gurgle—she was dying. She was trying to get words out, but she was drowning in her own blood. I heard it and wanted to go and save her, but Ava was screaming out to me as well, and soon she’d be in the same condition. I looked in one direction and then the other and was utterly frozen with indecision.

It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to choose—I couldn’t.

And then, just like that, shrill laughter filled my ears. My whole body went ice cold as I realized that it wasn’t a coincidence that Adéluce’s vanishing act earlier had been simultaneous with Cali and Ava starting to scream—none of it was real. It was all an illusion created by Adéluce.

“You fucking *witch*!” I screamed out. “When will this end?”

“When you die,” she sang back. “Perhaps… Or maybe I’ll torture you in the afterlife as well.”

I wanted to lash out—to just fucking swing until I made contact—and then kill her in the most gruesome, painful way I knew how, but she wasn’t actually here.

At the far end of the hallway, I saw a wolf step out—a Bitterfang looking to fight.

“Better get ready to fight,” Adéluce said in my mind. “I don’t want to find you in the afterlife today.”

Then her voice was gone, and I looked down the hallway at the Bitterfang. I cracked my neck to the side, actually welcoming this fight. If I *couldn’t* deal with Adéluce, then I at least had to get out my aggression somehow.

He ran toward me, and I bolted in his direction, shifting as I leaped toward him, and tackling him to the ground. He was strong and fought with all his might, but he was nothing compared to me filled with the rage I’d built up from dealing with Adéluce. He seemed truly shocked by how fiercely I was fighting.

And that was the expression I left on his face when I finished him off, raking my claws from his neck straight down to his belly, turning him into a mess of blood and innards. Even long after he was gone, I continued to slash at him and slash at him, envisioning Adéluce’s face and pretending it was her, when all of a sudden I heard noises.

“Xavier!” I looked up, barely able to see with my face drenched in the blood of this wolf. But I recognized Gabe, Mikah, and Aysel standing in front of me. It was Gabe who had called out to me and Gabe who asked, while peering at me anxiously, “Are you okay?”

Slowly shifting, I nodded at him. “I’m okay.” But I wasn’t. I was anything *but* okay.

“I think that one is quite dead now,” Aysel said. “You’re probably safe to stop.”

I looked down at the mess that I’d made of the Bitterfang, and then I stood up and stepped around him, trying my hardest to shake myself back to normal. “Did you guys find Armin?”

Mikah shook his head. “No, but I smell blood. Lots of it. Coming from outside. Wolves. Your wolves.”

That wasn’t good.

“We’re guessing the others got ambushed,” Gabe said. “We need to go now. Before we have no way out again.”

I nodded and stepped to the front of the group so that I could use Lucian’s X marks on the walls to lead us back to the tunnel. We walked in a total, tense silence, and soon, the air started to smell less stuffy, and I knew that we were almost out.

Eventually, we got back to that storage room where the tunnel originally led us, and from that point, it was easy to retrace our steps. We quickly made our way through the tunnel and toward the outside, but as soon as we stepped out, it was into a full-fledged battle.

A Bitterfang jumped at me as soon as I emerged, and immediately, Ava’s wolf slammed into it. It went flying, and she landed, shifting back to her human self as she did. “Nice of you to join.”

We turned to face more of the Bitterfangs, shifting as we moved, and I felt guilty as her *real* voice filled my mind. It brought the reminder that, back in the dungeon, I’d chosen Cali. I’d doubled back and eventually froze up when I couldn’t choose, but when I had to make a gut decision, my gut pointed me toward Cali.

But I pushed that thought away and joined the fray—I couldn’t afford to worry about that right now.

As I ran around, taking out Bitterfang after Bitterfang, I eventually spotted Cali fighting beside Greyson. It was a relief to see her there, safe, after Adéluce’s trickery and my own mind had convinced me she was all but dead.

*Greyson*,I mind linked to my brother.

*Good, you’re alive*, he replied. *We need to retreat. There are too many Bitterfangs.*

*I’m with you. Let’s get the fuck out of here.*

While Greyson turned and howled to the Redwoods, I did the same to the Samaras. The other Alphas followed suit with their packs, and soon, all the wolves in our alliance turned and started to retreat.

And that was when Malakai arrived with his guard. The actual *trained* Bitterfangs—not just the cannon fodder he’d been chucking at us en masse. He looked enraged to see the fighting, almost like he truly believed that just throwing wolf after wolf at us should have shut us down by now, but we were a unified front to his chaotic, self-serving army of the naive and unskilled.

“Take no prisoners!” he bellowed, filling the entire battlefield with his thunderous voice.

Now that he was here, getting the fuck out of dodge was even more urgent. I sprinted along with my pack, barely letting my paws touch the ground, as we made for the trees.

*Split up?* I said to Greyson over the mind link.

I just barely saw him glance sideways at me. *Don’t get killed.*

Looking into his eyes, I nodded. *You either.*

Just like that, we peeled off in two different directions. I decided to lead the Samaras up to higher ground, thinking it would be good to lose the Bitterfangs on the rocky terrain, while Greyson ran into the thicket, trusting the Redwoods and other wolves with him to navigate the density of the woods better than the advancing enemy.

I watched as the rest of my pack, hurt and exhausted, struggled to run with all their might to escape the advancing Bitterfangs. I felt like I’d failed them as an Alpha. I’d led them into this mess. I’d caused them this pain, when they were already struggling so hard to become a full pack again. Each time one of them groaned, each time one of them cried out in pain, each time one of them had to throw all their effort into getting up the side of a hill, I could feel their agony like millions of pinpricks into my side. It was killing me how much this was killing them.

Was this all a mistake—not justgoing to war, but me becoming Alpha of the Samara pack to begin with?

It felt like I’d made so many missteps, and I had already started to care about this pack almost as much as I cared about the Redwood. They were *my* pack, my responsibility, my new family, but I had no idea how to protect them now. The Bitterfangs were just too powerful, and a dreadful thought started to fill my mind.

I was beginning to worry that our only true choices were either to join Malakai or die.

**Episode 4307**

Everything moved in the blink of an eye as we went from fighting to retreating. I was hanging onto Greyson’s back for dear life as he sped through the forest like lightning with the other Redwoods and alliance wolves around us.

*Where are we going?* I asked Greyson through our mind link.

*Elle is leading us to a safe place that she knows about from her time as a wolf in these woods. Apparently, it’s very hard to find, so hopefully we’ll lose the Bitterfangs there.*

I took a deep breath to try and calm my racing heart, if only slightly. *Do you really think we can lose them?*

For a long, tense moment, there was to response, just the sound of dozens of feet pounding against the forest floor. It made me nervous that Greyson didn’t feel like he could answer me right away, but eventually I heard his voice slide across my mind.

*I’m hoping so*,he replied. *If we can’t ditch them, we’re going to be in some serious trouble.*

We were weaving around tree trunks, no longer following any sort of path through the woods. At times, we were weaving so close to trees that I could feel branches whizzing by my face, just barely missing me. But Greyson was being careful. He wouldn’t dare risk hurting me, even if it was just by letting me get hit by the brush.

Eventually, Greyson slowed to a trot and then finally to a halt. He tilted his head up toward the sky, sniffing the air, and then I heard him say, *I don’t smell the Bitterfangs anymore. I think we lost them.*

*That’s a relief.* I slid down off his back, and he shifted and started to do a head count of everyone. I was relieved to scan our group and see that we hadn’t lost any of the Redwoods. I did see before we left the battlefield that some of the Aspen and Blue Blood wolves had fallen. It broke my heart that there was any loss of life at all. It even made me sad that any of the Bitterfangs had to die. Chances were, they were just following orders. Malakai had probably filled their heads with false confidence that they could handle whatever threats came their way. But did they even agree with his plans, or were they just powerless to defy him?

“Do you know if Armin got out, too? Like Marissa did?” I asked Greyson.

He shook his head. “I don’t. As soon as I heard Xavier, we left.”

Well, that was troublesome. Who else might we have lost during the fight? My mind couldn’t help but think about Xavier…

The last time I saw him, he was bolting through the woods with his pack, and they decided to head for higher ground. As much as I couldn’t help it, I told myself not to worry about him. He was fast—I was certain he had to have escaped.

Everyone looked completely and utterly dejected after the battle, and I could certainly understand why. We were really taken by surprise by the power and sheer number of the Bitterfangs, and if we hadn’t retreated when we did, we would have lost way more people than we did. Plus, we didn’t recover the Vanguard palace like we’d wanted. Even though we had escaped—even though we were alive—it felt like we’d lost.

While we started to assess the wounded and patch them up as best we could, I started to do a trip around the group and did my best to comfort and encourage people. Everyone seemed to appreciate seeing a warm smile after such a harsh battle, and they could at least return it, even if it faded as soon as I walked away.

“Cali.” I looked up as Greyson approached me with a look of worry on his face. “How are you? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m oka—”

Suddenly, Greyson wrapped me up with a fierceness I wasn’t expecting. It took me by surprise at first, but then I coiled my arms around him and held on. Whispering into my hair, he said, “For a minute back there, I thought I was going to lose you.”

I nodded against his chest, letting it finally hit me that I really thought I was going to die. “Yeah, you’re not the only one.”

He pulled back, but only enough so that he could smooth his hands up my sides to cup my face. “I never want you to be in a situation like that again.”

With a sad smile, I replied, “You can’t control those things when there’s a war.”

Greyson scowled, but he didn’t deny it because he knew I was right. Instead of dwelling on that fact, I lifted on my toes to kiss his cheek and reassure him that I was here and alive. I was about to pull back, but he twisted his head so that he could kiss me more fully, and I let myself sink into him. To let *him* remind *me* that he was here and alive. To allow us both to remind ourselves that we were alive and together.

Someone quietly cleared their throat behind me, and I pulled away from Greyson and looked around to see my sister standing there with her brows raised. “Sorry to interrupt, but Ravi’s pretty injured. We think it was just adrenaline that carried him this far, but now we really need to get him back to Torin. Just to have a healer look at him.”

Greyson nodded at her. “Okay. I’ve done a count, and it seems like we’re good to move. Let’s head back home, then.”

I was reveling at just the *mention* of the word “home.” God, I couldn’t wait to get home. I climbed onto Greyson’s back, held on tight, and we set off again.

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We made great time getting back to the house, and, weary and exhausted, everyone made their way inside.

Torin and Big Mac rushed out to meet us, quickly helping Ravi inside and identifying a few other injured that needed help. The Vanguards came trudging in behind us, looking completely dejected and beaten. They had been expecting to get their home back today, and they didn’t. I understood how horrible that must feel, so I set right to getting people food and water once we were inside. I was one of the few lucky ones who wasn’t too hurt other than some scratches along my collarbone from where I’d been pinned down by the wolf who attacked me, and a bruised tailbone from a hard fall. It was nothing compared to the bite marks and gouges many of the Vanguards had. I knew they’d heal, but I still hated to see it.

After helping everyone who was inside, I carried a tray of water out to the porch in case any of the wolves had lingered out there, but it seemed everyone had come inside now that the sun had long set and it had grown chilly. I pulled my cardigan a little tighter around myself and was about to turn around to head back inside when I saw some movement in the trees. I stiffened, prepared to blast them with magic if it was a wayward Bitterfang, but then I saw Xavier step out of the trees. Immediately, all my anxiety about his safety came bubbling to the surface. He looked exhausted, covered with dirt and blood—hopefully not his own.

In that moment, I forgot all the horrible things that he’d done and said to me lately. All I cared about was that I thought he was going to die back there, and here he was—safe. I set the water down and raced off the porch over to him.

“Are you okay? What happened back there?” I asked. My hands moved on their own, running over his shoulders and down his arms to check for wounds. I started to babble, “You should let Torin look at you. You were inside the palace for so long, we thought something might have happened to you.”

My assessment of Xavier eventually had me cupping his cheeks, and I looked into his eyes. To my surprise, all the ire I’d seen there lately was gone. He was quiet for a few seconds, and then he finally just said, “Cali,” in a soft, caring voice. The sound of my name whispered on his lips stilled my fretting hands. Now he just watched me intently. I totally froze, and once again, this time impossibly softer, he repeated, “*Cali*,” and he lowered his forehead against mine.

I drew in a deep breath, taking in this moment. When I looked up, I realized that our lips were just inches apart. My breath caught. He was so close. Did he mean to be this close? All I had to do was lift onto my toes to kiss him.

And before I could stop myself, I started to lean in.

**Episode 4308**

**Xavier**

I could feel Cali’s breath brushing against my lips, and it sent a chill down my spine. All thought had escaped my mind, beyond this moment, right here, right now, with Cali. I’d come to the Redwood house for a reason, but I couldn’t be paid to remember what it was right now. All I could think about was Cali. Being closer to her. Soothing my frayed nerves with her. I wanted to be able to wrap my arms around her and never let her go again. I wanted to know that she’d forever be in my arms and that I’d never have to go without her again.

I had never wanted *anything* as badly as I wanted her right now. There was a chilly wind cutting across my heated skin, but I didn’t care. Cali was shivering, and she was real beneath my touch—even just this connection at our foreheads felt like I was getting the first taste of food after I’d been starving for *years*. And when she started to move in, I told myself that I wouldn’t pull away. I wanted this—*needed it*. I felt like I would die if I didn’t get it.

But then I remembered Adéluce’s laughter, cutting across my brain as clearly as if she were standing behind me right now, and it was like having a bucket of ice water dumped on me. We were so close that Cali’s lips were very nearly on mine, to the point that I could have *sworn* I could taste her, but at the very last second, I took a step back.

“Sorry,” I managed to mutter. “I shouldn’t have done that.” I searched my brain for a purpose, which on its own was hard with Cali’s needy gaze glued to me now. I’d give anything if I could just give in to her. If I could let her take me far, far away from this harsh reality, but I knew I couldn’t. “I just came to make sure that everyone is okay and to check in with Greyson about next steps. Is… is he here?”

“Oh.” Cali’s voice had a disappointed tone, and it made my stomach knot up. “Yeah, okay, come inside.”

She turned to lead me back toward the house, grabbing the edges of her cardigan and wrapping it even tighter around herself, almost like she was trying to protect herself from the pain I was causing her. Even as she moved, there was a slight tremble to her body, and it tore me up inside. The fact that *I* was responsible for that—for putting that agonized expression on her face and continuously causing her pain—it made me feel like a complete piece of shit.

Even more so, because in spite of knowing how much worse it would make things, I *still* longed to reach out to her again. But I did everything I could to bite back that desire flaring through me. Cali didn’t deserve anymore pain, and I wouldn’t bring her anymore.

At least not tonight…

Once we were back inside the house, I saw Greyson doing his rounds, checking in on both the Redwoods and the crestfallen Vanguards. When he saw Cali leading me in, he nodded at me, finishing up the conversation he was in the middle of, and then motioning for me to follow him. Cali took over his humanitarian work while he led me down to his study. We stepped inside, and he closed the door behind him.

He crossed to the whiskey cabinet and opened it up, pulling out a bottle and a glass. Lifting the bottle in the air, he asked, “Drink?”

I shook my head. “No.” I wanted to keep my wits about me right now. I had too much to take care of with the Samaras and everything.

After pouring himself a drink, Greyson came back over and leaned against the front of his desk, taking a sip, while I stood in front of him. “Did your pack all come out of it in one piece?”

“Somehow,” I responded. “Not sure how, though. I’ll probably have some sleepless nights trying to figure it out.”

Greyson nodded. “I hear that. You got Marissa back, though. That’s good.”

“It is. She’s a good pack member and gives good counsel.” Although, even as I said it, I remembered that I still had to deal with her anger toward Knox. For a brief moment, I actually considered telling Greyson the situation and asking for some advice, but then I wanted to stab myself in the eye with a pen.

I must’ve *really* been lost if I was considering asking my brother for advice.

“Did Gabriel and Mikah go back with you?” Greyson asked. “They’re not in our headcount.”

“They’re with the Samaras,” I said, nodding.

“Good. I’m glad they’re safe.” Greyson let out a sigh and took a long drink of his whiskey. I could see just how shaken he was from all of this. We had watched people die out there, and knowing Greyson, I knew that he was shouldering much of that burden on himself.

Crossing my arms, I asked him, “So what do you think our next steps should be?”

“First? To heal. You get your pack all healed up and healthy again. After that, we’ll have to meet up, all of us, and talk seriously about how to do a counter-offensive. We were foolish to think that we could just take back the Vanguard palace today. We need to strategize carefully. All of us.”

“Yeah, I agree.” There was an awkward beat of silence between us, which I decided to solve by leaving. “Well, I’m glad the Redwoods are all safe. I’ll see you around.”

Greyson nodded at me and didn’t move from where he was leaning—he clearly needed a moment to be alone and work on his drink, so I turned my back to him and let myself out.

Back in the foyer, I paused and looked into the living room where Cali was talking to Paige. I considered going over to her and saying goodbye, but I knew I probably shouldn’t. I had already made things too awkward by nearly kissing her, and I was worried about how Adéluce might interpret that moment of weakness.

Just to be safe, I should probably keep my distance for a while.

I stepped back out into the chilly night air and shifted, desperately needing to run. I had to clear my head and hopefully outrun this guilt I felt from nearly kissing Cali. Letting my guard down that much had been a mistake, but the relief I felt at finally seeing her after how worried I’d been about her throughout the whole battle—it overwhelmed every whisper of logic and clear thought. I had immediately noticed the scratches on the sides of her neck—it looked as if she had been just moments from being mortally wounded. That was probably the cause of me losing myself. I just wanted to hold her and keep her safe.

But I couldn’t keep thinking like that. I had to do better.

My mind drifted back to that moment in the Vanguard palace, when Adéluce played yet another trick on my mind, and when it came down to it, I’d chosen Cali. She wasn’t really in danger, but I’d still chosen her when I thought it was real. Over my own Luna. I was certain that Adéluce would use that against me soon.

*Fuck*. I needed to quit causing myself more problems with Adéluce. Why couldn’t I just deal with one problem at a goddamn time?

When I got back to the Samara pack house, Ava was on the porch waiting for me. She stood up when she saw me step out of the forest, and all that guilt in my chest bloomed up again. It killed me that I didn’t try to save Ava first when I thought she was in trouble. She was my Luna and technically also my mate. She was the one who had stood by me without a second thought as I tried to become a good Alpha. I could still hear the sounds of her screaming out for me down in the dungeons of Vanguard palace—the way she sounded like she was suffering as I was running in the opposite direction for Cali. That wasn’t fair to her. I wouldn’t have made it this far without her. I should be prioritizing her. But would that mean that Adéluce would try to hurt her, too?

I could barely even stand to consider the thought.

Shifting back to my human form, I tried to give her a smile. Then I leaned down to kiss her, but I was close enough, she pulled back from me. What was that about?

I furrowed my brow and looked down at her. “What’s going on?”

“This isn’t going to work, Xavier,” she said to me. “I know what you’re trying to hide from me.”

**Episode 4309**

**Greyson**

After Xavier left, I just took a few moments to quietly drink my whiskey and process everything that had happened. Right now, I had my pack and the fragments of three others in my pack house. One of those packs was downright homeless, and the others needed to get home. We had some recovering to do, and then, as exhausting as the thought seemed, it was time to move another set of pieces forward in this twisted chess game with the Bitterfangs.

“You wanted to see me?” Mace said, poking his head into my office.

I’d sent after him because I wanted to check in on the state of the Blue Blood pack and see about getting them home along with the Aspen pack. “How is your pack doing?”

Mace lowered his gaze with a grim expression on his face. “One of my wolves died, and I know that a couple of Porter’s did as well.”

“Shit,” I hissed under my breath. “I’m so sorry. I wish…” I took a deep breath in and held it for a moment, letting the silence linger for a respectful beat before continuing. “I wish that we had more time to mourn and recover, but . . .”

“Such are the times of war. I understand,” Mace said.

“The Blue Blood and the Aspen packs can head out. I just spoke with Xavier and said that we should all take a day to heal and recover, but then I want us to all meet up and plan out our next steps.” My mind was tripping and stumbling over a long checklist of things I had to take care of as Alpha.

“Yeah,” Mace said. “I hate it, but I know we can’t afford to rest for too long.”

I walked with him toward the door of the study so he could return to his pack and prepare them to move. Opening the door, I saw Cali and my mother standing right outside. I saw Mace off and then faced them. “What’s going on?”

“Greyson, we need to do something for the packs,” Cali said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

There was an emotional expression on her face. “In the last few days, all the packs have lost some good people. They need time to grieve.”

“We don’t have time. I’m sympathetic— really, I am, but we’re right in the middle of a war,” I said.

Surprisingly, my mom shook her head, “Greyson, you can’t just ask people to keep fighting and fighting without reminding them of what they’re fighting for.”

I looked between them, seeing how determined they *both* were to get this point across, and sighed. “Okay. If you think that we need it. But we can’t do anything too elaborate.”

“I think I have the perfect thing,” my mom said. “We’ll do it when the other packs come here. Right before you have your war council.”

The thought of all the packs coming back here in a day made me hesitate. Cali and Xavier would be back in the same room again. I thought back to that moment when I’d wanted to retreat from Vanguard palace and Cali had refused to leave the battle without Xavier. If I was being totally honest with myself, it hurt. I was kind of hoping that after everything Xavier had put her through, and with me remaining loyal to her, she would realize I was the only one for her. But it seemed that was just wishful thinking.

*Of course* Cali still cared if Xavier lived and died.

The reality was, Cali wasn’t cold enough to completely lock Xavier out of her heart. And wasn’t that part of the reason why I loved her so much?

I drove the thoughts out of my mind and forced myself to let it go. It wasn’t worth dwelling on. “Okay,” I told my mother. “You get those plans in order, and we’ll reconvene before the war council.” She nodded and walked away, and I shifted my gaze to Cali. Then I said, “I’m going to take a shower.”

She let out a long groan. “A shower sounds really good. Can I join you?”

I couldn’t help but smile back. “Always.”

Chuckling, she gave me a soft punch. “I meant just for the shower.”

“Hmm. Are you sure? I’m getting the slightest hintof something else,” I joked.

Tilting her head adorably, she said, “*Well*, now that you mention it… I have been enjoying our showers lately.”

I grabbed her by the hand and pretended to race up the stairs like I couldn’t wait—hell, I wasn’t pretending. Suddenly, all of the fatigue was gone, and I couldn’t wait to have her in my arms. Once we were in the bathroom behind closed doors, we started immediately. She was fiddling with the shower handle while I was kissing along her neck and undoing the button to her jeans, and then I was cranking up the heat as high as we could handle while her hands clawed up my shirt and dragged across my abs.

We didn’t bother with making any sense of where we threw our clothes, we just let them fall where they did while we tangled into one another, kissing and fighting for closeness. The urgency was growing, like we needed to be reminded that we were alive and whole. Cali was practically wrapped all the way around me as I finally pulled her into the shower and under the water.

When the water hit her, she let out a yelp, and I raised an eyebrow. “Too hot?”

Her eyes, now dark and filled with ecstasy, bore into me. “I can handle it.” And then she took my mouth with hers.

Her hands came up to grab my shoulders and held on as she jumped into my arms. I was quick to brace her under her ass, and then I turned around with her to press her against the shower wall. Her legs locked behind my back, and I deduced from Cali’s urgency that we were skipping right past foreplay for the time being, which was fine with me.

I lowered her down onto my waiting cock and loved the way steam lifted from her mouth as she moaned in response. She squeezed me so tight with each additional inch of my dick that I pushed inside of her. It was like she was trying to hang onto all of me as tightly as she could, from the inside out. Her fingers tangled into the ends of my hair while I began to lift and lower Cali on top of me, reveling in the feeling.

Through her moans and parted lips, she started to massage her fingers through my hair. That feeling of her hands in my hair, while her pussy squeezed me down below—it was like I had died in the war and gone to heaven. It felt so fucking good.

I pressed her into the tile and then grabbed a bottle of body soap and squeezed a healthy portion into my hands. As I was thrusting in and out of her, I used my thumbs to massage the soap all around her back and ass. When I got to the sides of her neck where the scratches were, I was careful not to press too hard. It killed me that she’d gotten even *that* hurt, so it made me want to make sure that all she felt right now was nothing but pleasure.

Squeezing out more of the soap, I slid my hands around to grab and squeeze her breasts. With the soap, my hands slid deliciously over her skin, smoothing over every inch of her. Once she was totally covered in suds, I grabbed her thighs, securing her to me as I walked us back to the stream of hot water.

“Does that feel good?” I asked, pumping in and out of her at a faster pace.

“Fuck, Greyson,” she said. “Don’t stop. *Please*, don’t stop.”

“Come for me, love,”

Cali moaned as I took one of her nipples in my mouth. “That feels so good. Please.”

I didn’t stop until I could feel her spasming around me. She cried out, her nails digging into my shoulders as she came. I kept up my pace until her moans went quiet for a moment, and then she let out a sigh. “Wow.”

I kissed her lips. “That good?”

She nodded dreamily. “Now I want to make you feel just as good. Put me down.”

My cock ached as I took it out of her. Cali reached for the soap and started to massage circles around my pecs and down my abs and across my back. Her hands moved lower and lower until she was finally able to wrap her hands around my still-hard cock. She looked up into my eyes as she lowered herself down to her knees.

“*Fuck*,” I said. “Just seeing you like that is too much, love.”

She smiled wickedly before taking my cock into her mouth. I groaned, and this time it was my fingers that went into her hair. She looked up at me, holding my gaze as she sucked me off. Her tongue swirled around the head leisurely, and it was taking everything in me not to make her go faster.

It didn’t take me long to come. She drank me down, smiling as she wiped her mouth off and stood up. I kissed her, sucking on her lip as her body relaxed against mine.

I wrapped my arms around her and chuckled. “Well, we got *kind of* clean.”

Placing a gentle kiss on my chest, she laughed as well. “Eh, I kind of preferred dirty in this case.”

**Episode 4310**

**Xavier**

I stared at Ava in shock. She knew what I was “trying to hide” from her? What was she referring to? Did she somehow find out about Adéluce? How? And what would Adéluce do when *she* found out?

“You’re trying to pretend that you have it all together and you’re not bone tired, but I’m not blind, Xavier. I can see that you are,” Ava explained. “You can’t be a good Alpha if you can barely stand up straight.”

Stifling a breath of relief, I managed to put on a tired smile and said, “Fine, okay, you’re right. But the pack needs me right now. I can’t just rest and relax. I can’t just go to sleep.”

“Yes, you can,” Ava replied. “And I’m going to make sure you do.”

“Ava—”

“Nope,” she cut me off. “I’ll tackle you into the bed if I have to.”

Laughing, I nodded. “Okay, okay, just let me do a walk-through of the house and make sure that the magic shield is up, and then I’ll come upstairs.”

She replied with a deep scowl. “I don’t believe you.”

That was fair. This wouldn’t be the first time I’d promised someone that I’d slow down and take it easy and then did the exact opposite. Hell, it wasn’t even the first time I’d made that promise to Ava that recently. She had every right to assume that I was lying to her face.

“I promise,” I said. “I agree with you—I do need some rest—but I also need to at least make sure that we’re safe. I won’t sleep at all if I haven’t done some final checks first.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You promise? You won’t try to go on a patrol shift or something?”

I almost smiled at the look on her face, and I realized that Ava had helped me shed some of my guilt. I didn’t know how that made me feel. It was strange, to say the least, and not something I’d ever expected. How things were between Ava and me was night and day from how they’d once been.

Without thinking, I bent down and pressed my lips to hers in a soft kiss. When I pulled back, her eyes were slightly widened in surprise. “What was that for?” she asked.

Letting one of my hands drift up to push a stray strand of her hair back behind her ear, I replied, “I appreciate you as my Luna. You know that, right?”

A bunch of emotions flashed across Ava’s face, one after the other, until she finally settled into a wry smile. “Of course you do. I’m an *amazing* Luna.” Then she turned around and started for the house. I lingered for a moment until she got back to the porch, stopped, and looked back at me, nodding her head toward the pack house. I continued forward, letting her lead me inside.

Beyond the front door, I found that most of the pack was gathered in the kitchen, but I didn’t see Knox or Marissa there, which made me nervous. She had been really upset with him back at Vanguard palace, and I was afraid she might be trying to kill him again, so I went in search of them.

Thankfully, I found Knox in his room with Zipper, and it didn’t seem as though he’d had his face clawed off, which was an unexpected but pleasant surprise. I didn’t bother him, and instead continued on to find Marissa. We didn’t really have the capacity to deal with this drama right now. What we needed to do tonight was focus on recovering, and then get back to the war in a couple of days, so I planned to tell her just to keep her distance from him for now.

Marissa was in her room with Kira, who was helping Marissa wrap one of her deeper wounds. I leaned against the doorway, and when Marissa looked up at me, I said, “Can I ask what happened down there in the dungeon?”

Both Marissa and Kira frowned, but it was Kira who asked, “Can this wait? She just got back, and she needs to focus on healing.”

“It’s okay, I can talk about it,” Marissa insisted. “I know it’s important for you to know what the Bitterfangs are capable of.”

“As long as you’re sure,” I said.

She nodded. “I am.”

I walked farther into the room and sat down on the bed, staying silent so that she felt free to continue. “Right after we were captured, we were starved for a whole day. No food or water. That wasn’t so bad at first, but then when we finally *were* given food, it was moldy and rotten. I was able to withstand the hunger at first, but soon I had to give in. It made me violently ill, which, of course, made me weaker,” Marissa explained. “They also made Jesse and Knox move boulders from one end of the tunnels to the other, but not for any purpose, just to make them do physical labor. As soon as they got the boulders down to one end, they’d make them pick them back up and return them to the other end. And because they were also horribly sick from the bad food, it did a number on their bodies.”

“God,” Kira said, frowning. “They’re monsters.”

It wasn’t as if I hadn’t realized that the Bitterfangs were so brutal—look at their Alpha—but hearing it spelled out this way and knowing that my own pack mates had been through it… It was filling me with a swell of sadness and fury. I wished I could’ve swapped myself for them so that Marissa, Knox, and Jesse never would’ve had to go through it. When I finally did get my hands on Malakai, I’d show him absolutely no mercy.

“At night, instead of being able to sleep, we were taken into interrogation rooms one at a time and were questioned for hours on end until we couldn’t think straight. I have no idea if Jesse or Knox gave up any information, but I held strong, I promise.”

I nodded. “I believe you.”

“I guess they thought they could break me. That was why I wasn’t chosen for the ‘fight to the death’ match. Malakai decreed that it was a gift for the Bitterfangs—a prize fight to entertain them.” She shuddered. “It was sick. And they forced me to stand there and watch as Jesse and Knox were given the choice: fight each other until one dies, the victor earning their freedom, or refuse and both die.”

Anger boiled deep within me. They’d used my pack members as sport. They would pay for it.

Tears were streaming down Marissa’s face now. “I’m so sorry this happened to you,” I said, grabbing Marissa’s hand for comfort, and Kira grabbed the other.

“I know it’s harsh. I know that Knox was scared. But the way he fought… So desperately. He killed Jesse, who had *always* been on his side. When Knox was thrown out of the pack, Jesse told me that he felt bad for Knox, and then to just see Knox tear into him like that?” Her hands tightened on mine and Kira’s, and now she was quietly crying. “All the Bitterfangs just watched and cheered. Like it was a game. Like our lives meant nothing to them.”

There was this far-off look in Marissa’s eyes that was almost terrifying to behold. I could see her reliving it—every harsh, horrifying moment that the Bitterfangs had forced her to endure. They were meticulously working to break us. Starvation, exhaustion, mental anguish, psychological torture, everything they could imagine. Hell, if Marissa told me that she *had* given up some information, I wouldn’t blame her, but I supposed that was why it hurt her so badly to see Knox fold the way he did.

Or at least what she perceived to be folding. After she fought through all of that and remained strong, she was probably expecting the same thing of her pack mates and was devastated when they didn’t meet that expectation.

Marissa opened her mouth to keep going, but she started to shiver. Her hands were clenching mine and Kira’s so tightly that her knuckles were starting to turn white. It didn’t hurt me, but I was able to feel how much pressure she was putting into it. It was clear that she was seizing up just to get herself through retelling the story. She was out of it now and was still so traumatized. The fact that they’d done this to a strong wolf…

“It’s okay, Marissa, you can stop,” I said quietly. “You don’t have to talk about this anymore. You’re back, and you’re safe.”

But she shook her head. “I don’t think any of us are safe. Not with the Bitterfangs around. Malakai is brutal, Xavier. I think he’s just toying with us right now, but soon, he’ll tire of this game, and then he’ll kill us all.”

**Episode 4311**

I woke up the next morning and quickly washed up, got dressed, and made my way down to the kitchen. After putting the teakettle on the stove and getting some coffee brewing, I started looking through all the cabinets, pantries, and fridge to put a plan together for breakfast. With all the guests we currently had staying here, we’d need a *lot* of food. I wanted everyone to be nice and fueled up. Not only in preparation for the battles still sure to come, but I also wanted the Redwood pack house to feel homey and comfortable for everyone.

What was that saying about happy stomachs? Or was that happy wives? Anyway…

“Cali!” I nearly jumped out of my skin as Torin’s cheerful voice pierced the calm silence in the kitchen.

“Oh, thank god you’re awake,” I told him. “We *need* breakfast. Please. I’ll help.”

He smiled wide as he pulled on an apron. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

As I gathered all the eggs from the fridge, Torin grabbed packs of bacon and dough for biscuits. Once we’d piled everything onto the counter, he surveyed it with an almost worried expression. “Is this good? What do you make for an army?” He crossed his arms. “There’s an army stew I could whip together.”

I frowned. “We’re not an army.”

He tilted his head at me. “We’re a group of people fighting a war. How else do you define an army?”

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that he was kind of right. I just didn’t want to consider us an army. Then again, I didn’t want us to be at war at all, so I supposed that by denying we were an army, all I was really doing was being naive.

Not really wanting to travel any further down that road, I simply gave Torin a friendly pat on the back. “I think the bacon and eggs and biscuits will be just fine.”

He shrugged at me but didn’t protest, and eventually he got to cooking.

I made my cup of tea, and when I looked up again, I saw that a bunch of Vanguards and Redwoods had woken up and were mingling. Some ventured into the kitchen in search of coffee, and it was a good thing I’d prepared some, because in the blink of an eye, it was almost empty.

I grabbed the carafe and started to prepare a second pot when Mrs. Smith came into the kitchen and started to shoo me out. “No, no, no. I’ll take care of this. You go worry about Luna things.”

She pushed me out of the kitchen before I could argue, and I stood outside with a look of bewilderment on my face. What the hell were *Luna things*? I thought making sure all of our guests had food and fresh coffee was a pretty good and responsible thing to be busying myself with.

Maybe she wanted me to go find Greyson? I wanted to make sure that he came down to eat anyway, so that wasn’t a terrible idea. He didn’t seem to be downstairs, despite the fact that he should be awake already.

Where was he?

I started to make my way through the house, in the general direction of Greyson’s study, keeping an eye out for him along the way, but it wasn’t until I was nearly to his study that I heard raised voices arguing back and forth. The door was open, so I poked my head in to see Greyson and Lucian engaged in a pretty intense-looking argument.

“We can’t risk that right now!” Greyson thundered. “Not after such a huge loss!”

“*We* are the ones who have lost everything! The Vanguards!” Lucian shouted back. “We lost our home *and* our people! And Armin is still in there! With the other prisoners out now, all the attention will have turned to him! He’s on borrowed time as we speak.”

Greyson calmed his voice way down to say, “I know that you’re worried about your man, and I promise getting him back *is* a top priority, but we have to regroup first. Rishika and the patrol aren’t even back from their reconnaissance mission this morning.”

The look of worry on Greyson’s face told me that he was expecting them back by now and was probably worried about why they hadn’t returned.

I could tell that the bulk of the tension between them was the fact that they were both worried about their packs, and even about one another’s packs. This situation was bearing bad fruit, and in terms of *Luna things*, as Mrs. Smith so eloquently put it, it felt like at least keeping people as calm and levelheaded as possible was a task I could shoulder.

I set my fist to my mouth and cleared my throat gently, stepping into the room. “Good morning, Lucian. Have you had coffee or tea yet this morning?”

He blinked at me, obviously surprised to see me. He’d probably been so laser-focused on the conversation that he hadn’t even seen me standing there. After considering it quietly for a few moments, he replied, “Well… No, actually, I haven’t.”

Patting his arm softly, I led him to the door and said, “Why don’t you go eat breakfast first, and then when the other Alphas get here, you can have a proper war council.”

Now that I was standing so close to him, I could really see how worn out he looked, which wasn’t helping either. I wondered how much sleep he had actually gotten last night, but if I were in his position and had to try and sleep knowing that my home was under siege and my right-hand man was in the enemy’s custody being tortured, I wouldn’t sleep a wink.

Thankfully, he gave me a weary nod and walked out the door. I took a breath and turned back to Greyson. He was massaging his temples, looking pretty exhausted himself. “You okay?” I asked.

He took a few heavy steps backward until he was able to flop down into one of his study’s plush armchairs. “I get that he’s worried about his pack—I do—but we can’t just be running into things without thinking first. All that’s going to do is get more people killed, maybe even *his* people. Can’t he see that?”

I walked around behind him and started to massage his shoulders. “You’re being smart. And a good leader. He’ll realize that soon, when he’s not caught up in worry for Armin. I think any of us would lose a little bit of our discernment if we were in the situation he’s in. It’s good that you’re thinking straight, but I also see now that Lucian really does care a lot about his pack. In that way, he’s a true Alpha.”

Moving my hands inward, I started to massage Greyson’s neck. He let out a low groan. “That feels so good.”

“Good,” I told him, really making sure to dig in and get the knots out. “Do you think you could eat something? Your mom said I should do *Luna things*, and taking care of my Alpha seems like it takes the top of the list. Torin is working on breakfast.”

Greyson reached behind himself to grab my wrist, and then he pulled me around the chair and down so that I fell onto his lap. He gave me a sly look and said, “I was thinking of having *something else* for breakfast.”

I laughed, then leaned in to kiss him, loving the feeling of his hands sliding up my legs. My fingers were tangling into his hair, and our tongues were swirling together, the passion growing…

… Until his office door opened, and Rishika, Ravi, and Sage walked in without knocking.

We quickly pulled apart, but it wasn’t hard to tell what had been going on moments before. At least that was what I was able to gather from the deep eye roll we earned from Rishika. Behind her, Ravi and Sage exchanged a glance, clearly trying not to laugh. At least it seemed like Ravi was feeling better.

However, Greyson sat up straighter—popping me off his lap in the process—and I remembered that he had been worried they hadn’t come back from patrol. When Rishika said, “We finished our patrol,” and didn’t delve into anything in the way of an emergency, he let out a sigh of relief.

“And?” Greyson asked.

“The Bitterfangs are stationed in place at the Vanguard palace. It seems like they’re closing ranks there—not on the move at all,” Rishika explained.

Greyson nodded. “Okay, that’s good for now. We don’t want them attacking us before we’re ready either.”

Then Rishika continued. “And the Samaras, Blue Bloods, Cobalts, and Aspens have arrived from their respective pack houses as well.”

I looked past Rishika then, into the hallway beyond, hoping for a glimpse of Xavier, but when I didn’t see him, I looked for an excuse to step out. “Um, I’ll let you guys finish up. I’m going to go make sure we have enough coffee for everyone.”

As I hurried out, I tried to tell myself that I wasn’t actively looking for Xavier, I just wanted to make sure he was okay—it was something I needed. We were mates after all, and tied with the *due destini*…

But instead of running into him, however, I crossed paths with Kira first, a grim expression on her face. She took me by the arm and leaned in and whispered, “Come with me. I found out something about Xavier from the magic test.”

**Episode 4312**

I tried to read Kira’s face. Was she scared of what she’d found out? Was Xavier in danger? Did we need to more fully loop Greyson into things? He was his older brother… But she just looked secretive right now, like she was trying to make sure no one knew what we were doing.

“Kira,” I whispered finally. “What did you find?”

“Shh, don’t talk so loudly,” she hissed back at me. “Wait until we’re somewhere private. Is there a good spot we can go to?”

“Yeah, my room,” I told her. She nodded, and we started toward the stairs. We were nearly there when Kira suddenly stopped short, and I bonked right into her.

“Hey, what—” I started. But when she turned to look at me and motioned subtly to the side, I looked and saw what she was showing me.

Ava was coming toward us. In an instant, my jealousy flared at the sight of Xavier’s Luna, but I told myself to stifle it—it wasn’t useful right now. Or ever. Of course she would be a part of this, given her relationship to Xavier. We needed to figure out what was wrong with him, whatever it was, and if that took Ava’s help as well, then so be it.

We continued to make our way to and up the stairs—I didn’t even bother to check whether Ava was following us—and I began to worry about the seriousness of what it was Kira had found. Was it something that would affect him during battle? What if it altered his ability to protect himself? Just the thought of Xavier being in more danger made me sick.

Hopefully Kira also had a plan for dealing with whatever she had learned.

Once all three of us were inside my room, I closed the door and was quick to face Kira and say, “Okay, please tell us.”

Kira nodded. “So, you know how the spell burnt up?”

“Yeah, so?” Ava said. “What do you want? To get more blood? Because that went so well last time.”

But Kira shook her head. “I suspect that the spell will just do the same thing again, but we don’t need to even go there. Big Mac and I sifted through the ashes.”

“You brought Big Mac into this?” I asked. I knew we could trust her, but bringing the other witch in felt even more serious.

Ava winced. “Why did you even bother going through the ashes like that?”

Kira shrugged. “You should never waste any part of a spell. Each piece can tell you something.” I logged that information away for future knowledge. “We read the ashes much like one might read tea leaves.”

Looking doubtful, Ava asked, “So, it’s like divination?”

“Um… In a way, I guess?” Kira bobbed her head as if she was trying to discern how to put it in terms that Ava and I could understand. “It’s somewhat different. The ashes aren’t as concrete as the spell would have been, but there’s one thing that remains, and that’s the pure essence of what the spell was meant to maintain. It can’t necessarily give us the exact same answers that a successful spell would have given us, but it can give us the gist. And Big Mac and I both interpreted the ashes to mean the same thing—that something has a hold on Xavier.”

Well, I didn’t like the sound of that at all. “What do you think it is?” I asked. “I mean, if it could have caused your magic to go awry and burn up like that, it must be dark, right? How do we fix it? How do we save him?”

Ava side-eyed me. “How do we know he wants saving?” I scowled at her, but it didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. “Shouldn’t we finally tell Xavier what we’re up to?”

Kira was quick to shake her head. “I don’t know what kind of magic this is, but I do know that when you don’t know the source of a magic, you must be careful around it.” The frustration filling her voice was increasing my anxiety exponentially. Kira and Big Mac were two of the most powerful witches I knew. If they weren’t able to find the source of this magic, then who could? “Until we know who has touched Xavier with their magic, we can’t know for sure that they’re gone. They might be monitoring him. They might hurt him more. There are even spells that are so undetectable that the person under the spell doesn’t know about it themselves, and alerting them of it makes the spell start to work against them—slowly killing them.”

“No way,” Ava said. “I think that’s a little dramatic.”

“I’ve seen it happen with my own eyes,” Kira told her. “You should never underestimate the power of magic—ever.”

My stomach was starting to twist into knots the more Kira spoke. I was absolutely *horrified* at these different speculations as to what this spell could be doing to Xavier. “So just *telling* Xavier that he’s under a spell could literally *kill* him?”

Unlike the harsher, more anxious expression she’d been showing Ava, when she looked at me, her expression actually softened. “We don’t know that for sure. I’m just being cautious. I don’t want to risk anything. You know?”

Taking a deep breath, I concluded, “So all we know for sure is that Xavier is safe for now, and we need to figure out what’s wrong with him before we do anything?”

“Exactly,” Kira confirmed.

Ava crossed her arms. “Okay, but how do we do that if we can’t use your magic or ask him?”

Kira went silent, which I didn’t love. She looked from me to Ava and back again before finally frowning and saying, “That’s the issue. I’m not sure yet.”

Ava threw her hands in the air in frustration. “Okay, well, when you actually figure out a solution, come let me know. I have a war council to attend.” And with that, she stormed out, slamming my bedroom door behind her.

I hated how negative she was being about all of this. Wasn’t she supposed to be Xavier’s Luna? Shouldn’t she be as eager as anyone to figure out what was wrong with him and do everything in her power to help him? She was being so resistant to the whole thing. I wondered what her angle was.

Regardless, though, I didn’t want to express my annoyance and create any additional problems between Kira and Ava. They had enough friction between them as it was, and we were all going to have to work together to figure this whole thing out.

“She’s probably just frustrated that we can’t do anything,” I said, covering for her. “I’ll admit, I’m experiencing some of that same frustration.”

Rolling her eyes, Kira said, “Don’t make excuses for her. She’s just rude.”

“Well… Yeah,” I agreed, “but she *does* care about Xavier, so in the end, she’ll do what’s best for him.” *I hope*, I added mentally.

“I know you’re probably right, but…” Kira let out a long sigh, and she didn’t have to finish her sentence for me to understand what she was thinking.

This would all be a lot easier if Ava wasn’t as friendly as a rabid wolverine.

“Anyway,” I said, shifting the subject, “we should probably head to the war council, too.”

Kira nodded. “Yup, but I want a *giant* mug of coffee first, and one of Torin’s biscuits.”

I chuckled. “That we can do.”

We went downstairs to the dining room, where all the food Torin made had been set up buffet-style. Along with the bacon, eggs, and biscuits we’d decided on, Torin had also sprung for some fried potatoes and a medley of fruit. It all smelled heavenly, even if I didn’t think I could get much down right now due to my nerves. I smiled at Duke and Paige near one end of the dining room, and Rowena and Porter near the other, all enjoying some food themselves, then I grabbed a biscuit with jelly for myself.

While I was walking around, taking in the sheer number of guests, Artemis approached me and gave me a gentle pinch on the arm. “Hey, how are you feeling?”

“Good,” I said. “A little anxious, but good. You?”

She nodded. “Same here. Wondering when we’re going to start training, though…”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Was that on the schedule?”

“When you’re at war, you have to keep your powers honed, Cali.”

With a smile, I said, “Yeah, of course. Let’s train this afternoon.”

“Cool.” She pinched my cheek and then said, “I’m going to go tell Adair to sharpen my arrows.”

I watched her go and rubbed my no-doubt bright-pink cheek. That girl seriously did not know her own strength.

Once she was gone, I returned to the kitchen to make a fresh cup of tea. No sooner than I got the liquid in the mug did Rishika’s voice start to rumble throughout the pack house.

“Can we have all the Alphas, Lunas, and witches in the big study? The war council is going to begin.”

**Episode 4313**

**Greyson**

I looked around the study in the Redwood pack house, knowing that, momentarily, it would be packed with Alphas, Lunas, and magic users from all the packs in the alliance. A lot of us were still recovering, but this war council was going to plot out our next steps in this war. We needed it if we had any hope of regaining control over Malakai, so I was trying to breathe and get us as set up as possible to review things together.

Across the massive round table in the center of the room that Torin had put in, I rolled out a huge map of our territory and the surrounding areas. Rishika was standing next to me, and as soon as it was unfurled and weighed down. I handed her a pen and said, “Mark where you saw the patrols today.”

She nodded and began making notes on the map, and I was a little less than thrilled to see how many she was marking down. The Bitterfangs along with their allies seemed to have an endless supply of wolves. That was definitely a problem. But not all the wolves were trained the way the Bitterfangs were, and that was something we needed to take advantage of.

While Rishika was working, the study door opened, and Xavier walked in, saw the empty room, and said, “Guess I’m the first one here?”

“Yeah,” I replied, nodding. “We’re just gathering some intel from this morning. Rishika took some of the pack on patrol. I want us to get a bird’s eye view of where the Bitterfangs are other than the Vanguard palace.”

Xavier stepped forward so that he could review the map and then pointed to a spot that Rishika *hadn’t* marked. “We did a run last night, and the closest Bitterfang patrols we saw were only a few miles from the border of the Samara territory.”

With a heavy sigh, I nodded at Rishika, and she marked the area down as well. Seeing it all laid out like this, the situation certainly seemed dire. It wasn’t anything we couldn’t handle, but we were going to have to be particularly strategic about how we went forward from here. We couldn’t risk anything like what happened with our attempt to reclaim Vanguard palace. The Bitterfangs would just continue to pick us off until there was nothing left.

Eventually, the door opened again, and the other Alphas and Lunas filed in. The room continued to fill as everyone sat around the table, until there were sixteen of us inside: Duke and Paige, Porter and Rowena, Mace, Lucian and Aysel, Xavier and Ava, Cali and myself, Adair, Torin, Big Mac, and Kira. Rishika had stuck around as well, in order to deliver info about what she’d learned on her patrol to the rest of them.

“I’m not looking forward to wasting half my day on werewolf war stuff,” Big Mac grumbled under her breath, although everyonecould hear her. I didn’t blame her for being frustrated with the situation. She was a witch, not a wolf, and I knew she was helping us because of my mother. This war normally wouldn’t have been something any witch, let alone Big Mac, would’ve had to concern herself with.

As everyone found their seats, Cali sat down next to me. She was frowning, clearly lost in thought. “What’s wrong?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, but her eyes moved to Xavier.

A flash of jealousy shot through me at the look, but I forced myself to swallow it down and leave it there. It had no place here right now. We had much more serious things to be worried about than petty jealousies. Besides, there could be plenty of reasons she was wary of him other than the *due destini*.

I set a hand on top of hers and said, “I’m here if you want to talk about anything, love.”

Once again, her eyes went to Xavier, but this time she said, “Later,” which was enough for me for now. I nodded and then stood back up to address the room.

“All right. If everyone is ready, then let’s get started.” The quiet murmur in the room came to a stop, and I started immediately by directing everyone’s attention to the map. “So, as far as we know, the Bitterfangs and their allies are staying put for now, which is good. This gives us time to figure out our strengths and advantages and how we can put them to use to outsmart their forces. We need to be strategic and careful moving forward. I know I speak for all of us when I say we don’t want a repeat of last night.”

From there, I nodded at Rishika, and she stood up, drawing all eyes to her. “So far, what we know is that they have increased their numbers, likely due to their allies. Some of these new recruits are highly trained, but others are a mixed bag. It’ll be hard for us to take them head-on like we were forced to do yesterday.”

Just remembering how we’d tired so quickly yesterday and how the Bitterfangs and their allies just kept coming brought a frown to my face. I wasn’t lying when I said I did *not* want us to ever be in that situation again. We couldn’t afford it.

“What if we try to outflank them by attacking from either side?” Mace asked.

Duke shook his head. “We kind of did that yesterday, and it didn’t give us much of an advantage. The only thing it really did was help us escape. Barely.”

“What if we made better use of the witches?” Porter asked. “We could lead in with some attacks of magic over the sides of the estate walls and then draw them out of the palace?”

Lucian let out a loud, room-filling scoff. “What if you set my palace on fire? Again!”

“Lucian,” Cali said in a calm voice, aiming to soothe him. “We’re just discussing ideas. We won’t do anything to damage your home if we can help it, but it might be necessary if we want to actually get the palace back.”

I couldn’t help but smile. While I didn’t like the scenario we were in, I loved that Cali was by my side. By my side and speaking up like the Luna she would one day be. And her keeping Lucian placated was another bonus. It was one of the many things Cali was best at in these kinds of situations: keeping things calm. And even the overzealous prince seemed to be soothed by her words, if only slightly.

Adair held out a hand and said, “What about something more covert?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“How about we send a contingent inside to make an assassination attempt on Malakai’s life? We could move quietly if it was just a small team, and the Bitterfangs would probably fall apart without his leadership.”

“I disagree,” I said. “They could just rally behind Honora. There’s too big of a risk that he might just end up becoming a martyr and making things worse.”

Xavier finally decided to join the mix by plainly asking, “What about Armin?” I wished that he hadn’t. I internally groaned, tossing him an annoyed look that he either didn’t notice or didn’t care to acknowledge. Of course we needed to recover Armin, and I hadn’t forgotten about him, but the last thing I wanted was for Lucian to erupt all over again. I’d already had that argument this morning, and I wasn’t interested in doing it again. “I talked to Marissa about what the Bitterfangs did to the prisoners, and it was brutal,” Xavier continued. “We don’t know what they’ll do to Armin the longer they have him, and now that he’s alone, all their focus is on him.”

To Lucian’s right, Aysel’s face fell. I wanted to tell Xavier to shut the fuck up, that his words were *clearly* agitating Lucian and Aysel, but now I was forced to address it in front of everyone. “As I told Lucian, Armin’s rescue is definitely a priority, but we have to be smart about it. You all couldn’t find him the first time around, so he might not be in the dungeons.” I looked over at Lucian and Aysel. “Where else could he be in the palace?”

“Maybe the towers?” Lucian replied. “Those are also secluded.”

“Okay. So whatever plan we come up with, we’ll have to make sure that Armin is not forgotten, and that plan will have to take us by the towers to check there as well,” I said.

“So, we know what our goals are,” Mace declared. “Get rid of the Bitterfangs, find Armin, and take back the Vanguard palace. But we still don’t have a *plan*.”

“I agree, but I think I might have an idea,” I said. “At least a starting point for one.” Everyone’s eyes shifted over to me, and I took a moment to lock eyes with everyone at the table. Then I took a deep breath and looked down at my mate. “The next step forward is Cali.”

**Episode 4314**

The weight of everyone’s eyes on me felt as heavy as if an anvil had been dropped on me. I was getting looks ranging from confusion to anger—the latter of which was coming from Xavier.

“Who, me?” I asked Greyson. “What can *I* do?”

“You can’t put her in danger,” Xavier snapped. My eyes went over to him, and I was truly surprised by his angry tone. It was as comforting as it was bewildering. I really wished that we could make heads or tails of whatever this magic was that had a hold on him. Would that explain why it felt like I was constantly getting two different versions of him lately?

My gaze then flicked to Ava. Xavier had just spoken up for me. But Ava looked classically stoic. If she was pissed off at Xavier for saying something, she certainly wasn’t showing it.

*Damn, I was kind of hoping to see her jealous.*

Greyson looked at his brother. “I’m not going to put her in danger,” he said. “I mean that Cali was the one who got us out of the trap that Malakai set for us. We need to continue to rattle them with magic, since it’s clear that they haven’t figured out how exactly to battle against it. We need to lean on that. Julia was right for pointing that out to us. It’s our one advantage.”

*Wow, talk about no pressure.*

“Artemis, Adair, and I are going to train more today,” I said. “But I’m not sure how exactly we could channel my magic to take out the Bitterfangs or get the palace back. I can blast things and put up shields, but I’m not sure… I want to do more, but I just—I don’t—” I was rambling, but I felt put on the spot by Greyson’s declaration and just wasn’t positive I could live up to these expectations.

Luckily, Greyson cut in. “You’re already doing enough, love. We’ll figure this out between all of us.”

I shook my head. “But we need more power. Even though we have Dani, we’ve never tried to have her amplify multiple people at once.”

The roster of magic users we had was sizable, but not huge. Of course we had Torin, but his reverse healing power caused him so much distress, and I couldn’t just ask him to do that nonstop. He was meant to be a healer, not a killer. Then a thought occurred to me. *Maybe we could call Maren? Would she help?* But even as I thought it, it felt like a lost cause. She had Fenrir to take care of, and I didn’t know if either Greyson or Mace would ask that of her.

A frown came to my face as I mulled it all over. I *did* have my grandmother in the Fae world, but I didn’t know if I’d be able to get in touch with her in time, and even if I could, the Fae had no stakes in this werewolf war. They shied away from signing onto battles that had nothing to do with them. It’d be a hard sell convincing them to put their lives at risk for no return.

I felt bad not having more to offer—more magical power, more Fae connections. But I didn’t want to promise anything I couldn’t guarantee. I wanted to be realistic.

As if he could hear my spiral, Greyson placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder and looked at me. “We can always find out what Dani’s capable of. We *have* a lot of power, that’s not the issue. We just need to *use* it the best we can.” Then he looked around the room and addressed everyone. “We can’t ignore how useful magic is to us. It’s helped us in all our battles up to this point, and since Malakai is so averse to it, he doesn’t understand it or know how far it can extend.”

Kira raised a shaky and said, “I could maybe mix up some magical bombs?”

Lucian leaned forward in his seat. “Not to use against my palace, though, right?”

Greyson let out a long sigh. “We’re not trying to destroy your palace, Lucian,” he said. “You understand that in order to get it back at this point, we’re going to have to go all out.”

“And if my palace is compromised, what? You’re going to let a priceless family heirloom crumble?”

Greyson sighed again. I knew where Lucian was coming from. The Vanguard palace was his home, or at least one of them. And if it actually was in his family for as long as he said it was… it would be upsetting to see this happen to it.

*Remember how we felt when we lost the lake house?* I mind linked to him. *It’s hard to have no home. Just try being a little patient with him.*

He glanced sideways at me and replied. *I know, but sometimes things must be sacrificed in order to save actual lives. He needs to accept that.*

*I agree, but I don’t want to discount his feelings.* I told him. *Making him feel invalidated isn’t going to do anyone any good.*

Likely due to the fact that Greyson had stopped speaking for a bit, the group started to talk all at once. It started out with them bouncing ideas off one another, but then the debate started to grow more heated. Everyone had their own ideas about how best to handle things, and to make matters worse, a lot of the methods that people were coming up with were in direct opposition to what someone else thought was best. It was creating more than a little tension.

As Greyson returned to the conversation himself, I slid out of my chair and went over to Kira, who was speaking to Big Mac about how to strengthen their magical shields. Kira was talking a mile a minute about the ideas that she had, while Big Mac was watching her like she was trying to explain to her, step-by-step, how to watch paint dry.

“You okay, Big Mac?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I did *not* bring enough alcohol for this meeting.”

I looked down at the huge coffee mug she had in her hand and frowned. I had assumed she was drinking coffee. Kira kept rattling on, so Big Mac put a finger to her mouth. “I’ll be back,” she said, and then she stood up and ambled out of the office with her mug in hand.

After watching her go, Kira turned and looked at me warily. “We need to figure out how to improve the shield design somehow, maybe with Dani’s help. I’m still not sure how to use our magic against the Bitterfangs without someone getting hurt or the palace getting destroyed.”

“Yeah. I know it’s hard. We want to preserve it—the Vanguards deserve for us to at least try our best to,” I replied. “You never think that you’re going to have to sacrifice your own home in order to live, but it’s beginning to look like Lucian might have to make that choice sooner rather than later.”

I glanced over to where Lucian was engaged in a hushed, heated debate with Greyson and Xavier. Looking Xavier over, I was trying to determine if I could see anything off about him. What kind of magic could be affecting him? He looked fine. He was healthy and alert. There was a little scowl on his face, making a sexy crease between his brows. My fingers itched—literally fucking *tingling*—to reach out and smooth it out.

Then out of nowhere, he looked up, and our eyes met. My heart slammed, and I took a subconscious step in retreat. It was dumb of me to do, because he was still all the way across the room from me, but I suddenly felt… too close.

“Hey!” I heard the screech of a voice as I registered the feeling of stepping on someone’s foot. I nearly toppled to the ground when I side-stepped, then looked back to where Aysel was sneering at me. “Watch it!”

“Sorry,” I blurted, and she stormed away from me. When I looked up again, Xavier was looking away from me.

Hell, for all I knew, he probably wasn’t even looking at me to begin with. I needed to stop imagining useless stuff. It wasn’t helpful, and all it was doing was making me feel worse. Until we could figure out this situation with Xavier and whatever this magic was that was holding onto him, it would probably be best for me to just not consider *us* at all.

As if I could actually stop myself…

Finally, I managed to drag my eyes away from him and back over to Kira, who was watching me sympathetically. She set a hand on my back and said, “We’ll figure out what’s wrong with him, Cali. I promise you.”

I nodded at her. “I know, but that’s not the only thing I’m worried about. Will figuring out what’s wrong with him fix everything?”

Kira frowned at me. “Even *I* can’t answer that.”

I lowered my head. “Yeah… I know.”

Big Mac came walking back into the study with her now-full mug, and she returned to her seat next to Kira. She looked revitalized and wagged a finger excitedly at Kira when she reached us. “I figured it out! How to use magic to take away the Bitterfangs’ advantage!” Despite the fact that she was only addressing Kira, she’d spoken so loudly and confidently that it drew everyone’s attention to her. She took in everyone’s gazes and then rolled her eyes and turned to face them all. “I know what we need to do,” she announced. “We take away their wolves.”

**Episode 4315**

**Xavier**

Big Mac’s words sent a shiver down my spine. I immediately started to have visceralflashbacks of losing my own wolf. I even flinched as I thought about it—it wasn’t something that I’d have ever wished on my own worst enemy. Of course, now here we were, in a position to do that to our enemies, and… If there was a way Big Mac could pull it off, I knew firsthand how debilitating it could be.

Greyson crossed his arms as he looked at the witch. “You could do that? How?”

“Shifting is a type of magic,” Big Mac said. “It’s something old and ancient, of course, but magic nonetheless.”

Next to me, Ava muttered, “Which is ironic, since Malakai *hates* magic but loves his big ol’ wolf.”

“I think we can figure out a way to separate someone from their wolf,” Big Mac continued. “If we can do that, then the Bitterfangs won’t know how to fight. It would turn this from an even match to us versus children, essentially.”

Shaking my head, I asked, “You can really do this? Take away *just* the Bitterfangs’ wolves?”

She hesitated a little too long for my liking, and I got a sense of foreboding at the silence. Eventually, however, she took a breath and said, “Well, it wouldn’t be just *their* wolves…”

I didn’t like that *at all*. “I hope you’re not saying what I think you are.”

“Something like this would be a blanket spell. Something like this—that could affect such an ancient magic—would take all the energy of all of the witches in this house. There’s no way we could make sure it affects all the Bitterfangs without also affecting any other wolf in the vicinity.”

This caused an immediate uproar amongst the wolves, the loudest of which was Lucian, who barked, “Oh no, you’re not taking away *my* wolf.”

Mace quickly agreed. “That’s a big no from me.”

“I don’t want any magic touching *my* wolf,” Duke added, scowling.

Big Mac rolled her eyes as if she was terribly put out by the wolves not wanting a literal whole half of their souls stripped away from them. “It would just be temporary. Just for the duration of the next battle, and it’ll give you an advantage, because you’ll still have the Fae, vampires, and magic on your side.” She was still getting resistance, so she crossed her arms and sat back in her chair. “This is how we gain the upper hand, whether you like it or not.”

That definitive statement made the Alphas quiet down, but the tension in the air was still thick—almost noxious. I *hated* that this seemed like the best solution. I’d already felt what it was like to lose my wolf once, and I didn’t enjoy it at all.

“What will a spell of this magnitude do to the witches who cast it?” Cali asked with a nervous look on her face.

When Big Mac looked over at her, she seemed surprised that anyone would ask that, but then she smiled warmly. “It’ll drain us a bit. We’ll need someone to guard us as we hold up the spell, and it would take four of us to do.”

Immediately, I chimed in. “Then you can’t do it. There are only three of you.” I clocked Big Mac, Kira, and Rowena around the room. “Unless there’s someone I’m not thinking of.”

“Dani.” Kira looked over at Big Mac and said, “You want to ask Dani to help, don’t you?”

Big Mac shrugged. “It’s the only play. She’s a magnifier. It might be what we need to ensure that a spell of this magnitude works.”

I could see the look on Kira’s face and was worried about her. It felt like we were clawing our way back to a good place, and the last thing I wanted was to put her in an uncomfortable position and cause her to retreat again. I understood that it was what was necessary in order to be able to cast such a powerful spell, but at the same time, if we polarized our allied witches to pull this off, we might win this battle, but at too great a cost.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked Kira. “You’re a Samara. If you don’t want to risk it, I won’t make you.”

Kira shook her head. “I’ll do it. For the good of the packs.”

Across the table from me, Rowena nodded. “Me too. This is worth bending for.” She took Porter’s hand in solidarity, and he nodded at her. I knew that he felt similarly—if Rowena wasn’t comfortable with it, he would have protested.

For a brief moment, I couldn’t help but feel inspired by these three. As prickly as Big Mac was, as fierce as Kira could be, and as reserved as Rowena could be, they were all taking massive steps out of their comfort zones for our benefit. If they were willing to do something so huge so that we came out on top, we at least needed to support them as Alphas.

“If there’s anything I can do,” I told Big Mac, “let me know.”

Lucian, Duke, and Mace, who’d seemed to come around to the idea as well—if reluctantly—made their own sounds of affirmation.

“How long will it take you to prepare a spell like that?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac sighed. “A bit. It’s not a simple process. We’ll need materials and to do some pre-rituals to gather our strength.”

Greyson nodded. “Start with whatever preparations you need to do, but I want all the wolves in agreement before we *do* anything. If they don’t all agree, we kill the plan. But if they do, then we don’t want to waste too much time.”

Standing up from the table, Big Mac said, “Let’s go, ladies. We’ve got work to do.”

With that, Rowena and Kira stood up as well, and the three of them left the study.

Once the witches were gone, I looked back over at my brother and took a deep breath. “All right, so that’s sorted. What do we do in the meantime?”

“We come up with a battle plan,” Greyson said. He spread his hands across the map and said, “With that spell, this next fight will be totally unprecedented. We’re going to have to make sure that we’re giving ourselves as many advantages as possible.”

“Maybe,” Cali started to say, and everyone looked over at her. “Maybe this would be a good time for a break? Everyone can take some time to mull this over, top up on coffee and rest, and then we can reconvene later?”

Greyson gave Cali a warm smile, which she returned, and I had to swallow a pang of jealousy. “I think that’s a great idea.” He looked around at everyone then. “Let’s break. I’ll have Rishika spread the word when we’re ready to meet again.”

With that, everyone began to get up and file out. Cali set her hand on Greyson’s arm and said, “I’m going to plan a candlelight vigil for tonight. I think we all could use something like that,” and then she walked out of the room.

Aysel, who looked a little worse for wear, looked at her brother and said, “I’m going to go lie down,” and then she left the room as well.

Most of the council left the study one by one, but apart from Greyson and me, Mace and Porter lingered. “Should we help with the battle plan?” Mace asked.

Greyson nodded. “We’ll get to that. Why don’t you go get something to eat first? We’ll wait. Cali’s idea was a good one. Refuel and generate some ideas, and then we’ll start putting some things together.”

They nodded and left the room, but I didn’t follow. I remained sitting in my seat watching Greyson, who was now studying the map intently, until he noticed me hanging behind. “You don’t have to stay.”

“I know, but I have a question…”

My voice trailed off. I hated this—how vulnerable I felt. I truly thought it would be a cold day in hell before I asked Greyson’s advice on something. It was a huge blow to my pride, so much so that I’d spent all morning trying to think of a way to avoid this, but nothing came to me. I needed to resolve this issue within my pack quickly, so I definitely didn’t have time to be distracted by anything unnecessary like my ego right now.

“What is it?” Greyson asked.

With a deep breath, I said, “Knox killed Jesse.” Greyson’s eyes widened, and I nodded. “Yeah.”

“So, what are you going to do? Kick him out of the pack?” Greyson asked.

I shrugged. “It was extenuating circumstances. The Bitterfangs forced them to fight to the death. Marissa told me about it. They told them that if they refused, they’d kill them both. She still feels betrayed by Knox, though. She thinks they should have both died with pride rather than kill a pack mate.”

Shaking his head, Greyson said, “The more I hear about the Bitterfangs, the more I hate them.”

“I’ve tried talking Marissa down, but I really don’t think she’s going to be able to let go of that anger,” I explained. “I told her that I would do what was best. I even told her that I would kill Knox if I had to in the past.”

“So what do you need from me?” Greyson asked.

It felt like trying to regurgitate a hook, but I made myself do what had to be done. “I need your help deciding what to do. Alpha to Alpha.”

**Episode 4316**

I was busy helping Mrs. Smith gather the white votive candles we were planning to hand out during the vigil later tonight. It was still early in the afternoon, so we had plenty of time to prepare, but Mrs. Smith wanted to get a head start, and I was grateful for the distraction. Lola was “helping” by lying on my bed and playing with one of the candles.

“So… Is there going to be alcohol at this thing?” she asked, setting the candle aside and looking at me. “I hope the answer’s yes.”

I frowned. “Lola, it’s a vigil, not a kegger.”

I didn’t think I’d ever heard of a vigil that involved alcohol, but I also hadn’t been to any werewolf vigils before, so for all I knew, it was par for the course.

Lola sat up. “Yeah, and people sometimes need alcohol when they’re sad. It takes the edge off.”

I rolled my eyes. “No. There will be no alcohol. This is serious. People died, Lola.”

“No, Lola’s right,” Mrs. Smith interjected. “This vigil is supposed to help the packs heal. We did lose people during the last battle, and that’s a lot to digest. If people want to drink, they should be allowed to.”

I sighed. “Fine—just as long as it’s not Big Mac’s moonshine.”

I pictured people chugging it straight from the bottle, getting rowdy and ruining what was supposed to be a somber time of reflection.

Mrs. Smith smiled. “No, we don’t want to get them completely wasted. Beer and wine will do.”

I nodded at the compromise as I placed the last of the candles into the box we’d use to carry them down to the yard. It was unfortunate that there was a need for us to hold a vigil at all, but I supposed things could’ve been much worse. I was just happy that we hadn’t lost any Redwoods during the battle.

“Great! I’ll go get Jay and take him on a wine run!” Lola hopped up from the bed and bolted for the door.

“Lola, wait!” I shouted. “I don’t think any of us should be leaving the pack house right now, especially for a wine run. We are literally at war. That last thing we need is for you and Jay to get caught out there alone, without anyone to have your back.”

Lola pouted. “But we’re out of my favorite red wine.”

“There’s plenty of wine and beer in the basement, Lola,” Mrs. Smith said. “Just go take a look at what we already have.”

“Fine,” Lola said, her frown deepening as she set off.

A moment later, Artemis knocked on the doorframe. “Hey, Mrs. Smith. Cali, are you ready to train?”

I looked at Mrs. Smith. “Do you need any more help?  I’m happy to stay behind—I can always train later.”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “No, we’re good for now. Go train; it’s important. I’ll manage.”

I followed Artemis downstairs to go meet up with Adair. On the way, we passed Big Mac, Kira, Rowena, and Dani discussing the de-wolfing spell out on the back porch. I wanted to ask how it was going, but I didn’t want to interrupt. They looked so serious.

Some of the Alphas had seemed pretty uncertain about allowing the witches to magic away their wolves, and I didn’t blame them. Werewolves never handled being stripped of such a big part of themselves very well. It was a good idea, but it was going to be a game changer for everyone involved—for better or for worse.

As we left the witches behind on the porch, I spotted Tabitha talking to Adair out in the yard. She looked really agitated. As we got closer, I picked up the tail end of their conversation.

“—don’t care if they need her! It’s dangerous! It puts a direct target on Dani’s back. I didn’t go through everything I did to find her only to lose her to a fight that has nothing to do with her! This isn’t fair! And she’s not thinking straight!”

In a rare show of tenderness, Adair ran his hands down Tabitha’s arms and pulled her close. “Tabitha, I understand, but Dani is her own person, and she can make her own choices. If this is what she wants to do, you shouldn’t stand in her way.”

Tabitha looked like she was seconds from crying. “But I’m scared for her! What if something goes wrong? And don’t tell me it won’t, because something *always* goes wrong around here! I can’t lose her.”

Adair enfolded Tabitha into a hug, and she relaxed against him, clutching him tightly, like he was her lifeline.

I felt guilty as I watched them. Tabitha was right—this war really *didn’t* have anything to do with her and Dani. They were innocent bystanders, and yet they were still being dragged into it, potentially putting their lives in danger. If they wanted, they could’ve left at the first sign of trouble, but they’d stayed to help, and now Dani was being pulled into the war—even if Big Mac had said the spell would only drain them for a little while.

I stepped forward, wanting to do something as pseudo-Luna.

“Tabitha, I’m so sorry that this is causing your family pain,” I said. “You have to know that we’d never have asked Dani to get involved in this if we’d had any other choice.”

Tabitha pulled away from Adair, wiping the tears from her eyes. “No, Adair is right. Dani has the right to do whatever she wants. I’m just kind of emotional about it.”

I nodded. “I know what it’s like to have a strong sister who puts herself in danger a lot.” I shot Artemis a pointed look.

Artemis waved me off and rolled her eyes. “Please.”

Ignoring her, I turned back to Tabitha. “I promise, we’ll do everything in our power to make sure that Dani is safe. I care about her, too, and I’ll protect her however I can. Greyson will, too.”

Tabitha nodded. “Okay. Well, I should get out of your way. You have training to do, right? I don’t want to get hit by a wayward energy ball.”

She turned and headed back to the house. Adair watched her go, his face twisted with worry.

“She’ll be okay,” Artemis told him.

“Yes, I know,” Adair said briskly. He didn’t turn to look at us until Tabitha had disappeared back inside. “Okay. Let’s train.”

“Are you sure—”

“I’m sure,” he said, his expression closed off. “Now, let’s get those energy balls going. Concentrate and focus on increasing your speed so that you can create them one after the other without delay. You have to be ready to do that in the heat of battle.”

Artemis and I exchanged a quick look before holding out our hands and getting to work creating energy balls, letting them grow before dissolving them and quickly forming more.

“Good,” Adair said, nodding as he circled us, studying our form and giving us small corrections and bits of advice. “Now, Cali, let’s see your shield.”

With a quick nod, I concentrated on the energy ball in the center of my hand, quickly stretching it out until it was large enough to shield my entire body.

“Great,” Adair said. “Good thinking, working with the magic you’d already conjured.”

Bolstered by his encouragement, I let the shield dissipate and immediately formed my sword.

“Excellent,” Adair said. He beckoned to Artemis. “Do you have any actual weapons on you?”

Artemis arched an eyebrow at him. “Did you seriously just ask me that?”

She pulled two daggers out of the sheathes on her hips and held them at the ready.

“Great. Go at Cali with everything you’ve got. Now!” Adair shouted.

Artemis didn’t hesitate for even a second. She raised her daggers over her head and bolted toward me.

“Oh shit!” I yelped.

I quickly shook my sword away and reformed my shield, just in time to block a flurry of Artemis’s rapid-fire attacks. Her blades clashed against the shield, creating magical sparks that illuminated Adair’s face as he watched us with a stoic expression.

I thrust my shield forward, knocking Artemis off balance, and then I formed my sword again. Artemis recovered quickly and came at me with her daggers, forcing me to block strike after strike. Her speed gradually increased until it became too difficult for me to keep up, and one of her attacks broke through. Artemis stopped herself before she could plunge the blade into my chest.

“Whoa, that was close!” Artemis took a step back and paused to catch her breath.

“You can say that again.” I let my sword dissipate and bent over, trying to catch my breath, too. I was tired and a little shaken after my near-stabbing experience, but I felt good. Accomplished. “I think I need a water break.”

“You’ve earned one,” Adair said.

I went up to the porch, where I had put a water bottle earlier. I had taken the cap off and taken my first sip when Ava appeared.

“Hey, Cali. We need to talk,” she said. “I know how I want to fix Xavier.”

**Episode 4317**

**Greyson**

While I waited for Xavier to rejoin me in the study, I thought about what we were about to do. Never in a million years would I have predicted that Xavier would come to me for advice on how to be a good Alpha. I supposed that meant we’d come a long way as brothers, no matter how often we still clashed. I wondered what Cali would think of this.

*It must have taken a lot for my brother to put his pride aside and come to me for the good of his pack, and the alliance. I guess I can put aside how angry I am at him for the way he’s been treating Cali—if only for the sake of our success in this war.*

It was true that we needed to fix any rifts within the alliance as soon as possible, and in order to do that, we were all going to have to put our differences aside. The only thing that mattered was ensuring that we were strong enough to defeat the Bitterfangs when the time came—and if that was going to happen, I needed Xavier and the Samaras in top form.

Xavier walked into the study, along with Marissa and Knox, who’d just arrived from the Samara pack house. The tension between the two wolves was palpable. Marissa looked like she was willing to tear Xavier apart to get to Knox, and Knox looked like he wanted to be anywhere else. Just one look at them made me understand why Xavier was so concerned. It was dangerous to let conflicts like this one fester in a pack—especially now, when we’d all need to have each other’s backs during the war.

“Sit down,” Xavier told his pack members, motioning to the two seats facing my desk.

Knox quickly obeyed, but Marissa stayed on her feet, her gaze on the floor and her arms crossed over her chest.

“Marissa,” Xavier said firmly.

Sighing, Marissa pulled her chair far away from Knox’s and then plopped down into it, still not making eye contact with anyone in the room.

I sighed, realizing that this was going to take every bit of diplomacy I possessed. But if I could help Xavier stabilize his pack, it would be worth whatever annoyance I felt at having been forced to get involved in the first place.

“We brought you both here because we need to figure this situation out before it gets in the way of us protecting our pack, and the alliance,” Xavier said.

“He’s already proven that he can’t be trusted to protect the pack!” Marissa shouted. “He’s too busy killing them himself! I don’t see why you haven’t exiled him already!”

“That’s not fair, and you know it!” Knox shot back. “I did what I had to do!”

Xavier held up his hands, and the two wolves went quiet and slumped in their seats. “Marissa, I hear you. I understand why you’re worried, why you’re skeptical. You have every reason to be. But these aren’t normal circumstances. Surely you can see that?”

“But—”

Xavier shot Marissa a hard look, and she snapped her mouth shut.

“What is *he* doing here, anyway?” Knox demanded, jerking his head toward me. “This is Samara business.” He plied me with a nasty glare before turning his attention back to Xavier. “Since when does the Redwood Alpha have any say in what happens in the Samara pack?”

“Since I decided it would be a good idea to have a neutral party here to help arbitrate,” Xavier said. “I’d like to hear Greyson’s opinion, since he has no loyalty to either of you. You should be glad that I’m doing my best to approach this situation impartially.”

“*Right*.” Knox scoffed, turning away. “Your brother hates my guts—that’s not what I’d call impartial.”

“To hate you, Knox, I’d have to care about you,” I said cheerily. “And I assure you, I don’t give a damn about you one way or the other.”

Knox sniffed but said nothing else.

*Good*,I thought. *That shut him up. This kid has gotten so many chances, and he still seems to have a chip on his shoulder for no apparent reason. I have to give it to Xavier for having the patience to deal with him at all.*

Marissa let out a little snicker.

I turned to her. “And I don’t know you, either. Xavier’s right—I’m totally neutral, here. I don’t have an opinion about either of you.”

Marissa scowled. “Whatever.”

Xavier nodded. “Greyson’s part of the alliance, so it’s in his best interest for the two of you to make amends. We all have to think about the bigger picture, here. So, to start with, you’re each going to tell us your side of the story.”

Marissa rolled her eyes. “Why are we doing it like this? This isn’t the way pack business is handled.”

Xavier nodded. “You’re right—usually, it’s not. But we’re at war, and I need to get this issue resolved quickly. I don’t have a lot of time to think the situation over, and we need to resolve it today. I’ll listen to what Greyson has to say about this, since he’s in charge of making sure that our alliance functions smoothly during this war. But ultimately, the decision about whether I punish Knox for what happened with the Bitterfangs and Jesse will be mine, and I will decide the final outcome as your Alpha. Any objections?”

Xavier looked back and forth between the two wolves, and neither of them said a word.

*I hate to admit it, but Xavier’s really good at this. He’s holding firm but explaining himself so that both wolves understand what the stakes are. I would’ve handled the situation the same way.*

“Marissa,” Xavier said. “You explain your side of things first.”

“What is there to explain? He *killed Jesse*!” Marissa shouted, jabbing a finger at Knox. “He could’ve chosen not to do it and died with honor—that’s what I would’ve done. But he didn’t. He chose to kill a pack mate. Someone he considered a friend! I don’t care what anyone says—I’m not okay with that.”

Xavier nodded. “And Knox? What do you have to say to that?”

“If I hadn’t fought Jesse, they would’ve killed us both,” he said flatly. “I thought that at least one of us should survive. Jesse chose to fight, too, Marissa. If he’d killed me, would we even be having this conversation? Or are you only mad because *I’m* the one who survived?”

I lifted a brow as I looked at Marissa, noting that she’d pursed her lips. Knox was onto something. By the looks of it, she would’ve had a very different perspective if Knox had been the one to die.

“All right, you two. Leave,” Xavier said. “I need to talk to Greyson in private.”

We both stood and watched them leave, Marissa headed in one direction and Knox headed in another, which was probably for the best.

Xavier shut the door and started to pace, his jaw set in thought. “I could banish him; that’d make Marissa happy,” he said, “but then he’d lose his wolf as soon as the council found out, and I’m sure they’d love to punish me for that.”

“And I hate to say it, but we need all the wolves we can get for the upcoming battle,” I said. “And Knox was right—it was clear that Marissa wouldn’t have been so angry if Jesse had been the one to survive. Not that I can blame her. I know how much Knox has put your pack through. She’s just upset that her friend died and someone she hates lived in his place.”

Xavier nodded. “Agreed.”

“Like you said—it’s your right as Samara Alpha to decide where the chips fall.” It still felt weird to call Xavier the Samara Alpha, but it was the reality now, and the choice really did fall to him. “But I’ll ask you to keep in mind that we do need as many soldiers as we can get. And personally, I think Knox was telling the truth. Sounds like he was stuck between a rock and a hard place.”

Xavier nodded thoughtfully. “I think I’m going to forgive what he did. It’s devastating that he was forced to kill Jesse—but on the bright side, perhaps this will mend what remains of the rift between me and the shrimp.”

I nodded and patted Xavier on the shoulder. “Good luck with whatever you decide.”

I left Xavier to deliver the final decision to his wolves and went searching for Cali. I’d just stepped into the main hallway when Lucian intercepted me.

“Ah, Greyson—just the man I was looking for,” he said. “Do you have a moment?”

I stared at Lucian, all too aware of the headache that had started brewing behind my eyes. I’d had way too many meetings today, and I still hadn’t drunk so much as a cup of coffee.

“Later,” I grunted. I tried to push past him, but Lucian blocked my path and grabbed my arm.

“I’m afraid that later won’t work,” he said. “We need to devise a plan to rescue Armin, and we need to do it now. I’ve waited long enough.”

I ripped free of his hold and looked him right in the eye, wordlessly daring him to touch me again. “I told you—*later*.”

I started to walk away.

“Fine, Redwood Alpha,” Lucian said coolly. “As you wish. Ignore me, like always. But be certain of this—if you refuse to help with Armin’s rescue, I’m simply going to have to go and get him myself!”

**Episode 4318**

I stared at Ava in confusion. “Wait. Say that again?”

“I want Big Mac to use her magic siphon spell on Xavier,” Ava repeated. “Seems like it would do the trick.”

I shook my head. “What are you even talking about?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “You heard Big Mac in the war council room. She said that she can de-wolf us because shifting is magic—an ancient type of magic, but magic all the same. It sounds like she can sift the magic out of all of us. If she can do that to our wolves, why can’t she use the same principle to counteract whatever’s affecting Xavier? That way, we won’t even need to figure out exactly what kind of magic is influencing him—we can just clear out whatever magic there might be and be done with the whole thing.”

I chewed my lip thoughtfully. “Are you sure Big Mac can do that?”

“What?” Ava eyed me like I was the world’s biggest idiot. “No, of course I’m not *sure.* I’m not a witch—how would I possibly know for sure? All I’m saying is that it’s worth a try. What do we have to lose?”

Usually, I never would’ve gone along with anything Ava had cooked up, but she seemed so determined, and I saw the worry etched across her face. She was genuinely concerned about Xavier. And perhaps she was onto something. Her idea didn’t sound all that far-fetched. I just needed a second to get over the surprise of realizing that Ava really did want to rid Xavier of the magic, even though there was a chance that doing so could affect her current arrangement with him.

“Okay,” I finally said. “Let’s go ask, I guess. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Ava nodded and turned around with determination, heading for the door. I rushed to catch up with her as she flew out onto the porch, where the witches were still busy discussing the spell.

“Big Mac, can we talk to you?” Ava asked, interrupting Rowena, who was reciting some strange chant while Kira used a quill to transcribe it into an ancient-looking book.

Big Mac sighed and gestured at the circle of witches. “I’m kind of in the middle of the *last* favor you asked me to do.”

“But this is important,” Ava pressed. “It’s about… that test you helped Kira with.”

Big Mac’s eyebrow rose. “Rowena, Dani, can you excuse us for a moment?”

“Sure,” Rowena said. She and Dani exchanged a confused look.

“I should probably come, too,” Kira said.

She passed the book to Dani, and Rowena went back to chanting again while Dani struggled to write it all down. It was all very witchy and intense, and it gave me confidence that the witches would be more than prepared to do what we needed them to do.

“Is this about Xavier?” Kira asked as we went inside and filed into the den, where we could snatch a bit of privacy.

“Yes. We might have an idea about how to fix him,” I said. “Or rather, Ava might.”

Big Mac sighed. “Have you two not realized what the priority is, at the moment? Because it doesn’t seem like it.”

“It’s just a question,” Ava said quickly. “We were wondering if you’d be able to siphon out whatever magic is in Xavier with the same process you’re planning to use on the wolves.”

Big Mac looked shocked at first, but then her expression turned thoughtful.

*Whoa, could this actually work? Is there a chance that Big Mac can just clean out whatever magic influence Xavier’s dealing with? Are we finally close to saving him?*

But my hopes were swiftly dashed when Big Mac shook her head. “No, it won’t work.”

Without another word, she turned to leave.

“Why not?” Ava demanded.

Big Mac sighed and turned back around to face us. “Because it’s too dangerous. We don’t know what kind of magic Xavier might be battling—without that information, the spell could hurt him.” Big Mac glanced between me and Ava. “Is that what you want? To hurt him because you think you know what’s best for him? Take it from me—mixing magic without any kind of roadmap is dangerous.”

“But what about the spell to de-wolf him?” I asked. “Will *that* hurt him, since it’s essentially the same thing?”

“No,” Big Mac said immediately. “With that spell, we’ll be targeting a specific magic that we know and understand. What do you think we’re doing out there on the porch? Sharing gossip? We’re synthesizing a specific spell that will latch onto the ancient shifting magic within the wolves. It’s not the same. So, to reiterate, without knowing anything about the magic we’d be attempting to siphon, it would be the equivalent of performing surgery while blindfolded.”

I nodded. “Okay, I get it. It was just a thought.”

Ava wasn’t so easily deterred. “Fine, maybe siphoning the magic isn’t the answer, but you have to do *something*! We can’t just leave him like this. It’s not right!”

Big Mac frowned and let out a heavy sigh. “I’m pretty sure we have bigger issues to deal with right now. Whatever’s going on with Xavier must be inconvenient for you girls, but it’s not a matter of life or death. He seems fine to me.”

“But he’s an Alpha!” Ava argued. “If something’s going on that could impair his judgment in any way, then I need to know about it, and it needs to be fixed.”

“Like you said, he’s an Alpha,” Big Mac said. “He’s survived up until now with whatever magical influence is hanging over him and seems to be making very ‘Xavier’ decisions from what I’ve seen. He’ll survive a few more days until we’re done with the war.”

“But, Big Mac, you have to—”

Big Mac held up a hand, silencing Ava. “You know what he *won’t* survive? Being killed by the Bitterfangs before I can finish my spell.”

Ava scowled at that, but she kept her mouth shut.

Big Mac flashed her a super fake smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, she left us standing in the den.

Kira lingered, wincing a bit as the sting of Big Mac’s denial settled over the room. “I’m really sorry about that, Ava. It was a good idea, really!”

“I don’t need your fucking pity,” Ava spat. “What I *need* is to save my Alpha.”

She turned on her heel and stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

“Well, she’s as delightful as always,” Kira deadpanned.

“I should go after her,” I said reluctantly. “I shouldn’t have encouraged her.”

I strode out of the room and, after taking a quick look around the house, figured Ava had gone outside. I bolted out into the front yard, and when I didn’t see any sign of her there, I walked around toward the back of the house and finally spotted her walking toward the forest.

“Hey, wait!” I called out. “You shouldn’t leave!”

Ava stopped and turned to face me. “Don’t worry about me, Cali.”

She turned away and kept walking.

“I wouldn’t be worried, except we’re at war and we’re allies… And you’re obviously upset!” I called after her.

Ava rounded on me, her eyes flashing. “What do you *want* from me?”

She was breathing heavily, and her cheeks were flushed. She appeared to be on the verge of either flying into a rage or dissolving into tears. I wasn’t sure how to handle Ava when she was this worked up. I wasn’t exactly intimidated, but I wasn’t comfortable, either.

*It's not like we’re friends*,I thought to myself. *She might decide to lash out at me just because of our history.*

Still, I cared that she was hurting. I couldn’t explain it. She was with the man I loved, and who I knew still loved me, but I still didn’t like seeing her suffer. We were supposed to be allies, after all.

“Things between you and me… It’s not a contest,” I said slowly. “We’re on the same side here. We want the same thing.”

Ava barked out a harsh laugh and shook her head. “We might be on the same path, but you can be very sure that we don’t want the same thing.”

I frowned at her. “What are you talking about? We both want to make sure Xavier’s safe, right? Or is that *not* what you want?”

Ava took a step toward me, and I resisted the urge to stumble back. “And what happens after we save him from this mystery magic, huh? What do *you* picture happening?”

My frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

Ava laughed again. “Caliana Hart, you really are a piece of work.”

“Why? Because I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about?”

“No, because I can’t *believe* you think I don’t know what you’re up to,” she retorted. “Just say it! The only reason you’re so hell-bent on saving Xavier from this so-called magical influence is because you’re hoping that once he’s free of it, everything will go back to the way it was before. It’s not enough that you have one mate who adores you—you miss having two mates fawning all over you and following you around like pitiful puppies.”

“I don’t know why—”

“Oh, *please*. Just admit it, Cali!” Ava said. “Admit that you want Xavier back!”

**Episode 4319**

**Xavier**

I’d gathered all the Samaras who’d accompanied me to the Redwood pack house in the room that had once been my study. I’d looked around for Ava, wanting her stand with me while I addressed the pack, but I hadn’t been able to find her. I’d considered waiting for her, but what I had to tell the pack was time sensitive. I’d just have to fill her in on my decision later. She’d already told me that she would support whatever decision I made about Knox’s fate.

I cleared my throat and eyed the assembled Samaras. “So, I have an announcement to make. After careful consideration, I’ve decided to allow Knox to remain in the pack.”

I paused as a smattering of whispers passed through the pack. A few people looked upset, which was to be expected. I’d already predicted that any decision I made would be controversial.

I locked eyes with Marissa. She was standing at the edge of the group with her arms crossed. Her expression was blank, which I knew was by design. She had to be seething inside, but she was doing a decent job of hiding it.

“If any of you have a problem with that, now’s the time to tell me,” I said. “I have to focus on our strategy for the war, so after today, we won’t be discussing this issue again. Speak now, or forever keep it to your fucking self.”

Geraint looked around before clearing his throat. “So you’re pretty much saying it’s okay that he killed Jesse?”

“Of course that’s not what I’m saying,” I said calmly. “What happened in the palace dungeons was a horrible, horrible thing, and Knox will have to atone for it. I haven’t decided yet what form that atonement will take, but I’ll have more time to think after the war has been won.”

A chorus of grumbles filled the air.

“Once again, if you’re unhappy with this decision, speak up right now,” I said loudly. “I’m an Alpha who will listen to your worries, but what I won’t condone is anyone muttering about this issue behind my back when you’ve all been given a chance to disagree with me. Stand up and say your piece now, if you have a mind to.”

The pack went quiet.

I looked around. “This is your final chance to say anything.” I lifted a brow. Still, no one spoke up. I nodded. “Okay then. That’s all.”

The pack slowly began to disperse, and I noticed that the whispers and grumbling had ceased.

Knox came walking over to me. “Thanks for believing me,” he said. “It means a lot.”

“I never thought you were lying, Knox,” I told him. “It wasn’t about that. All that matters to me is what’s best for the pack right now.”

Knox nodded. “I understand. And I want you to know that I’m ready to do whatever you need me to do. I want to prove myself. I *will* prove myself.”

“Right now, what I need you to do is prove to your pack mates that they can trust you,” I said. “Be by our side in battle, and right now give them space.”

Knox winced, but he nodded. “Agreed. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

I watched him walk off, hoping that the pack’s silence on the matter wouldn’t come back to bite me in the ass. I was surprised that Marissa hadn’t said anything, and I contemplated asking Ava to check on her, just in case she wasn’t as accepting of my decision as her silence might’ve led me to believe.

*Where* is *Ava, anyway?* I thought to myself. *I need to tell her about this. It’s important that she stays up to date on what’s going on with the pack.*

I went searching for her, starting with the kitchen. She wasn’t there, but all the teenagers were perched around the island, drinking hot cocoa. I lingered in the doorway and watched as Violet, Lilac, and Charlie tried to console Julia, who looked absolutely miserable.

*As an Alpha, should I step in and do something? I’m not* their *Alpha, but does that really matter, under the circumstances? There’s obviously something very wrong here. And I can only imagine what Julia’s going through right now.*

I hesitated, wondering what I could even say to ease Julia’s pain that the others weren’t already telling her. I quickly decided not to get involved. It seemed like Lilac and the others had the situation in hand.

I caught sight of Perrie, lingering a little apart from the others.

“Hey, Perrie,” I said. “Have you seen Ava anywhere?”

She shook her head.

“Isn’t that her outside with Cali?” Tabitha asked, pointing at the back window.

I leaned forward and squinted against the glare in the glass.

“Yes, that’s them,” I said, already heading for the back door. I’d just stepped out onto the porch when I heard Ava yell something at Cali.

*Shit. I should’ve known that they weren’t out here having a friendly chat. This* is *Cali and Ava we’re talking about.*

I rushed toward them, hoping to put a stop to whatever fight was brewing between them.

“That’s not why!” Cali shouted. “How dare you say that?”

“Just get the hell away from me!” Ava shot back.

I sprinted in between them, already holding out my hands to stop them in case things got physical. “What’s going on out here?”

“None of your business!” Ava shot back. “Go back inside.”

I glanced at her. “Are you serious?” I looked at Cali. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on here, or what?”

Cali crossed her arms and looked away.

*Wow. So she’s not going to say anything, either. What are they hiding?*

Frustration flared in the pit of my stomach.

*What in the hell is going on here? What could they be fighting about? Better question—what could they be fighting about that needs to be kept secret from me?*

“Are you both seriously not going to tell me what’s going on here?” I demanded. “You were both yelling at each other at the top of your lungs!”

Ava and Cali exchanged a look but said nothing.

“Fine,” I grumbled, stepping away from them. “Whatever. Don’t tell me.” I looked at Ava. “But you should go find Marissa. She’s upset. I pardoned Knox for what he did to Jesse. Marissa didn’t say anything when I made the announcement, but I’m sure she’s seething.”

Ava’s eyes widened, but she said nothing. Without another glance at me—or Cali—she rushed off to find Marissa.

I turned back to Cali, but she was already walking away.

“I have to go help Mrs. Smith set up for the vigil,” she, not looking at me. And then she was gone, too.

I stood there for a few long seconds, wondering what the hell I’d missed. I glanced out into the velvety darkness of the woods, wishing that we weren’t at war and that I could go for a run to clear my head. Unfortunately, it wasn’t safe to do that right now. It wasn’t that I was afraid of running into any Bitterfangs—I just wasn’t in the mood for a fight. All I wanted right now was to be alone.

*So much has happened today, I’m feeling overwhelmed. I just want this fucking war to be over so I can get back to figuring out what to do about—*

Adéluce’s shrill voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Did you miss me?”

“Fuck! Shit! Fuck you!” I hissed as an image of Adéluce materialized in front of me.

She smiled. “What a creative use of language.”

I scowled. “What the fuck do you want? What, do you need me to go hang from the roof with one finger?”

Adéluce’s smile widened. “Ooh, that’s a thought. But let’s save that one for a slow night.” She began to circle me, looking me up and down. “So, does Ava know?”

I sighed. “Does Ava know what?”

“That you chose Cali over her, back at the palace? I have to admit, I was on the edge of my seat waiting to see what you would do. Not that I was surprised when you ditched your beloved Luna like a sack of trash. You still have that soft spot for Cali, I see.”

“What does it matter?” I demanded. “It wasn’t like Ava was actually in any danger. It was just another one of your lame tricks.”

Adéluce laughed. “Of course it was—but you didn’t know that at the time. You really believed that they both needed you, and when it came down to it, what did you do? You chose Cali. You would’ve left poor Ava to die.”

I shook my head, unable to ignore the wave of guilt that was rising within me. “No. Ava’s a strong fighter. She would’ve saved herself. Cali needed me more.”

Adéluce laughed even louder. “Is that what you’ll tell Ava if she finds out? That you left her to die because she’s stronger? Do you think she’ll buy that?”

“She isn’t going to find out,” I said. “And you wouldn’t dare tell her, because you’d blow your cover. You don’t want anyone else to know that you’re alive, do you? Because if they did, they’d destroy you—just like I’ve fantasized about doing ever since you started fucking with me.”

Adéluce’s smile fell.

“Be careful with your tone, Xavier Evers,” she said coldly. “Never forget that I hold *both* your mates’ lives in the palm of my hand.”

**Episode 4320**

I couldn’t get away from Xavier fast enough—especially after what Ava had just said to me. Her words kept echoing through my head, setting off a wave of anxiety that I just couldn’t shake.

*How dare she accuse me of wanting to save Xavier just so I can get him back? Where does she get off, thinking she knows what’s going on in my head? She has a lot of nerve! She doesn’t know the first thing about how I feel.*

Of course, a big part of my indignation at Ava’s comment was due to my inability to deny what she’d said. She’d struck a nerve. No matter how hard I tried to suppress it, I always found myself wishing that Xavier and I could go back to the time when we’d been able to love each other freely.

Things had never been easy between us—the *due destini* had made sure of that—but at least we used to know that we wanted to be together. Now, we didn’t even have that, and it tore me up inside.

But as much as I longed for the old times, I wasn’t sure if going back to the way things used to be was even possible. Not after everything Xavier had put me through. I was worried that I’d never again be able to fully trust him with my heart. How could I, when he’d hurt me so badly and barely even seemed to care? He’d broken away from the pack, become the Samara Alpha, and taken another Luna—all without any indication that he’d considered how it would affect me. How could I ever feel safe with him again?

*Why am I even thinking about this? It’s a moot point. Xavier is with Ava now. I told Ava that I’ve accepted that Xavier’s chosen her, and with the way Xavier’s treating me, I have no plans to get between them. I mean that. Xavier seems to have made his choice, and now we both have to live with it. And that’s how things are.*

I spotted Greyson and forced myself to cut off that line of thinking. There was no use dwelling on what had been and what would never be again. I had a mate—and an Alpha—who adored me. What more could I ask for?

“Hey there,” Greyson said, smiling when he saw me. “What’ve you been up to?”

“Training with Artemis and Adair,” I said.

I had no desire to tell him anything about what I’d *really* just been up to. He’d been so understanding about what I was going through with Xavier, but I couldn’t help but wonder if—*when*—all that understanding would run out. Not that I’d blame him if it did. Really, it almost felt like Greyson was *owed* a chance to explode about the whole messy situation.

“Great,” he said. “Was it productive?”

I nodded. “Very.”

I was still a little distracted, and as much as I tried to fight it, my mind wandered back to Xavier.

“Where are you?” Greyson asked.

I snapped my attention back to him. “What do you mean? I’m right here.”

I moved in close and wrapped my arms around Greyson’s neck as I struggled to push my conversation with Ava out of my mind.

Greyson laughed and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Maybe so, but your mind is somewhere else. I can tell. You’ve been distracted all day. Want to talk about it? You know you can tell me anything.”

I sighed, realizing that I wanted nothing more than to be honest with him. But I couldn’t. I didn’t know if I wanted to talk to him about what was really going on in my head.

“Kira thinks that Xavier is definitely under some sort of magical influence—she and Big Mac have confirmed it. They’re just not sure what kind,” I said. Telling him about part of what was on my mind would have to do for now.

“So the blood test *did* work?” Greyson asked.

“Yes and no,” I said. “It showed that there’s definitely magic at play, but not what kind, or how much, or who’s responsible for it.”

Greyson sighed. “Damn. But at least we have a place to start, now… And at least you know that there *is* magic involved. That counts for something, right?” He bent down and kissed me, sending a rush of heat racing through my body. “Don’t worry, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

I sighed. “Maybe.”

*But will* I *figure out what to do about all these feelings I still have for Xavier? Will I ever be able to put him out of my mind for more than a few minutes? Am I doomed to yearn for him for the rest of my life?*

Greyson frowned. “Do you need anything from me? Just say the word and I’ll do it.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m good.”

*How sweet is it that Greyson’s willing to be here for me, even when I’m stressed out about his brother? He’s such a good man, and I’m so lucky to have him. I need to stop thinking about what I don’t have and focus on what’s right in front of me.*

I finally gave Greyson a big, genuine smile—as well as my undivided attention. “You’re already giving me everything I need and more.”

I pushed onto my tiptoes to kiss him. He leaned into it, and it was obvious that he needed this bit of closeness just as much as I did. Kissing him sent a wave of clarity ripping through my mind, and finally, I was thinking of no one but Greyson.

We broke apart at the sound of footsteps, and turned to see Mrs. Smith coming over.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “I just wanted to tell you both that the vigil’s about to start.”

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Greyson and I followed Mrs. Smith outside where all the alliance packs had gathered. I resisted the urge to search the sea of faces for the one I longed to see, but no matter how much I tried to avoid it, I spotted Xavier immediately. It was like a part of me always knew where he was, no matter what.

He was standing near the rest of the Samaras, but was hovering a little away from the crowd. It was just like Xavier to avoid being too close to anyone.

*I wonder if he’s mad that I refused to tell him what Ava and I were fighting about. It sure seemed like he was, earlier… I hated lying to him, but I didn’t have a choice. If we’d told him what we were arguing about, we’d have had to tell him everything, and that can’t happen. Not if we want to keep him safe.*

I could sense Xavier watching me, though he was taking great care not to turn and stare at me head on. It was as if he knew I was watching him, too.

I quickly shifted my gaze down to my hands and let out a deep sigh. I had to stop acting like this. It wasn’t helping me, and it certainly wasn’t helping Xavier. He’d chosen another life, and I needed to stay away from him.

Mrs. Smith picked up one of the boxes of candles and started to pass them around. Wanting to help and needing to do something to take my mind off Xavier, I picked up another box and got to work distributing candles. I started with Rowena and the rest of the Cobalts.

“Thanks, Cali,” Rowena whispered as I handed her a candle.

“You’re welcome.”

I quickly supplied the rest of the Cobalts with candles before I moved on to the Vanguards. I held out a candle to Lucian, who was looking glummer than I’d ever seen him.

“Thank you, Caliana,” he said softly. It sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “We’ve just lost so many already, and Armin might be gone, too, for all we know. I feel like there’s a hole in my heart.”

I wasn’t used to seeing Lucian so raw. He was typically so… *on*… that I sometimes forgot he was actually a real person, and capable of being vulnerable and genuine.

I took his hand. “Don’t worry, Lucian. We have to hold out hope that Armin is alive. Have a little faith. We’ll rescue him, I know it.”

“Thank you, Caliana,” Lucian mumbled, accepting the candle.

I moved on to the next person, and a familiar hand reached out to take the candle I offered. Holding my breath, I looked up to see Xavier standing right in front of me. He gripped the candle, his hand covering mine. We stayed that way for a long moment, neither of us moving a muscle. It was like we were holding hands, and I didn’t want it to end.

And in that second, my heart fell as I realized something I should’ve realized a long time ago. I’d been telling myself that my feelings for Xavier were irrelevant, and that I was prepared to let him go—but that was just complete, ridiculous bullshit. Ava was right. *Of course* I wanted him back.

**Episode 4321**

**Greyson**

I watched Xavier walk away from Cali, taking note of the wounded expression on my mate’s beautiful face. I hated that she was still hurting over my brother.

I moved to stand next to her, both of us holding onto our candles. I pressed my flame to her unlit wick and watched her candle surge to life.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice small. “I forgot to light mine.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’ve always got your back.”

At my mother’s gentle direction, we’d all moved to form a semi-circle. There was a bit of tension in the air, but that was to be expected. I took a step forward, knowing I needed to say something. The Redwoods might not have suffered any losses, but my choices had brought us all here.

I took Cali’s hand as we broke away from the rest of the packs to stand in front of the half-circle. I took a deep breath and Cali squeezed my hand, giving me the reassurance I needed.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming tonight,” I began.

I paused as whispers drifted through the crowd. I couldn’t make out what anyone was saying, but I waited, wanting to give people the time to say whatever was in their hearts.

Once silence had fallen once again, I cleared my throat and continued. “I know that none of us ever wanted to reach this point—where we’ve lost our friends, our lovers, our family to this war—but here we are, and we cannot let those losses be in vain. The sacrifices the packs assembled here have made? They mean something. The deaths of the people we care about? They mean something, too. They all died with honor, and tonight, we celebrate their lives—as well as the sacrifices they made to let the rest of us live to fight another day.”

I raised my candle, and everyone else followed suit.

I sensed movement to my left and turned to see Xavier striding forward with purpose. Unlike the Redwood pack, the Samara pack had actually lost someone, and this vigil was for Jesse as much as anyone else.

“I’d like to say a few words,” Xavier said. “If you don’t mind.”

Cali squeezed my hand again, and I shot her a small smile. It was wonderful, having a mate who could read me so well.

*We don’t even need to mind link for her to know exactly what I’m thinking and feeling. She just knows. That means everything to me at times like this. I need her more than she’ll ever know.*

Xavier turned to face the crowd, holding his head high as he looked to me. I nodded at my brother, urging him on.

“We’re here today to remember the wolves we lost,” Xavier said. “And I want to remind you all that this is a moment to be one with your packs, to relish your connections, to cherish the time you have with your pack mates, because tomorrow isn’t guaranteed.”

It struck me then that now, whenever Xavier talked about being with his pack, he was no longer talking about the Redwoods, but the Samaras. I glanced at Cali out of the corner of my eye.

*Xavier being the Alpha of the Samara pack is a good thing. I never really felt that way before, but now I do. It looks good on him, and some of the turmoil between us seems to have settled—at least with regard to our fight over the Redwood Alpha position. Not to mention that I now have Cali all to myself. I don’t always think about it that way, because of the* due destini*, but it’s the truth.*

“Tonight, let’s be good to each other,” Xavier continued. “Let’s listen to each other, and more than that, let’s move forward with those we’ve lost in our hearts. May they be with us in battle, and in times of peace—which hopefully won’t be too far away.”

After that, the crowd began to disperse. Xavier had spoken from the heart, and I was sure that everyone had felt it. I turned to Cali and saw that she was wiping tears from her cheeks.

“Do you want to go inside for a little while?” I asked.

Cali shook her head. “No, I’m fine.”

She wasn’t looking at me, though. Her eyes were on Xavier, and her expression was unreadable.

*This is who we are—the* due destini *is part of us—but that doesn’t mean that seeing her look at him like that, seeing her yearn for him doesn’t frustrate me. I want her to choose. Why can’t she? Why is it so difficult for her to choose me, and only me?*

I wanted Cali to choose me more than anything in the world—but I also knew that conversation wouldn’t go well. Especially right now.

Cali pulled her hand away. “I’m going to go talk to him.” She finally looked up at me and hesitated before asking, “Are you okay?”

I looked into her eyes and saw the love there, and I knew it was all for me. My frustration quickly washed away. I couldn’t stay mad when she looked at me like that. I was going to support her, no matter what. I loved her too much to do anything else.

I nodded at her. “Go ahead.”

She started to move away, but, as if I had no control over it, my arm shot out and pulled her in for a quick kiss before I finally let go. She smiled up at me before turning and walking off after Xavier. I had to fight the urge to follow her.

Everyone started migrating toward the pack house, where my mother and Lola had set out beer and wine. This was the part of the night where people would need to be able to talk about who they’d lost.

Rishika sidled up to me. “Is it awful to say that I’m happy we didn’t lose anyone?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. We can sympathize with the others while still being grateful that the Redwood pack came out relatively unscathed.”

Rishika let out a sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear it. We have hard days ahead, and I’m glad that we still have our entire pack to rely on.”

“Me too.”

As we followed everyone else inside, I glanced back and saw Cali following Xavier around to the side of the house. I deliberately tore my gaze away and refocused on Rishika.

“Do you feel ready for what’s coming?” I asked her.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said. “Sometimes I ask myself how anyone can ever be truly ready for war. It’s so unpredictable. There are no guarantees, and that’s scary. But I feel good about our chances. I admit, I’ll feel even better once the witches can tell us exactly what’s coming and when they’ll be ready. I hate waiting around like this.”

“Same here,” I said.

Artemis’s voice rang out through the din of the crowd. “Rishika! Where are you?”

Rishika started to walk off, but then she hesitated and looked up at me. “You good?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. Go ahead.”

I watched Rishika go, and then surveyed the scene. It was appropriately subdued, with small groups of wolves drinking and talking quietly. I heard snatches of conversation. Some were relaying stories about the people they’d lost, while others were cursing the Bitterfangs and plotting their revenge. I understood that completely. Like Rishika, I couldn’t wait to put our plans into action.

Ava appeared at my side and offered me a beer. “Nice and cold.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I popped the beer open and took a long swig. I had to admit, it hit the spot. According to Cali, I had Lola to thank for the refreshments.

“So, our mates are outside together, and we’re both in here,” Ava said.

I frowned. That definitely wasn’t anything I wanted to discuss with Ava, of all people. I shrugged noncommittally, hoping she’d just move on.

“How do you stomach it?” she asked, a strange expression on her face.

“Stomach what?” I took another swig of beer and angled my body away from her, hoping that she’d take the hint. “It’s normal. Losing people is part of war. You know that, and I know that. It’s hard, but we have to forge ahead.”

Ava smirked at me. “You know that’s not what I’m talking about. But if you want to keep pretending that you’re all fine and dandy with the two of them canoodling every chance they get, that’s fine by me. It’s not going to make what Xavier and Cali have go away, and eventually, you’ll have to deal with that. We both will.”

I gritted my teeth, wishing that her words weren’t hitting home. I wanted to bolt right out of the house. Ava might’ve been right, but she wasn’t someone I wanted to have this conversation with.

Undeterred, Ava drained her beer and crushed the can. “But maybe there’s something we can do about it. Better yet, maybe we can help each other out.”

**Episode 4322**

**Xavier**

I knew Cali was following me, but I just needed to get away. I was at the end of my rope. My self-control was frayed to nothing, and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to handle another moment like what had just happened with the candle. If anything like that happened again, I wouldn’t be able to control myself—and I couldn’t risk putting Cali in that kind of danger.

“Xavier!” she shouted. “Xavier, stop running away from me! Please!”

I let out a sigh and slowed to a stop before slowly turning to face her. My gaze immediately fell to her lips, and the overwhelming urge to kiss her nearly dissolved the last bit of resolve I had left. It was all quiet around us, and some people had started to go back inside while others lingered here. I was suddenly keenly aware of what we’d be able to get away with without being seen.

*Except by Adéluce, that is. She sees everything. Shit! Why didn’t I just stay with the crowd? If I had, I wouldn’t be in this situation right now. This is so stupid! I can’t be alone with her! Adéluce set clear boundaries when it comes to Cali, and every time I push them, something bad happens. I can’t keep doing this!*

Cali started to say something, but I got in first. “Cali, why do you keep trying to get me alone? We’re not together anymore. We’re not even in the same pack.”

Cali’s face fell, and all I wanted was to take her in my arms and let her know that everything was okay. But I couldn’t. Adéluce’s warnings were ringing through my head, and I had to keep pushing her away. The temptation was too great, and I had to stop her before I made a mistake that neither of us would be able to recover from.

“I’m not in the mood for whatever’s going on here, or whatever *feelings* you’re trying to work through, okay?” I snapped. “I can’t do this right now. You have a mate you can talk to about this, and—”

I fumbled, unable to finish my sentence. It hurt me so much to speak to her this way that I could barely get the words out. I wanted to tell her to go to Greyson—that was what I *needed* to do. It would end this latest encounter and keep her safe for another day. But I couldn’t say the words. Even if they were the only thing that would keep her safe.

A wave of self-loathing washed over me. I had to be stronger than this. For her.

Cali took a step away from me. “I only wanted to offer my condolences. I know that you—the Samaras—lost a good pack member.”

With that, she turned and ran back toward the pack house.

I watched her go, feeling like the biggest asshole on the planet. I let out a frustrated sigh and dragged a hand down my face, wishing I could just disappear. No matter what I did, no matter what I said, I was going to end up hurting her—for her own good.

Adéluce’s laughter started up, and I looked around, not sure if she was really here, or if the sound was just in my head. I supposed it didn’t matter. Either way, it was a stark reminder of the chains that bound me to her.

I tried to shake it all off before I started back toward the front yard. The image of Cali running away from me just kept playing through my head. Adéluce was getting exactly what she wanted—for me to hurt someone I loved so deeply. I was doing her bidding, and I was doing it well.

*But what else can I do? I have to protect Cali by any means necessary, even if that means hurting her. She has to stay away from me, and she won’t do it if I don’t give her a good enough reason.*

I opened the front door and stepped into the house. Immediately, I spotted the table of drinks. Blocking out everything else, I headed straight for it. I plucked a beer from a tub of ice and popped it open, then tipped the can to my lips and took a look around.

The Samaras were sticking together, but Marissa wasn’t with them.

*I wonder if Ava had a chance to talk to her yet. We have to speak to her before her anger can fester and infect the entire pack. I know there are a lot of bad feelings about Knox in the pack, and it won’t take much to stoke those flames. If we don’t get Marissa in hand, it could hurt us all. Luckily, Ava can be very convincing when she needs to be. Hopefully she’ll take care of it.*

Ava. Thinking about her brought up an entirely different crop of complicated feelings. I hadn’t lied to her earlier when I’d said I was grateful that she was my Luna. I could admit that she was important to me—more important than I ever could’ve imagined her being, after all the awful things we’d been through.

But that brief moment with Cali and the candle—the heat I’d felt, the tension, the longing… I’d almost forgotten what that felt like. I’d never questioned it with Cali. There had never been any reason to, but with Ava…

As if she’d sensed that I was thinking about her, Ava appeared at my side. She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me hard in greeting, sliding her tongue into my mouth and setting off a swell of heat that traveled all the way from my lips down to the pit of my stomach, and then lower.

I was surprised. Ava hadn’t acted like this in front of other people for a while. Her behavior felt territorial, almost. My wolf approved, coming to life and howling for more. I had to work hard to keep myself from falling into the feeling. Every time Ava did something like this, it reminded me of how easily my body reacted to her.

I pulled away and my wolf howled in complaint. “Are you okay?” I asked her.

Something I couldn’t quite decipher passed across her face. “I’m fine,” she said breezily. “I just want to be around you right now. Is that okay?”

I heard the hint of a challenge in her voice, and I didn’t want to set that aflame. I had enough going on in my head without adding a fight with Ava to the mix.

I took her hand and pulled her away, out of earshot of everyone else. “Have you talked to Marissa yet?”

Ava shook her head. “No, I haven’t. I do need to find her, though. No one’s saying much about your decision, but I can tell that…”

Ava kept talking, but the sound of Cali’s voice distracted me. She was in the corner, talking to Artemis and Lola.

*Stop thinking about her! You have to distance yourself! How are you going to do that if you keep fixating on her?*

With significant difficulty, I refocused on Ava.

“Come with me,” I said.

“Gladly,” she purred.

I took her hand and pulled her to the den. I peeked inside to confirm it was empty, then pulled her through the door. Ava had barely shut the door behind us before I was on her. The fire that she’d ignited with her kiss hadn’t gone out, and it roared with fresh life as I pressed her against the door and snaked my tongue into her mouth, moaning against her lips as her hands explored my body.

“Now this is *exactly* what I had in mind,” Ava said between kisses.

“Me too,” I replied.

I couldn’t lie to myself—I needed this. It was the perfect distraction from the longing I felt for Cali. Plus, it helped that Ava knew just the right buttons to push to make me stop thinking about everything but the sensation of her hands palming the growing bulge in my pants.

*Fuck, that feels good.*

I picked her up and tossed her onto the couch, then covered her body with mine. I pressed her down there, feeling the curve of her body against mine. There were still too many clothes.

“Xavier, what’s gotten into you?” She moaned as I hiked her shirt up and buried my face in her soft cleavage, inhaling her scent and longing to see her breasts swinging free, preferably while her body vibrated with the force of my thrusts.

“Hopefully *I’ll* be getting into you in a second,” I grunted.

Ava’s eyes flashed with passion. She lifted her hands over her head, giving me free rein to caress every slope and peak of her body. But then a loud cry rose up from somewhere outside, and we both stopped cold.

Ava shot to her feet, straightening her clothes and looking in the direction the sound had come from. “What the hell was that?”

**Episode 4323**

I started to rush toward the sound, but then Artemis grabbed my wrist and pulled me back.

“Let the wolves see what’s happening first,” she said.

Lola didn’t hesitate for even a second, bounding outside with the other wolves who were already pouring through the door.

I yanked out of Artemis’s hold. “I don’t want to wait! What if it’s the Bitterfangs? They’ll need all the support they can get, especially from those of us with magic.”

“Exactly,” Artemis said. “We’ll be needed as *support*, which means that we should figure out exactly what’s happening before we act. I want to get in on the action just as much as you do, Cali, but we have to be smart about it. Only fools rush in.”

I knew that Artemis was right, so I hung back while all the Alphas and Lunas ran out the door. I was surprised when Lucian’s voice rang out above the rest. “Out of my way! Move!”

Unwilling to wait any longer, I shoved my way out onto the front porch before stopping short, impeded by the bottleneck that had formed on the porch stairs. Elle overtook me and rushed to Lucian’s side, and I followed as she elbowed her way through the crowd.

I gasped when I caught sight of Lucian—and the broken, beaten man sagging against him. It was Armin. He was covered in blood, and his face was swollen and black and blue all over—so much so that I barely recognized him. His legs and knees were just as bruised and bloodied as his face, and it looked like he wouldn’t have been on his feet if Lucian hadn’t been holding him up. He was in horrible shape.

“So much for having to figure out his rescue,” Artemis muttered. “Good thing we hadn’t lit a candle for him, huh?”

“Artemis!” I said.

“What?” Artemis shrugged. “I’m right. And besides, it’s a good thing. He’s alive, and now we have one less plan to come up with.”

Greyson and Xavier made their way over to Lucian and Armin, their expressions grim. I wanted to ask Greyson what was going on, but he and Xavier were deep in conversation, and I didn’t want to disturb them.

“Everyone clear the way! We need to get him inside!” Lucian shouted.

I rushed back into the house and cleared a space on the couch for Armin. Behind me, I heard his groans growing louder as Lucian and Elle brought him inside. Lucian gently laid him down on the couch, and I hovered nearby, cringing when I saw how much worse he looked up close.

His breathing was coming in loud gasps, and his swollen lips were moving ever so slightly. It took me a moment to realize he was trying to say something, but he couldn’t get the words out.

“I’ll go get Torin,” I said.

I rushed to the kitchen, hoping my instincts were right. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw Torin scrambling out of the walk-in pantry, his arms full of snacks.

“Cali, what happened?” he asked, looking alarmed as he dumped everything onto the counter. “I heard everyone freaking out!”

“It’s Lucian’s second—Armin,” I said. “He just showed up, and the Bitterfangs have worked him over pretty badly. He’s covered in blood and bruises, and it doesn’t look like he’s healing.”

Torin ripped off his apron and followed me out of the kitchen. “He probably *is* healing, just slowly—if he’s as badly injured as you’re describing, his body’s probably overwhelmed. But I’ll have to take a look to know for sure.”

As soon as we got to the living room, Torin knelt at Armin’s side.

“This is bad,” he muttered to himself, but he’d said it loud enough that anyone close enough could hear him, and Aysel and Lucian winced. “Really bad. He must be one badass wolf to have survived an ass kicking like this.”

“Can you help him?” Aysel asked, placing a gentle hand on Armin’s forehead. “Please don’t let him die. Please save him!”

“I’m going to try,” Torin said, already getting to work. “It’s not the worst thing I’ve seen since arriving at the pack house, but it’s pretty close.”

Torin started running his hands over Armin’s body like I’d seen him do before, checking the severity of his wounds.

I just couldn’t believe that Armin had managed to escape. How had he gotten away? I’d seen the current state of the palace—the place was teeming with Bitterfangs. It was almost unbelievable that Armin had managed to escape and make it all the way here, especially in his current state.

I spotted Xavier and Greyson standing nearby, and I went to join them. They were mid-discussion, and I quickly realized they were thinking along the same lines as me.

“How the hell did he get here?” Xavier was asking. “Did he run away, or what?”

“Hell if I know,” Greyson said darkly. “It’s a wonder he’s still alive. He’s got some bad wounds. He could lose too much blood if his healing takes too long. Hopefully Torin will be able to help him.”

“It’s just strange that a single wolf managed to escape the Bitterfangs,” Xavier said.

Greyson angled his body so that he could address both Xavier and me when he responded. “I know, it’s strange. We shouldn’t jump to any conclusions, though. We should let Torin heal Armin enough to find out what he knows.”

“Agreed,” I said. “But we also have to consider the possibility that—”

“That this might be some kind of trap,” Xavier said, finishing my thought. “The Bitterfangs might be using Armin, somehow—like how they poisoned Knox and then used him to deliver their last message.”

Greyson nodded. “It’s definitely not outside the realms of possibility..”

We all watched and waited as Torin did his magic, moving his hands over Armin’s many wounds, soft blue magic glowing at his fingertips and radiating from his palms. Soon, Armin’s breathing began to even out.

“I’m almost done,” Torin said, still concentrating. “I’ve managed to speed up the healing process on his worst wounds, and I’ll patch up the smaller ones myself. That should leave him in pretty good shape.”

I glanced at Greyson and Xavier. “If the Bitterfangs allowed him to escape, what purpose would that serve?” I asked quietly.

“It could be a ploy to try to create a double agent, the way we tried to do with Knox,” Xavier said, shrugging.

Greyson shook his head. “That seems like an obvious move for the Bitterfangs.”

I nodded. “You’re probably right. We’ll just end up thinking ourselves in circles trying to identify their motives here. Armin is loyal to the Vanguard pack—to Lucian *and* Aysel—that much is clear.

“That’s true,” Xavier said. “Not to mention that we haven’t been all that good at predicting what Malakai’s up to in the past.”

“Exactly,” Greyson said. “We’ll find out soon enough. I feel confident that we don’t need to worry about Armin turning on us or anything like that. At least not of his own free will.”

“I just hate this,” I said with a sigh. “So much violence and chaos, and for what? What does Malakai hope to gain from all this?”

Greyson looped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me in close, and I saw Xavier flinch imperceptibly. My stomach twisted. What Xavier had said to me earlier wasn’t sitting well at all. But unlike before, when I’d blamed Xavier for his harsh words and let them hurt me, now, I was really starting to think that his strange, erratic, and downright cruel behavior was all due to the magic that Big Mac and Kira had confirmed was affecting him.

*It has to be the magic. He says these awful things and tries to hurt me, but then he turns around and proves how much he cares about me. If he hated me as much as he keeps trying to make me believe, why would he care about Greyson putting his arm around me? Why would he touch my hand the way he did when I handed him that candle? Why did he kiss me back at the summit? Why do I always catch him looking at me, watching me?*

I knew it was the magic, and I knew I had to figure out how to fix it. If he came back to me once he was free of whatever had a hold on him, then I’d take him. There was no point pretending that I wouldn’t. But first, I had to fix him. Everything else would come later.

“I’ve done all I can do,” Torin said, rising to his feet. “The Bitterfangs did a number on him, but he’s going to be okay.”

“Did you hear that, Armin?” Lucian said. “You’re going to be okay!”

The Vanguard wolves in the room pushed past everyone else to crowd around Armin. Aysel knelt beside him and planted a featherlight kiss on one of his black eyes.

Lucian threw a confused glance at Torin. “Excuse me, Fae—Torin. Why isn’t he answering me? I thought you said he was going to be fine?”

Torin nodded. “He will be, but he’s been through a lot, and it might take him a while to wake up. He was in really rough shape. Now that I’ve had a better look, I can say that he has some of the worst injuries I’ve seen in a long while. We got to him just in time.”

Just as Torin finished speaking, Armin’s eyes shot open. He grabbed Lucian’s collar and yanked him close.

“Listen to me!” he rasped. “They’re coming!”

**Episode 4324**

**Greyson**

Armin’s words washed over me, and I forced myself to stay calm. Unfortunately, the wolves around me didn’t make the same choice. The entire room exploded into confusion as panic took hold.

Voices rose as people began asking questions that none of us had the answers to. I was managing to stay calm myself, but I understood their alarm. I wasn’t ready for an all-out fight either—at least not yet—but it looked like we were going to have to figure things out as we went. It wasn’t like I could call Malakai and ask him to wait until we were ready for him.

Lucian had already shot to his feet and gotten to work rounding up the Vanguards. Xavier was busy gathering the Samaras, too.

The entire pack house echoed with the sounds of the Alphas barking orders to their respective packs. I took a moment to close my eyes and take a deep breath.

*This is ridiculous! Why are we reacting like this? We have to remember our alliance. We aren’t helpless. Far from it!*

“HEY!” I shouted. “Everyone, calm the fuck down!”

There was a lag where the volume of the noise seemed to rise rather than fall, and then, all at once, the noise tapered down to nothing. The room settled, and I turned to see both Xavier and Lucian glaring at me.

“Don’t yell at me like that,” Xavier snapped. “You might be running the alliance, but you’re not my Alpha. Remember that, and show some damn respect.”

“Save it, Xavier,” I retorted. “I was just trying to get you all to chill. Panicking and flying into a frenzy isn’t going to help anyone. Everyone needs to stay calm, and the Alphas need to gather and discuss this. Together.”

I glanced at the couch to see that Armin had passed out again, his head lolling against his shoulder. It looked like we weren’t going to be getting any more information out of him until he’d recovered.

“Come on,” I said, motioning to the Alphas to follow me into my study.

Lucian, Xavier, Porter, Duke, and Mace followed me into the room, and I shut the door behind us. The Alphas spread out around the large space, and I sensed the tension in the air.

“I suggest we figure out what to do as quickly as possible, because if they’re really coming, we’re about to have a battle on our hands,” Lucian said curtly.

“We don’t even know what ‘they’re coming’ means,” Xavier said. “How could the Bitterfangs regroup and stage another attack so quickly, anyway? Maybe Armin was talking about the wolves who followed him when he escaped, not the entire fucking pack.”

Porter nodded. “Xavier might be right. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions, here.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Regardless, ‘they’re coming’ makes it sound like an attack is imminent, whether it’s two, twenty, or fifty wolves. We should prepare by stacking our decks outside so that we aren’t caught by surprise.”

“Lucian’s right,” I said. “Each Alpha should choose one fighter from his pack to join him outside, and we’ll keep the majority of our people safely inside as backup.”

“I’m good with that,” Mace said, and the other Alphas silently nodded their agreement.

I popped my head out the door and signaled to Rishika, who quickly came to join us. I closed the door once she was inside and wasted no time filling her in.

“You heard Armin,” I said. “We don’t know what’s coming, exactly, but we need to be ready, regardless. I’m going to need you outside with me.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Rishika said, without hesitation. “Thank god for Armin. Without him, we might’ve been ambushed.”

“Armin has always been a loyal, effective second,” Lucian said wistfully.

For once, I didn’t feel the urge to tell Lucian to shut up. He was right, and so was Rishika. Armin had come through for us, and now we had to make sure we used his information to our advantage.

I sent out a mind link to Cali. *We’re getting ready to face whatever threat might be coming our way. For now, you and the rest of the pack need to stay inside and wait for any signal from us, in case we need backup. Spread the word and keep everyone calm and encouraged.*

*Got it*, Cali replied. *I’ll handle things in here.* *Just be careful.*

*I always am*,I said.

I heard the low hum of talking out in the living room as Cali shared the news. Her voice was comforting but firm, and I appreciated her approach. There was no need to talk the packs down, or sugarcoat things. They needed to be fully aware of the potential threat and stay on high alert, since we had no idea what was coming our way.

I led the Alphas and our fighters outside—just as a group of four Bitterfang wolves emerged from the dense trees that bordered the front yard. I shifted, and everyone else did the same, our howls filling the air as we launched ourselves toward them.

I liked our odds. We outnumbered the Bitterfang wolves nearly two to one. This was clearly just a small party that the Bitterfangs had sent after Armin. I snarled, wasting no time speeding toward the wolf closest to me. Xavier was right by my side, and he faced off with a Bitterfang just to the right of the one I’d targeted.

*Another one wants in on this*, Xavier mind linked, just as another wolf trotted over to join the first two.

*Then he’ll die, just like the others*, I replied.

The wolf in front of me feinted left and then went right before going in for the kill. Its powerful jaws only just missed me. I dodged and then swiped at the wolf, raking my claws down its side and doing a good amount of damage. I’d caught the wolf by surprise, and it yelped and skidded away from me before I could sink my teeth down into its leg.

Xavier threw the wolf he was fighting into the massive third Bitterfang, who was closing in on us with bared teeth. The two wolves collided with a thud and slid across the ground, their limbs tangling together as they fought to right themselves.

Xavier wasted no time joining my fight. In a flash, he leapt at the wolf and ripped off its ear, then darted away before the wolf had a chance to react. The wolf howled in pain but held its ground as streams of blood darkened the gray fur on its head.

Wanting to keep up the momentum, I lunged at the wolf and sliced my claws into the thin layer of flesh covering its ribs. I quickly backed out of the wolf’s reach, just as Xavier lunged and ripped into its right flank.

Spotting the perfect opening, I went in for the kill and latched onto the wolf’s throat, shaking violently and until it went limp. I dropped the wolf, and it crumpled to the ground before going still.

Xavier and I had always fought well together, but there was a strange, effective flow to the way we were fighting tonight, which suggested a level of growth that wasn’t always evident off the battlefield. Xavier had certainly grown as an Alpha, and our collective dominance was working in our favor. If we could fight this well when the stakes were higher, I knew we’d come out on top.

There were only three Bitterfangs left now, and Xavier and I flanked each other as we faced off with the two wolves that Xavier had thrown aside. They’d recovered and were now circling us, searching for a weak spot.

Xavier and I growled and fake lunged in tandem, keeping them at bay. We moved almost as one, rotating around each other so that between us, there were no blind spots and no openings for the Bitterfangs to attack. It was obvious that they’d seen the way Xavier and I had torn into their companion and were trying to be strategic so that they could avoid the same fate.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Lucian. He had one of the Bitterfangs cornered against a tree, and I heard his low, guttural growls as he nipped at the wolf, tearing chunks of flesh from its body until the wolf was limping and cowering in fear.

I’d always known that Lucian was an exceptional fighter, but this was the most vicious I’d ever seen him. His unfortunate opponent was covered nearly head to toe in blood, and one of its legs had stopped working, but Lucian wasn’t letting up. He just kept going after the wolf, as if they were still equally matched.

The princeling was showing no mercy, and he lunged forward again. I heard a sickening crunch as the Bitterfang lost the use of another leg. With a swift movement that my eyes could barely track, Lucian finally tore the wolf’s throat out.

*They’re in over their heads*, Xavier announced, drawing my attention back to the two wolves we were going up against. They were clearly stalling and starting to pull back.

*They’re going to run*,I warned the group.

*No!* Lucian said. *Don’t let them!*

But it was too late. The Bitterfangs regrouped and began to retreat into the trees. Lucian started to chase after them.

I quickly shifted back to human. “Lucian, no! Stop!”

“Lucian, come back!” Porter and Mace shouted, shifting back too.

Lucian only took a few steps into the trees before he finally listened to us and came trotting back out, not bothering to shift back to human like the rest of us. I could feel the fury rolling off him.

I spat on the ground, getting the last remnants of blood out of my mouth. “The Bitterfangs know where we are,” I said. “Let them run back to Malakai with their tails between their legs. We’ll face the Bitterfangs again—on the battlefield.”

**Episode 4325**

**Ava**

I watched as Lucian finally shifted back to human, relieved that the skirmish had been quick and that we’d come out victorious. We’d been in need of a decisive win, and that was exactly what we’d gotten.

*This should help raise everyone’s spirits a bit, show them that we can face the Bitterfangs and win… Even if there were only a few of them, this time round.*

I’d been excited when Xavier had asked me to accompany him outside for the potential battle, and I’d been even more excited about the prospect of kicking some Bitterfang ass after what they’d forced Knox to do to Jesse—but I hadn’t gotten a chance. Xavier, Greyson, and Lucian had beaten them too quickly for the rest of us to get any hits in.

I rushed up to join Xavier as he started walking back toward the Redwood house. I deliberately grabbed his hand and held on tight. I knew I was coming on strong, but I just couldn’t get the argument I’d had with Cali out of my head. It didn’t matter what Cali said, or how much she tried to deny it—anyone with eyes could see the way she looked at Xavier. I knew that look well. I’d worn the same one during the time I’d spent trying to get back into Xavier’s good graces.

*Of course Cali wants him back! Xavier is an amazing man, and a powerful, capable Alpha. She’d be stupid to let him go so easily.*

Things between Xavier and me had been so great lately, but I couldn’t help but wonder how real that was. I loved being with him, and being his Luna felt so *right*, but I wanted it to feel right and real for him, too.

If Kira and Cali were really onto something, and magic really was responsible for his behavior, then I owed it to Xavier to do whatever I could to help him. And if helping him meant I might lose him, then I’d just have to fight to keep him once the magic was removed.

*He does care for me on some level. I know he does. That can’t all be because of some spell, can it?*

Xavier tugged at my hand, interrupting my thoughts. “Hey, are you okay? Did something happen during the fight? It seems like you’re a million miles away.”

*He looks so concerned about me. That can’t be fake, right?*

I nodded. “I’m fine. A little disappointed, though. I barely got a bite in before they took off. Are you okay? I saw how well you and Greyson were fighting together. I have to say, it was pretty cool to watch.”

Xavier shrugged. “We’re both Alphas, and we’ve got a long history together. But now that we’re fighting—”

“As equals?” I finished.

Xavier nodded. “As equals, I’m not surprised we worked together so well during that fight.”

I smiled up at him. “Glad to hear it. That’s a good sign for the pack, too, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Xavier said. “A really good sign.”

We entered the pack house behind Greyson, Rishika, Lucian, and a few others.

“Armin!” Lucian shouted as soon as he was over the threshold.

Armin was sitting up, nursing a glass of orange juice, and Lucian rushed to his side.

“My prince,” Armin rasped. “I’m so happy to see that you’re back in one piece.”

“No happier than I am to see that you’re healing up well!” Lucian said.

“I’m happy about that, too,” Aysel said breathily as she cozied up to Armin’s side.

Elle joined Lucian as the princeling took a seat beside Armin.

“Tell me, Armin, what happened to you?” the princeling asked. “Are you feeling better?”

Armin waved his Alpha away. “I’m tired and sore, but not hurt. At least not anymore.”

I watched the two of them, unable to suppress my suspicions. It just didn’t make sense that Armin had just happened to get away from the Bitterfangs.

“How did you escape?” I asked. I’d tried to keep the suspicion out of my voice, but given the sharp look Xavier threw my way, I wasn’t sure if I’d succeeded.

Armin seemed to take me at face value, however.

“Excellent question.” He drank the rest of his orange juice and passed the empty glass to Aysel, who held it out like she thought a servant was going to appear to take it from her. When none did, she simply sat it on the coffee table. “The Bitterfangs captured me right after the tunnel collapsed,” Armin continued. “They dragged me into one of Lucian’s cells, and I pretended to be more… *affected* by their torture than I actually was. They got tired of torturing me after a while and left me alone.”

“My poor, poor dear,” Aysel said, stroking the side of Armin’s face.

“After a while, I was able to figure out the guard rotations. The first chance I got, I caught two of them by surprise when they came down with a plate of rotten food for me. They were weak and inexperienced, and I made quick work of them.”

“Tell us more!” Lucian shouted with obvious glee.

Xavier and I exchanged an eye roll.

“Certainly, my prince,” Armin said. “After I killed the two weaklings, I opened the locks on my cell with ease—I know those cells as well as I know the rest of the palace, after all. Then I took to the tunnels and escaped. But I assume that the two Bitterfang bodies I left behind were discovered, which explains why they gave chase and followed me here.”

“You did well, Armin,” Lucian said. “But you *are* a Vanguard wolf, so I’m not surprised.”

Armin grinned. “My prince, you flatter me.”

Greyson cleared his throat. “I hate to push you further, Armin, especially while you’re still recovering, but did you manage to pick up any clues about the Bitterfangs’ plans?”

Armin shook his head. “Like I said, I was locked up in the dungeon, so unfortunately, I wasn’t able to eavesdrop on any strategy discussions. But what I can tell you is that there is dissent in the ranks. The Bitterfangs are not as united as they may seem.”

Xavier stepped forward. “What kind of dissent? Is it widespread?”

I was glad to see Xavier stepping in. We needed to get as much information out of Armin as we could, and he didn’t need to wait for Greyson to take the lead.

“I can’t speak to how widely the dissent has spread, but I did overhear some of the guards complaining about Malakai’s aversion to magic,” Armin said. “They think he’s stupid to avoid it. They think that the Bitterfangs should be using magic to fight instead of being afraid of it. They consider this to be a weakness on Malakai’s part, and I tend to agree. Let’s just hope that Malakai doesn’t listen to them and change his ways. Though I don’t think there’s much chance of that. Judging by what I overheard, I doubt that Malakai will be changing his mind about magic any time soon.”

I grinned, my suspicion of Armin lessening. “That’s great news for us.”

“Really great news,” Greyson agreed. “Thanks, Armin.” He looked around at all the Alphas. “I think we have a lot to discuss.”

Xavier nodded. “Agreed. Let’s go regroup with our packs, and then we can meet in the morning. It’s already late, and we all need to be well rested so we can stay on our toes.”

Everyone agreed, and I followed Xavier as he made his way back outside. The rest of the Samaras had gathered in the kitchen, but I noticed that they hadn’t followed us out of the house.

“Should we call for the others?” I asked Xavier.

“No, I want to make sure that we’re on the same page, first,” Xavier said. “I know that you’ll back me, but it’s better if we put a plan in place before we talk to everyone. You’re my Luna, and I want to know what you think about what Armin told us.”

My heart warmed.

*I know this much is real. Moments like this remind me of how much Xavier respects me as a Luna. Even if the magic made everything else happen, I know that this part is genuine.*

“I think this is something we can exploit,” I said. “If there are Bitterfangs blaming Malakai for being unprepared for the upcoming battle, then it’ll be easy enough to turn them against those who share Malakai’s aversion to magic.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” Xavier said. “We don’t want to wait for them to turn on him—we need to push them into doing it.”

We both headed back into the house to talk to the Samaras, but Marissa intercepted me before I could follow Xavier into the kitchen.

“Can I speak to you?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said quickly.

Xavier and I shared a look before he reached out and squeezed my arm. “I’ll share the news with the pack. Come find me when you two are done?”

I nodded, and he left to go speak to the pack. Marissa and I ducked into one of the studies to talk in private.

“Are you okay?” I asked her. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with you since Xavier announced his decision about Knox.”

Marissa shook her head, and I noticed that her jaw was set. “No, I’m not okay, and I don’t know how anyone else is, either. Maybe the rest of the pack is okay with just following Xavier’s lead and letting Knox back into the pack with open arms, but I’m not. You didn’t see what I saw, back in the palace dungeons. I can’t trust him. I *won’t* trust him.”

“Marissa—”

“No, Ava. Listen to me. You two need to make a choice,” she said grimly. “Me, or Knox.”

**Episode 4326**

The Redwood pack stood clustered together in the den as Greyson explained what Armin’s revelation meant for us, specifically. I knew what it meant for *me*—that I needed to stay ready to use my magic and help however I could, even more so now that we knew it represented a source of dissent among the Bitterfang forces.

I eyed Greyson as he talked, glad to see that he hadn’t suffered any injuries in the recent skirmish.

*Everything happened so quickly, I still haven’t even had a chance to pull him aside and ask him how it went.*

It was a good enough sign, I guessed, that all the alliance fighters had come back safe and unharmed.

I tuned back in and heard Rishika telling Artemis that Xavier, Greyson, and Lucian had killed two members of the Bitterfang group. I processed that for a moment before turning my attention back to Greyson.

“Armin’s insight will help us be more strategic in this fight,” Greyson said. “We can’t just blindly throw ourselves at them—there’s too much risk in that. We have to be smart about this. Smarter than them. We have to hit them in their weak spot, now that we know what it is.”

“Sure…” Jay said slowly. “But what does that mean for the upcoming battle? Especially now that the witches are working on that de-wolfing spell.”

“It means that we’re going to be relying on our non-werewolf allies,” Greyson said. “We really need to make our peace with the fact that if we go ahead with this spell, none of us will have our wolves. I want to make sure everyone’s okay with that before we do it.”

A bit of discussion broke out among the pack as they weighed the pros and cons of moving ahead with the current plan.

“So you’re saying that we wouldn’t be able to shift at all? Our wolves will be completely gone?” Jay asked.

Greyson nodded. “Correct, you won’t be able to shift. At all. Not even a partial shift to use your claws.”

A wave of murmurs crested again.

“I know it’s a lot to ask of you,” Greyson said.

“It *is* a lot, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to kill those Bitterfang bastards,” Sage said.

“Same,” Zainab said.

“Me too,” Lola said, setting off a chorus of agreement from the rest of the pack.

“So, we’re all in agreement?” Greyson asked. “We’re going to let the witches cast the de-wolfing spell?”

Everyone nodded or spoke their agreement, except Elle. I spotted her sitting quietly off to the side, watching.

*I wonder what she’s thinking. Her human form is new to her, but her wolf form has been with her forever. For so long, it was all that she was. This might be a little harder for her to swallow than it is for the rest of the wolves.*

Greyson shifted his attention to Artemis and Adair, and then he finally glanced at me. “You three, along with Dani, Tabitha, and the vampires, will be shouldering a lot of the bigger burdens for the alliance during this fight. The witches will be busy handling the de-wolfing spell. This is new territory for a lot of us, being stripped of our wolves, but it’s our best shot at overwhelming the Bitterfang. Let’s just hope that it works.”

Adair nodded.

“I’m going to kick some Bitterfang ass,” Jay said, “with or without my wolf.”

The pack cheered, and a couple of people slapped Jay on the back. Lola smacked a loud kiss onto his cheek.

I was grateful for Jay’s interruption, since it broke the tension that had been building steadily ever since Greyson had made the announcement about the plan. They were being good sports about it for the most part, but I could still sense a bit of uneasiness, especially from Elle.

Greyson grinned at the wave of laughter that whipped through the pack as Jay started flexing his muscles.

“My human form is top notch, if you hadn’t noticed,” Jay said.

“Damn right it is!” Lola cheered.

“Jay may be full of himself, but he’s right,” Greyson said. “We’re all going to kick a lot of Bitterfang ass, *and* we’ll have the magical support to keep them down once the beating is finished.” He glanced at the magical contingent in the room. “Artemis, Adair, Tabitha, Cali—you should all get together and form a strategy. Once you have the details ironed out, come and tell me what you’ve decided. But for now, we’ve all had a very long day, and everyone should get some sleep.”

I grinned and nudged Greyson’s arm. “That means you need to get some sleep, too.”

“Oh, does it?” Greyson asked, his smile widening as I took his hand and dragged him upstairs to the bedroom.

Now that we had a plan that felt so promising, there was a bit of levity in the air. Between Julia and Armin, we now had some key information to get the jump on the Bitterfangs, and I knew everyone would sleep well tonight with the knowledge that we finally had an advantage in this war.

Greyson chuckled as he followed me into my bedroom. “I’m not sure how much sleep I’m going to get if we’re both in here.”

I kissed him in response, linking my arms around his waist, then letting my hands drop to his ass. I squeezed it gently and pulled him tight against me as I deepened the kiss, keeping it sweet and loving—right in line with the insane amount of affection I felt for this man, now and forever. Then I pulled away, wrinkling my nose.

“Oops. I need a shower, don’t I?” Greyson asked sheepishly.

I laughed. “Maybe just a quick one, to rinse off the blood and sweat and all.”

“On it,” he said. He gave me a quick kiss and then ducked into the bathroom. “Back in a few minutes,” he called, just before I heard the shower start up.

I plopped down onto my bed and relaxed into the pillows. There was something about lying there, listening to him shower and looking forward to relaxing in his arms, that felt so… comfortable. So right.

*Greyson’s so loving and perfect, and I’m happy… But not content. There’s a war and one of my mates is going through something that I’m still not sure how to fix. And who knows what tomorrow holds?*

Greyson walked out of the bathroom a few minutes later, a towel slung low around his waist. The sight of him standing there, still damp and with his blond hair slicked back from his forehead, was enough to interrupt every single thought in my head.

Greyson narrowed his eyes at me. “I know that face. You’re overthinking.”

He unwrapped his towel and let it slide off his hips, and then he jumped in bed beside me.

“Greyson, no! You’re soaking wet!” I screeched, laughing. “Go dry off!”

“Fine, fine,” he said, getting up and picking his towel up from the floor. He dried off half-heartedly and then slid on a pair of shorts before climbing back into bed and pulling me close. “Everything’s going to work out. You know that, right?”

I nodded at him and tucked my head under his chin. “I know,” I said around a yawn.

My eyes began to drift shut, and the last thing I felt before I fell asleep was a gentle kiss on my forehead.

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I opened my eyes to see Greyson outlined by sunlight as he pulled on a T-shirt. He caught me looking at him and smiled.

“You’re awake.” He swooped down and gave me a kiss. “I’m heading out to meet with the other Alphas and talk strategy.”

I nodded and snuggled under the covers, not wanting to get up just yet. “Okay. Fill me in later?”

Greyson nodded. “I will.”

I stayed in bed for a few more minutes after he was gone, and then I remembered that I had to meet up with the other magic users to prepare for our role in the battle. But I was definitely going to need breakfast before I tackled that. I got up, got dressed in comfy clothes, and opened my door.

“What the!” I gasped when I saw Kira standing on the other side of the door, her fist raised like she was just about to knock.

“Oh, hi!” Kira said.

“Hi… Is there something you need?” I asked her. “Is this about Xavier?”

Kira shook her head. “No. It’s about the wolf spell, for the battle.”

“Oh… Well, I’m not sure what I can do to help with that, seeing as I’m not a witch,” I said. “But I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“Great! Come with me!”

Kira led the way to Big Mac’s room, where Tabitha, Dani, Rowena, Artemis, Torin, and Adair had already gathered.

Big Mac looked up when we came in. “Good, we’re all here.”

I looked around in confusion as I slowly walked into the room.

Probably picking up on all the questions I had before I’d even had a chance to ask them, Big Mac started talking.

“I’ve called together all the magic users in the alliance because we need to coordinate all aspects of our spell work.” She gestured at herself, Rowena, Kira, and Dani. “The four of us will be busy building and maintaining the spell to block all the werewolves’ access to their wolf forms.”

“It’s still kind of crazy to me that the werewolves are agreeing to that,” Artemis said. “I don’t think I’d be so keen on going into battle without my greatest weapon.”

“It’s a sacrifice for them, for sure,” I said. “But I’m certain it’ll pay off.”

I didn’t even want to contemplate what could still go wrong. For now, I only wanted to look on the bright side.

“The spell will drain us significantly, and during that time, we’ll be relatively defenseless,” Big Mac continued. “That’s where the rest of you come in.”

“But Greyson needs us fighting on the front lines,” Artemis said. “We can’t hang back to protect you.”

Big Mac glanced at Artemis. “Nor am I asking you to. But Cali, on the other hand, has exactly what we need.”

I suddenly realized exactly where Big Mac was going with this.

Big Mac turned her gaze on me. “Cali, we’re going to need you to be our shield.”

**Episode 4327**

**Xavier**

Greyson was busy talking through his plan to use all the non-wolves to lead the charge during the upcoming battle. I saw his point and all, but that didn’t mean that it sat well with me. It went against my nature to sit back and allow someone else to jump into a fight before me. It didn’t help that I wasn’t going to have my wolf. I’d already been through losing my wolf before, and I would’ve given anything to never go through it again, but I didn’t have much of a choice. At least I wouldn’t be alone in my discomfort.

I looked around at the other Alphas in the room. They hadn’t the slightest idea what was in store for them. I wasn’t even sure if they’d be able to handle it, when push came to shove and they had to face the Bitterfangs without their wolves to rely on.

“I think we need to get everyone ready for this,” I said, interrupting Greyson.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean? Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“I’m not talking about getting ready for the fight—we’re all good fighters already. But how many of us have fought in battle without access to our wolf forms?”

“I sure as hell haven’t,” Duke said.

“Neither have I,” Porter added. “I’ve never needed to. Never wanted to, for that matter.”

Greyson nodded slowly, glancing at me. “I get your point. Do you want to take the lead on that? Since you have some experience with it?”

I shrugged. “I remember all too well what it was like not having my wolf, but we can’t get too bogged down in that detail, or we’ll never be able to fight. I actually think we should go take a look at the Vanguard estate,” I said quickly. “And I’d like to lead the scouting mission.”

Before Greyson could agree or disagree, Lucian jumped in.

“Well, I think that’s a fine idea, Xavier!” he said. “I’ve been planning to do just that myself, so I’m sure we could partner on this.”

I rolled my eyes, but I knew that there was no use protesting. The Vanguard palace belonged to Lucian, so I couldn’t very well insist that Ilead a scouting mission on his turf and leave him behind—even though I would’ve been much happier if he’d just kept his mouth shut and let me do exactly that.

Greyson didn’t look too pleased about it, but he nodded. “Sure, that sounds like a good idea. Make sure to check in as soon as you can, so I know that you haven’t encountered any problems.”

“Will do. We’ll head out shortly and gather as much intel as we can,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Lucian said with a nod.

I left the room and headed outside to prepare myself. It was quiet and I was alone, since everyone was inside, planning and prepping for the coming days. I was antsy to move, to leave, to do anything but this. I was tired of sitting around at the Redwood pack house. It brought back too many memories of everything I’d lost.

But nothing reminded me of that more than Adéluce—who of course chose that moment to appear out of thin air.

“Hi, Xavier! Long time no see!”

I nearly fell over in surprise as she popped into stark relief not even a foot away from me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded.

Adéluce rolled her eyes. “Really, Xavier, is that what you’re going to say every time I appear? It’s getting very boring. I also just hate the question. I thought we talked about you being a little more respectful—and mindful of who holds all the cards, here. And, newsflash, it isn’t you! You want to stay on my good side, don’t you?”

“I wasn’t aware that you had a good side,” I grumbled.

Adéluce laughed—a mean, evil, joyless sound that sent a shiver down my spine. “You should know, I saw that cozy little moment between you and Cali yesterday.”

I looked at her, confused. “What moment? The one where I yelled at her to stay away because that’s what you want me to do?”

Adéluce tutted at me. “Oh, Xavier, don’t play dumb with me. I’m talking about the almost*-kiss*. You know, the candle moment? It was so beautiful, don’t you agree? You can’t possibly have thought that I *missed* one of those stolen moments with Cali that you keep thinking you can hide from me?”

My heart dropped into my stomach. It had been beyond stupid of me to think that Adéluce would let something like that slide. She lived to torture me—it made sense that she would snatch up any and every excuse to do so.

“When will you get it, Xavier? I see everything. *Everything*,” she repeated slowly. “You should always be thinking about me, and what I want. And if you don’t get that through your head soon, I’ll kill your little Fae mate, and it will be all your fault.”

I gritted my teeth as pure fury poured through me. “What the fuck are you *talking about*? I’m always thinking about how you’ll interpret my actions! That’s all I do, all the fucking time! Every fucking second of every fucking day! I’m constantly wondering if I’ve crossed the line and worrying that you’re going to hurt someone I love for fucking shits and giggles!”

“You could’ve fooled me,” Adéluce hissed.

“This is bullshit!” I shouted. “I don’t even have a life anymore because I’m too worried about you. Hell, sometimes I don’t even know if the shit I see is real or not, because there’s always a chance that you’re in my head, manipulating me.”

I was properly yelling at her now, and yet she was still plying me with that infuriating smile, like she was loving every second of my meltdown.

“Good,” Adéluce said.

I clenched my jaw so hard, I was worried that my teeth might shatter. “God, why are you such a *bitch*?”

Adéluce disappeared, and I heard Lucian’s voice behind me.

“Hey, Xavier,” he said. “Who were you just talking to?”

I spun around to see the princeling scanning the yard for any signs of life.

“No one,” I said. “Just blowing off a little steam. I’m beyond pissed off at Malakai and this whole stupid shitshow of a war we have to deal with, just because he has a chip on his shoulder.”

Lucian nodded. “That’s fair enough. So, are you ready to get going? I’m dying to see my home again, and to remember all the good times we have… *Had*.” He shot a baleful look at the Redwood pack house, looming behind him. “Hopefully seeing it will help me forget what I’m currently being forced to endure.”

I was too shaken up over Adéluce to even react to Lucian’s little dig.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said.

Lucian and I shifted and took off into the woods. We had a long run ahead of us, and it was going to give me way too much time to think. Thinking was the last thing I wanted to do right now, but my mind had other plans.

*What the hell am I supposed to do? I have no plan for how to get rid of Adéluce, and no matter how much I try to stay away from Cali, I just can’t seem to keep her away from* me*. But I have to do something! I can’t just stand by and let that fucking vampire-witch kill her.*

*We’re getting close*, Lucian mind linked.

*I know*, I said.

We slowed to a stop in a copse of trees near the entrance to the Vanguard estate and quickly shifted back to human. Lucian suddenly went rigid beside me. There were dozens of Bitterfangs crawling all over the property. They were camped out on the lawn, lingering in the open front door, hanging out of the windows. It was like they’d infested the place.

“They’re *ruining* my home!” Lucian choked out. “Look at what they’ve done to it!”

I was looking, and Lucian was right. The Vanguard estate looked *rough*,to say the least. The yard had been practically destroyed, a large part of the castle was scorched and had completely caved in—obviously from the fire the night of the banquet—and many of the windows had been cracked, or completely shattered. The evidence of all the fights we’d had here over the last couple of days was written all over the palace’s formerly pristine façade.

I noticed the flicker of a bonfire not too far away, and spotted a bunch of Bitterfangs throwing what looked like Lucian’s family portraits onto the fire to keep it going. I didn’t think the princeling had noticed what they were using for kindling, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him. He already seemed seconds from snapping.

“I have to teach them a lesson!” Lucian hissed.  “This will not stand! This house has been in my family for centuries and these… these *brutish creatures* are destroying it!”

“We’ll teach them a lesson, Lucian, but not right now,” I said, trying very hard to sound reassuring. “Now isn’t the time. We have to learn everything we can about where they’re stationed throughout the house if we want our attack to go smoothly, but we need to do this carefully. *Quietly*.”

Lucian didn’t seem to have heard me. He was getting angrier by the second as he took stock of the damage. “They have to pay for what they’ve done!” he growled. “For how they’ve insulted the Vanguard name!”

Lucian shifted back to wolf form and crouched down, a vicious snarl curling his lip.

“Lucian, wait—*no!*” I hissed.

Before I could even *consider* how to react, he leapt forward, out of the cover of the trees.

**Episode 4328**

Ice seemed to flood through my veins as Big Mac’s words sank in.

“I-I can’t be responsible for that!” I burst out. “Not in the heat of battle! Don’t you remember what happened the last time I tried to expand my shield?”

I remembered the magical burnout too well—the sensation of not being able to touch my magic, of feeling so empty that I’d thought I’d never be full again. There was no way I could go through that *and* fight the Bitterfangs *and* protect the pack all at the same time. I’d be burnt out if I did that and unable to help… anyone. It was impossible.

I could feel myself falling into a panic attack. My heart was hammering in my chest, and my throat felt like it was closing up.

I felt Artemis’s warm hands on my cheeks, and she guided my face up so that she could look me in the eye. “*Breathe*, Cali. Relax. Take a breath in, then let it out. Slowly. Count with me, okay? One. Two. Three…”

I followed Artemis’s instructions, and after a few minutes, my heartbeat finally began to slow, and I could think straight again.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked, concern still etched across her face.

I nodded. “Yes, I’m okay. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s understandable,” Artemis said. She glanced around at everyone. “We know the last time she tried to create a shield of that magnitude, it didn’t go very well, but we’re going to prepare her better this time.”

Big Mac shrugged. “Great. That’s what all the training has been for, right? Why train if you never plan to use what you learn?”

“I think it’s the right call,” Adair said, surprising me. “We can do this. *Cali* can do this.” He turned to meet my eyes. “Like Big Mac said, it’s what you’ve been training for. You’ll be able to do it without using up all your magic reserves. You’ll just have to pace yourself. It’s all part of leveraging your control, just like we practiced.”

I wanted to believe him, but right now, it seemed next to impossible. But I knew that I was going to have to try. These were desperate times, and we were all going to have to step out of our comfort zones if we wanted to beat the Bitterfangs.

“Uh, okay,” I told Big Mac, trying to sound less petrified than I felt. “I can do it.”

“Good,” Big Mac said. “Because we need that shield. The four of us will be completely vulnerable while maintaining the spell, so we need you, Cali. I wouldn’t ask you otherwise. In fact, if there were any other options, believe me, I’d use them.”

I nodded, trying to figure out whether to be offended by that. I settled on “yes,” considering the fact that Big Mac was making it sound like I was her last resort.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I can do it. I’ll do it because I have to.”

I wasn’t sure if I was convincing *myself*, let alone anyone else, but I was going to try my damnedest to make this work.

Surprising me beyond belief, Adair put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We will do what we need to do, and besides being on the battlefield itself, I’ll be by your side to train and support you every step of the way.”

“Thank you, Adair,” I said.

Adair turned to Big Mac. “What else can we do? My magic is obviously better suited to offensive fighting, but I think I speak for all of us Fae when I say that we’ll help you in any way we can.”

Big Mac sighed. “Thanks, Adair. But you should know that no one is going to like this next part.”

I braced myself, wondering what could possibly be worse than having to maintain a shield for the witches right in the middle of a pack war.

“I’m going to need a shit ton of ingredients for this spell to work,” Big Mac said. “Wolfsbane and silver, mostly.”

Artemis scowled. “You want us to bring wolfsbane and silver—which amount to perfect werewolf poisons—right into a werewolf pack house?”

None of the witches reacted, and I realized that they’d known this from the beginning.

“We’re going to need to let Greyson in on this,” I said.

Big Mac nodded. “Let’s tell him now. It’s not like we’re trying to hide anything. Besides, he should understand the same as anyone that magic requires a bit of give and take. Often, the ends have to justify the means. This is one of those times,” Big Mac said. “You know it’s the right call, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “The spell is our best chance of winning, and I think we all know that. Still, the wolves will have to decide for themselves if they’re comfortable doing it.”

I reached out to Greyson via mind link. *Hey, can you come up to Big Mac’s room? There’s something we need to tell you.*

*Sure thing*, he replied.

A minute or so later, he appeared in the doorway. He took a look around the room, his expression unreadable. “Everything okay? How’s the planning going?”

“That’s what we want to talk to you about,” I said, gesturing to Big Mac.

Not one to mince words, the witch dove right in. “The spell will only work if we use huge amounts of wolfsbane and silver which will be embedded in the spell itself to take away your wolves. There is a chance that it could affect some of you. Do you have a problem with that?”

I’d seen Greyson’s expression shutter as soon as Big Mac said the word “wolfsbane.”

“Hell fucking *yes*, I have a problem with that,” he said. “Find another way. If you have to keep brainstorming, do it. If we need to come up with a new plan, then we’ll do that. But no way in hell am I going to expose our packs to silver and wolfsbane, of all things.” Without another word, he stormed out.

Clearly, unfazed, Big Mac smirked. “So, that went well.”

Greyson was furious, and I totally understood why. He was used to feeling strong and in control, and wolfsbane and silver were two substances at the top of a very short list of things that had the power to take down someone like him.

“Go after him,” Big Mac told me. “There *is* no other way, and you need to convince him that it’s the right call.”

“No,” I said. “I’ll tell him what I think, but I’m not going to coerce him into doing this.”

Without waiting for Big Mac’s reply—and honestly fearing it a little, since this was one of the few times I’d ever stood up to her—I raced off to find my mate.

“Greyson?” I said, when I found him pacing back and forth in the hallway.

“Hey,” he said.

“I know this is hard, but I don’t think that there’s any other way that we can do this,” I said gently. “Big Mac’s made it pretty clear that it’s silver and wolfsbane or bust. Think about it, please—beyond your initial gut reaction. Big Mac’s a skilled, accomplished witch. Why would she choose such controversial ingredients if there were any other options? *Or* if there was any chance that those ingredients would hurt you, her fiancée, and our allies?”

Greyson stopped pacing and looked at me. “I think that’s why I’m so upset. I *know* that she wouldn’t do this if she didn’t have to, which means that we don’t have any choice but to mess around with the two substances with the power to bring any werewolf to their knees.” He sighed and closed his eyes for a few seconds before he looked at me again. “Do you think it’s worth it?”

I nodded. “I do. And you can trust me, just like you can trust Big Mac. We care about you, and we care about this pack. It’s not like she’s trying to stockpile weapons to use against the Redwoods. And you have to admit, the ingredients *do* make sense for a spell designed to disconnect people from their wolves.”

Greyson nodded slowly, and I could tell that he was finally starting to get past his initial knee-jerk reaction. He let out a breath. “Fine. I agree—but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I don’t like it either,” I admitted. I pulled him close and threaded my fingers through his, fitting our palms together. “But we can work with it, can’t we? We always knew we’d have to make a few sacrifices to beat the Bitterfangs.”

“You’re right, Cali.” He pulled in a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Together, we returned to Big Mac’s room. The witch was leaning against a wall, paging through a spell book. She snapped it shut when we walked in and arched an eyebrow at Greyson. “So?”

“So… I’m really sorry about the way I reacted,” Greyson said. “Werewolves don’t take kindly to the *mention* of wolfsbane and silver, let alone the possibility of being used to tear our wolves away. It was a lot to take in.”

“All good,” Big Mac said. “I get it, believe me.”

“So I’m hoping you’ll understand why I have to ask one more time,” Greyson said. “Are you *sure* there’s no way to do this without using silver and wolfsbane?”

Big Mac sighed and shook her head. “I’m sorry, but no. And even if there were, we don’t have time to figure it out. This is what we’ve got. So… Are we doing it or not?”

I looked at Greyson. His mouth was set in a straight line and it looked like his instincts were screaming at him to call off the entire thing, but he knew the stakes, same as the rest of us. We had no other choice.

“We’re doing it,” he said finally. “Let’s just hope I don’t come to regret it.”

“You won’t,” I said firmly, knowing that Greyson needed as much encouragement as possible. Then I turned to Big Mac. “And as for the ingredients—point me in the right direction, and I’ll go collect them.”

**Episode 4329**

**Xavier**

I lunged forward to tackle Lucian, barely managing to catch him mid-leap. I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him back into the cover of the trees.

“Shift back, now!” I hissed.

Lucian growled, but shifted back to human. He rounded on me with a deep frown on his face. “How dare you interrupt me and give me orders? This is *my* palace! You have no right to tell me how to defend my birthright! You have overstepped, Xavier—not that I’m surprised, since you have *no* manners!”

I shoved him in the shoulder and he smacked my hand away, his eyes flashing.

“Watch it!” he hissed.

“*You* watch it! If you don’t want to be interrupted or orderedaround, then stop acting like such a jackass! You could’ve gotten us both killed, just now!”

I was breathing hard, anxiety at how close we’d just come to being caught and anger at Lucian’s stupidity mingling in the pit of my stomach.

Shit like this was exactly why I hadn’t wanted him to come with me. He’d once again proven how much of a liability he was. I’d met a lot of loose cannons in my life—I’d even been called one myself, more than once—but Lucian gave new meaning to the term.

Lucian bristled. “So, what? I’m just supposed to sit back and watch these wolves destroy my home? Tell me, Xavier, is that what you would do?”

I hesitated at his question, putting myself in his shoes for a split second. I’d probably have been just as pissed as he was, but I’d also have been looking at the big picture and reacting accordingly.

“For now, yes, you have to sit back and watch,” I said. “We’re on a reconnaissance mission—we can’t reignite the war because you can’t control your emotions. We’re here to collect information that will help us win the next battle. We’re *not* here to start that battle prematurely. How shortsighted are you?”

“Don’t name call, Xavier, it doesn’t become you,” Lucian said, sniffing. “And I’m not shortsighted. I’m simply dealing with a lot of trauma. My palace has been invaded and half-destroyed. My entire pack has been displaced. So yes, when I saw these cretins crawling all over my home like vermin, I lost it. Besides, I just wanted to kill one or two of them. Work out a little frustration.”

“‘Killing one or two’ would’ve been impossible, Lucian,” I said. “There are dozens of wolves out there—they would’ve seen you, and all hell would’ve broken loose.”

Lucian shook his head. “Look around, Xavier. All hell has already broken loose!”

Lucian’s dramatics were sure to go down in history as the most annoying thing I’d ever experienced.

“Lucian,” I ground out. “My point is that we are *not* *equipped* to take on the entire Bitterfang army. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but there are only two of us.”

Lucian looked marginally chagrined. He crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to verbally agree. He just shook his head and turned back to look at the palace, his expression beyond dejected.

I sighed. “I know it sucks to see your home like this. If it’s what you think is best, then I won’t stop you if you want to run out there right now and die.”

Lucian shook his head. “I think not! The alliance needs me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then act like it! We’re here to gather intel, so let’s gather some intel. What do you say?”

I suddenly felt like I was babysitting, and that didn’t sit well with me.

Lucian gave a stiff nod. “Let’s do it.”

Together, we skirted the perimeter of the palace to see if there was anything to find. I led the way, keeping an ear out for Lucian’s footsteps behind me. I didn’t trust him not to make a break for it again.

So far, there wasn’t much to see, apart from an overwhelming number of Bitterfangs and their allies. The more I saw, the worse I felt about our odds. I truly hoped that Armin was right about the dissent in the ranks.

*We might stand a chance at winning this thing, but only with the combination of removing everyone’s shifting abilities and hitting the Bitterfangs with our magic. Turning some of Malakai’s people against him would help thin out his forces, too. Otherwise, based on numbers alone, things are looking a little grim—though I hate to admit it.*

I turned at the sound of Lucian huffing behind me. Again.

“What’s your problem this time?” I asked. “I get that this is your home, but it’s a *house*. A big house, sure, but still just a house. You shouldn’t be so hung up on material things.”

“It’s clear that you don’t understand my perspective, Xavier, and frankly, I don’t expect you to. This is the Vanguards’ ancestral home, as I’ve said countless times before. It’s not just some investment property with hideous shutters and chrome bathroom fixtures,” Lucian said, taking yet another dig at the Redwood pack house.

*He really makes it so hard not to hate his guts.*

“How do you think it makes me feel to know that *I’m* responsible for losing the house that means so much to my family?” Lucian continued. “This is the first time in recent history that we’ve ceded our ground, that the Vanguard seat has been compromised in such a vulgar way. And it all happened on my watch as Alpha. How can I face my pack? How can I face my *mate*? Elle deserves true strength. This is beneath her.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but I actually was starting to feel a little sympathy for Lucian. He’d definitely gotten a raw deal. His pride had to be bruised, not to mention his humongous ego.

“I still don’t like you,” I said, “but I do get it. Just remember that you’re the Vanguard Alpha, and your pack still has faith in you. They believe in your ability to protect them. Don’t prove them wrong.”

We both turned at the sound of loud voices coming from somewhere near the palace. Lucian and I both froze in place and listened.

“That sounds like Honora and Malakai,” Lucian whispered.

We inched forward until we spotted the Bitterfang Alpha pair, talking on one of the lower terraces. They were standing quite far apart from each other, and obviously arguing.

“This was always supposed to be about *her*—or have you forgotten that?” Honora demanded. “When? When did you forget why we started this?”

*Her?* Lucian mouthed at me.

*Julia, maybe?* I mouthed back.

“I haven’t forgotten,” Malakai shot back. “This is still for us, for our family. Don’t you see that?”

Honora shook her head. “The only thing I’ve consistently seen from you lately is your growing hunger for power. That’s all you really want, isn’t it? Admit it! And while you’re at it, admit that you’ll do whatever it takes to get it!”

“Please!” Malakai hissed, turning away from her.

“Don’t act like I’m speaking nonsense,” Honora snapped. “You need to take a look in the mirror, Malakai. I’m not sure anyone will be safe from you, if you keep going like this. We’ve already pushed our daughter away!”

“Don’t throw Julia in my face!” Malakai snarled. “We pushed her away because she strayed, because she brought dishonor to our family! She chose to believe in fairy tales! She chose to go against us!”

“If that were the driving force behind your recent actions, I’d understand, and I’d support you. But this isn’t about Julia anymore—not at all. It can’t be. We know she’s alive. This isn’t about avenging her anymore. The things you’re doing serve you and only you, and I’m not too blind to see that,” Honora said.

Malakai waved a dismissive hand in her direction. “You’re being dramatic, Honora. Please. I know what’s important, and no, maybe that’s *not* Julia anymore. Maybe things have developed beyond our child’s silly whims. Is it so bad if she doesn’t matter anymore? Besides, if she’s against us—and by the looks of things, she is—then she’s no good to me, or to you. Forget her!”

Honora shook her head sadly. “How did it come to this?”

“Things change. People change. Goals change. That’s the way of the world,” Malakai replied.

“Is it? Then I suppose we’ll have to see what happens,” Honora replied, her voice almost too soft for us to hear. She left Malakai, then. I could see the anger written across her face, even from here. Malakai watched her go, and didn’t bother chasing after her.

Staying out of sight, Lucian and I snuck away from the Vanguard perimeter and tore back into the cover of the forest.

“This is great,” I said to Lucian. “It’s exactly what we needed.”

“What, to watch two lovers quarrel on my favorite terrace?” Lucian said bitterly.

“No, it’s so much more than that,” I said, feeling downright *gleeful.* “Not only is the Bitterfang pack divided—their Alpha and Luna are, too.”

**Episode 4330**

**Greyson**

Cali smiled at me and stretched up to kiss me on the cheek. “Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ve got this.”

“Cali’s right,” Big Mac grunted. “And now that we have your approval, you can get the hell out of here so we can fine tune the specifics of the spell.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” I said. “I have a lot to do myself. And besides, I need to go share the ‘good’ news with the other Alphas. They have a right to know what they’re getting into.”

“Good luck with that,” Cali said. “I’ll come find you later.”

“Please do,” I said, before giving her a quick kiss and leaving the magic users to it.

I truly trusted Cali to handle getting the ingredients for the spell, but I still didn’t like it. Bringing wolfsbane and silver into a pack house just felt like a recipe for disaster. I also knew that it was going to be pretty damn tough to sell to the alliance.

I moved toward the stairs, just as Elle reached the top of the landing.

“Hi, Greyson,” Elle said. “How are you?”

“Hanging in there,” I said wearily. “How about you? How are you doing, with Lucian off scouting?”

Elle shrugged. “I’m fine. Lucian can handle himself.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that I was almost jealous. She clearly believed in Lucian in a way that she used to reserve for me alone. I wasn’t sure if that was the reason for my jealousy or if it had something to do with the sire bond, but I didn’t chase the question. Now wasn’t the time.

“Have you heard anything else about the council?” Elle asked. “Do you think I need to be worried that they’ll come for me? I know it’s not safe for me to be on my own in Portland right now, and I know that you and Lucian can’t go with me since you’re needed here, but I don’t want the council to find me, either.”

I reached out to squeeze her shoulder, and Elle leaned into the touch. “I won’t let the council lay a hand on you. You have my word as your Alpha.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” Elle said, relief loosening the tension in her shoulders.

“Oh!” I said, remembering. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you—are you really okay with the plan to have the witches suppress our wolves? I noticed that you didn’t object when I was talking about it with the rest of the pack, but I know that losing your wolf might mean something a little different to you than it does to the rest of us.”

Elle avoided my gaze. “You’re right—I’m not very comfortable with the idea. I’ve always been a wolf. Sometimes I feel like I’m more wolf than human, at least compared to the rest of the pack. I don’t know what it’s going to feel like, not having my wolf within my reach.”

“So why didn’t you speak up and share that before?” I asked. “I want everyone on board and comfortable with this plan, and that means you, too.”

Elle suddenly met my eyes. “Because you’re my Alpha, and this is about more than what I want. I’m putting my trust in you, and in this plan.”

It felt good to know that Elle trusted me that much, and that the entire pack did, too. I’d worked hard to prove myself to the Redwoods, and every single day I was humbled by the fact that I’d managed to gain, and keep, their trust.

“Hey, you two,” Cali said, coming up behind me.

“Hey, Cali,” Elle said, then glanced at me. “I’m going to go get some rest. I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

“Bye,” Cali and I said in unison.

Once Elle was gone, Cali took my hands in hers. “Are you okay? I know that was tough, making the decision to go through with the spell.”

“And against my better judgment,” I added. “I don’t know how this is going to pan out, and I haven’t told the rest of the alliance about the silver and wolfbane part yet, but I can only hope that everything goes according to plan.”

“It will. We just have to stay positive,” Cali said.

“You have no idea how much you help me do that.” I pulled her into a hug and rested my chin on the top of her head. I inhaled, enjoying the sweet scent of her shampoo. “But yeah, I’m okay. Having you on my side means a lot.”

Cali looked up at me and planted a kiss on my chin, then dragged her lips up to my mouth. I leaned into the kiss, deepening it and wrapping my arms tightly around her so that her entire body was pressed against me.

She pulled away, and I took pleasure in the fact that our kiss had left her breathless.

“I’m glad you’re on my side, too,” she said.

“I guess we’re both pretty lucky,” I said.

“Guess so.”

“When are you heading out to get the ingredients?” I asked. I didn’t even want to say their names.

Cali pulled away slightly. “So I’ve got Mikah and Artemis, who are going to come with me. We’re leaving as soon as we grab a few things. Apparently Mikah knows where to go to get large amounts of both wolfsbane and silver.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I feel like I should possibly be concerned about that.”

Cali laughed. “You know that Mikah wouldn’t betray us—at the very least, he’d never hurt Gabriel.”

“I suppose you’re right about that.” I looked into her eyes, shifting gears. “I’m serious though, Cali. Be careful. I need you to be safe. We haven’t had anyone coming or going off of Redwood land for a reason.”

“I know, and we’re going to be careful,” Cali said. “Besides, I could say the same thing to you.”

Artemis emerged from her bedroom with a couple of empty duffel bags hanging from her shoulder. “Come on, Cali, we need to get moving,” she said as she moved past us and jogged down the stairs. “Later, Greyson!” she called over her shoulder.

“Duty calls,” Cali said. She kissed me one more time before fully disentangling herself from my arms. “We’ll be back soon, don’t worry.”

“Remember what I said—stay cautious and alert,” I said as she started down the stairs.

“Right back at you.”

*Off they go to pick up the poison. This is such a crazy plan. I truly hate it—and it makes me hate the Bitterfangs even more for putting us in a position where we have no choice but to go through with it.*

I sighed and went downstairs to find the other Alphas. Since Xavier and Lucian were still out on their reconnaissance mission, I asked Ava and Aysel to join me in their stead, along with Mace, Duke, and Porter. We all went into the kitchen and gathered around the table.

“So, I have news,” I began.

Mace arched an eyebrow. “Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

“Maybe because you have good instincts,” I said, grimacing slightly. “I just came from talking to Big Mac about the wolf suppression spell. They think they’ll be able to do it, for sure.”

“Well, that’s good news, right?” Porter said.

“Yes…” I hesitated. “But the spell requires wolfsbane and silver to work.”

I’d barely gotten the words out of my mouth before the entire room erupted with protests.

“Silver? Wolfsbane? You’ve got to be kidding me, Greyson! Absolutely not!” Porter shouted. “Hell no. We’re not doing that.”

“So, the big plan is really for all of us to die?” Ava asked.

“This is pure bullshit—you know that, right?” Duke bellowed. “I’ve heard a lot of shit in my life, and I’m usually pretty open minded about most things, but I have to draw the line somewhere!”

I rubbed at my temples. “Come on, everyone, can’t we discuss this without yelling? Ava—of course the plan isn’t for us all to die! Duke—you shouldn’t draw the line *here*, not when this is the one thing that’ll give us the edge we need. We all knew that we might have to make some hard decisions to see this plan through. This is one of those hard decisions.”

“Sorry, man,” Porter said, rubbing his eyes wearily. “I know I reacted pretty harshly. It was just shocking to hear. Just the words wolfsbane and silver do something to me. I can’t help it.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Duke said, a little sheepishly. “It just caught me off-guard, too.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Ava wasn’t apologizing.

“I reacted the same way, at first, but the way Cali and Big Mac reasoned it out to me made perfect sense,” I said. “The spell is supposed to suppress our wolves, right? What better way to do that than to use the most anti-werewolf substances in existence?”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Mace said, a little grudgingly.

“Aside from that,” I continued, “we know and trust the witches who will be doing this spell. It’s not like we’re contracting it out to witches we don’t know. Rowena, Big Mac, Dani, and Kira care about us, and I know we all trust them to keep us safe. Right?”

“Of course. Rowena would never do anything to hurt me, or any of you,” Porter said.

“I’ve never met four witches I like more,” Duke admitted. “Doesn’t hurt that they’re all stone cold foxes, either.”

“Watch it,” Porter said. “That’s my wife you’re talking about.”

“And my mother’s fiancée,” I added.

Duke held up his hands in mock surrender. “My bad, just saying. Anyway, back to the subject at hand… I don’t like this whole wolf death spell thing, but I understand why we’re doing it.”

“Please don’t call it ‘the wolf death spell,’” Mace said with an eye roll. “But I’m with Porter and Duke. If this is a risk we have to take to take out the Bitterfangs and ensure our packs’ safety, then I’m all for it—though I don’t like it one bit.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

“Well, I’m not feeling as rosy on the subject as the rest of you,” Ava said.

“Neither am I,” Aysel added. “Besides, we’re missing some important voices here. Lucian isn’t here to add his opinion.”

“And neither is Xavier,” Ava said. “But for what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s worth the risk. It’s already bad enough that our wolves are being stripped away, but now find out that we all might be exposed to it? This just seems more like mutually assured destruction than setting ourselves up to win.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, my exhaustion deepening. “Then what do you suggest we do instead?”

Ava hesitated. It was clear that she didn’t have any other ideas. She heaved a heavy sigh and dropped her head. “I guess I have to agree to it. I don’t have any other suggestions. But this sucks.”

Aysel threw up her hands. “Fine. Whatever. I’m clearly outnumbered. But we’ll see what Lucian says when he gets back.”

We all started to clear out of the kitchen, but Ava paused at the door and turned her gaze on me.

“If we do this, Greyson,” she said, “and anything goes wrong, know that our blood will be on *your* hands.”

**Episode 4331**

**Xavier**

Maybe it was the good news talking, but I swore the air smelled sweeter on the way back from the Vanguard estate. With Honora and Malakai fighting, we might actually stand a chance. The dissent within the Bitterfang ranks might go even higher than we thought. What was that old saying? “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Not that Honora or Malakai were particularly friendly.

I shook my head to clear it and decided I was best off keeping my head on straight and focusing on not hitting a tree on the way home.

*Stop smiling*, Lucian sniped at me.

*I’m not smiling.*

*You are!* Lucian insisted. *We have yet to get my palace back, and did you see the state of the garden? I’ll have to oversee the restoration of it. Did you know those rosebushes have been on our grounds since—*

*Shut up*, I interrupted him, inhaling deeply. *Do you smell that?*

Bitterfang scouts. I could make out four—shit, five treads, at least.

*We have to hurry*, I told Lucian through the mind link, urging my legs to move even faster beneath me. What use would the intel be if we never got back home—or to the Redwood packhouse? Which wasn’t home. At least, not anymore

I could hear them gaining on us. Must have been well rested because if anything, they were getting faster.

*We’ll have to fight.*

*So much for reconnaissance*, Lucian replied. But I could hear the drive to fight in his voice. He wanted blood. I hoped that would give us the edge we’d need to beat these guys.

I turned around. In the time it took to do it, they were on us. Flying through the air, fangs glinting in the slivers of light that got through the trees. There were half a dozen of them.

*Three each*, I said to Lucian.

A huge, grey wolf snapped its jaws as it charged my way. I heard Lucian snap a spine between his jaws.

I ducked under the grey wolf’s muzzle and sliced his throat with my claws. Hot blood poured down on me—must have gotten an artery. I turned to the others, coated in the blood of their pack mate, and bared my teeth.

But before I could go on the offensive once more, I heard Lucian let out a surprised yip and then a high-pitched whine of pain. I turned and saw him pinned against the ground by one wolf while the other tore at his hind legs. If they succeeded, it would be four against one, and I couldn’t let that happen.

I barreled toward the wolf pinning Lucian. I slammed into him, and we tumbled head over feet across the clearing. I could feel his pulse fluttering between my jaws and bit down. Hard.

But my victory was short-lived. Because the wolves I left behind were coming my way. It was three against one again.

I snarled at the remaining wolves, trying to give myself time to gather my strength. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a large wolf pounce on Lucian’s back, biting at him. Blood sprayed everywhere, but the Vanguard princeling didn’t back down. He went for the wolf’s throat, tearing it out.

*Maybe he’s not so bad after all.*

And then I was surrounded.

The fight was a blur of fur, limbs, teeth, and blood. I tried to give as good as I got—to make room where there was none. I wasn’t going to let any of these fuckers take me down, but there were a lot of them. For every one either Lucian or I took down, it seemed like another three popped up.

*They’re only leaving me with one option.* I charged.

I lunged for one of their legs, snapping it in two with my head like a battering ram. I caught another by the tail and threw him at a tree so hard I was sure he had to be at least unconscious, if not dead. But that still left one more who was coming right at me.

I braced myself, trying desperately to hold my ground, but when he collided with me, I felt one of my claws snap, breaking off into the earth uselessly as I lost my footing.

What the fuck? What was going on?

And then I was turning over and over in the air. For a second, it was almost kind of beautiful.

And then there *was* no more air because all of it was knocked out of me when I hit the ground.

I heard the sound of it first. The sickening crunch that, for a second, I thought *had* to be something else. But it was me. I made that sound. Or my body did.

I couldn’t think.

I sucked in air greedily, and it hurt my lungs to expand. With the way my body cried out for oxygen, it barely felt like I’d breathed at all.

I was so cold. At least the uncontrollable shivering told me I was still capable of moving my body. But I felt so disconnected to it. I couldn’t tell if I was in my human or wolf form. Nothing felt real.

“Xavier!”

I tried to sense if I had a tail… But I’d never really been conscious of feeling it before.

“Xavier!” I jerked my head around, trying to follow the sound. The one I’d assumed I must’ve been making up. It sounded like… Lucian?

But it didn’t sound like him.

I tried to call back to whoever it was. But “Here!” came out the faintest wheeze imaginable. The fall had rendered me so useless I couldn’t even aid in my own rescue. But looking up, it was a ravine, not a cliff. How had a fucking ravine done this to me?

“Xavier,” this time the voice was soft, a whisper in my ear. Warm and comforting and smelling like—

*Cali.*

My eyes fluttered open. The sunlight felt impossibly bright. I could barely keep my eyelids open, but I knew I had to see her.

And then I did.

She was leaning over me, smiling brighter than the sun ever could shine. In spite of everything, I still felt taken aback by her in this moment. By how easy it was for her to light up like this, like a beacon, like a lighthouse calling me in from the storm.

Her fingers brushed against my cheek.

“C-Cali,” I managed to splutter, mangling her name on my tongue.

“Shhh,” she urged, clearly able to tell how hard it was for me to make even the most pathetic of sounds. “It’s okay now. I’m here.”

“I don’t—” I gasped for air and tried not to wince at the sound. “I don’t think—I’m okay.”

“You will be,” Cali assured me. “I’m here now.”

But I could feel my body shutting down. No matter how warm Cali was, she couldn’t stop the cold feeling spreading throughout my limbs. I tried to reach out, to pull Cali to me and feel her heat against me before I died. But all I was able to do was twitch my fingers toward her.

“I’m sorry I lied to you,” I forced out, tasting blood on my tongue.

But she just smiled again. Her eyes full of love. The way she looked at me at the start.

“It’s okay,” she told me, not even sounding sad. “I forgive you.”

“How could you?” I heard my voice crack on the last word. “After everything I did to you?”

“Because I know you had a good reason,” Cali replied, as if it were just that simple. “Stop torturing yourself. I just want you to be at peace.”

I shook my head. She didn’t understand. How deep the lie had gone, how much I wanted to take back every time I’d ever hurt her. How much regret I had that I’d spent my last days forcing myself to stay away from her.

“I did it because I love you,” I explained, my voice just a rasp.

Cali frowned, confused.

“What?” she asked.

I tried to say it again. *I love you, Caliana.* But the words sounded wet…

Blood. My mouth was filling with it. I coughed, spluttered, choked. I had to say it again. Had to let her know.

I blinked hard.

But when I opened my eyes, Cali was gone. Instead, Lucian was leaning over me, naked and concerned. Great, exactly the last thing I wanted to see.

“Hold on,”he ordered with more authority than I liked. “I’m going to bring you to that Fae of yours, Torin. He’ll fix you up.”

“Too late,”I told him, blood pouring down my chin. “I’m dying.”

Because what was the point getting anyone’s hopes up? I was so cold and so tired. I just wanted to rest. Just a bit. But I couldn’t yet. Lucian wouldn’t let me.

I could just feel it in my bones.

I reached for him, and this time my arm complied, closing around his wrist like iron. Holding him, forcing him to listen.

“Tell them what we saw,” I growled.

Lucian nodded, but he didn’t listen. His brows knit together, and his teeth clenched as he made some kind of supreme effort to—

Pain. Horrible pain lanced through me as he tried to pull me up. My body wouldn’t move; it *couldn’t* move. I roared in agony at the feeling of my splintered bones shifting inside me.

*Just a few more minutes*, I promised myself before turning my eyes on Lucian. He watched me, pale and afraid. But standing his ground. Hell, it was maybe the most I’d ever liked him. Not that I’d let him know that.

“Go now!” I grunted at him. “And tell Greyson to take care of Cali.”

**Episode 4332**

I rode in the passenger’s seat of Mikah’s extremely neat car. Pitch-black exterior and interior, naturally. I didn’t know anything about cars, but it looked fast. The leather upholstery was rich and buttery, and the peek I got in the center console was intriguing. A small bottle of iron pills, a polaroid camera, sunscreen, and several pairs of dark sunglasses.

He seemed to have everything anyone could ever need. Maybe he’d been on stakeouts in this car. Mikah seemed like a stakeout kind of guy.

“So,” Mikah asked, his voice pulling me away from thoughts of lukewarm coffee and peering through a telephoto lens hoping to see something sleazy. “Lakini is still operating out of Portland, is she?”

“She was a couple of weeks ago,” I answered, admiring the new car smell. Did he request that scent at car washes or was it really just brand-new?

“Okay.” Mikah frowned, like that answer was nowhere near precise enough for him. “Well, she said she definitely had what we’re looking for when I called to ask her.”

“I hope so,” I admitted, feeling the knot of worry in my stomach. “It’s not like we have that much time to get these ingredients.”

“We’ll get ’em,” Artemis piped up from the back seat. I heard the strangled sound of her trying to lean forward too fast in her seat belt and it sucking the breath out of her. I wondered if she’d ever get used to stuff that had felt normal to me my whole life. “Oh my god, what the hell is the deal with this death trap?”

“*Death trap?*” Mikah repeated, scandalized. “This is a luxury vehicle, Artemis.”

“*Pfff*.” Artemis waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve ridden in carriages with better suspension.”

Mikah made a nose that was like a horrified growl, and I put a hand over my face, embarrassed by my sister’s lack of real-world knowledge—and social grace.

“Artemis,” I warned. “The seat belt locks so you don’t fly through the window.”

“Whatever,” she huffed. “And stop getting your panties in a bunch about this mission, Cali. We’ll be home before dark. Just watch.”

I nodded, wishing I shared my sister’s confidence. Maybe it was a Fae thing. It’d be nice to be born with that kind of certainty. But if I had been born a full Fae, I’d have never met Lola or Xavier or Greyson. Still, it seemed like there was quite a bit I missed out on…

I settled back in my seat and tried to relax. Mikah was driving fast, and even with weekday traffic once we neared the city, we made decent time to Portland. I kept my eyes out the window—I liked watching the city spring up around me as we drove closer.

When we reached the general neighborhood of Lakini’s bar, Mikah started to look for a place to park and pulled the car into a tight spot with enviable ease.

As I got out, I looked up at the dusty sign hanging over the bar—The Rusty Wrench. Then I looked around the quiet street. It was always a risk that some of the Bitterfangs could have followed us to the city, but we’d known that going in. It was just a risk we had to take.

But I didn’t see anything, and when I cast a glance at Mikah, I knew he would have sensed if we’d been followed.

“Coast still clear?” I asked.

Mikah nodded. “Yeah. I don’t smell the blood of any werewolves. It’s actually kind of a nice break for me,” he added, wrinkling his nose.

Artemis snorted. “Isn’t your mate a werewolf?”

Mikah shrugged. “Yeah, but he smells better than most of them.”

“But we’re good to go in, right?” I pressed.

“Yeah, we’re clear,” Mikah confirmed. “But let’s do this fast. I want to get in and out.”

I led the way to Lakini’s bar. When I opened the door, the place was dark and dim—exactly as I remembered—and behind the bar I caught sight of the grumpy bartender I’d met last time. I smiled automatically, glad to recognize someone.

He answered my smile with a scowl. “We’re closed.”

“Oh, actually, we were hoping to meet with Lakini, um…” The guy’s name totally slipped my mind, and I panicked.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s Ulysses. What can I get you?”

“We are in the market for silver and wolfsbane. Preferably lots of it.”

Ulysses’s brows rose. “Oh yeah?” Then he frowned again. “Weren’t you here last time with some werewolves? That go south for you?”

I flinched, realizing what he meant, and I waved my hand, trying to appear casual. “Oh, no, it’s not like that. It’s not for any of my friends.” I paused. “Well, it is, and it isn’t.”

“It’s not my business how you use what you buy here,” Ulysses cut me off. “Anyway, Lakini isn’t here right now.”

Mikah stepped next to me. “She’s not? Are you sure? I called ahead to make sure she’d—”

“She’s not here now, and you’ve got me, pretty boy,” Ulysses snapped. “You can accept my help or not. Your choice. No skin off my ass either way.”

“Help us,” Artemis said quickly.

“Please,” I added, a pleading note in my voice.

Ulysses heaved a gusty sigh and turned to the shelves behind him. They were lined with bottles of booze, like any bar, but there was another shelf—the top shelf—that had a row of dusty jars. He reached up to the highest shelf with practiced ease and pulled down a large, black jar with a silver label, then a smaller blue jar with no label at all.

“Silver and wolfsbane,” he said flatly, setting down the jars—which turned out to be one small jar of powdered silver and another jar containing one measly sprig of wolfsbane no bigger than my ring finger.

I winced. Big Mac would not be happy with this. Not that she ever seemed happy with anything—except occasionally Mrs. Smith. Or moonshine sales. But if I came home with this measly little weed, she’d flip her shit.

“Do you have any more wolfsbane?” I asked, trying to use my most entreating voice. “Maybe in the back?”

Ulysses stared at me for a moment. Then he grunted, “I’ll check,” and turned to go through the door behind the bar. He stopped and turned back to the three of us. “Touch nothing.”

I gave him a thumbs-up. He rolled his eyes and disappeared through the beaded curtain.

I turned to Artemis and Mikah. “That is not enough wolfsbane, is it? Is this going to work?”

Before anyone could answer my question, Ulysses returned through the curtain, followed by Lakini, who looked at the three of us with furtive eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Mikah demanded. He glared at Ulysses. “I thought you said she wasn’t here.”

Ulysses didn’t deign to respond.

“Hello,” Lakini said quietly. “I’m sorry, but unfortunately there was a mix-up. I know what I said on the phone, but it seems I might have been mistaken. I’m so sorry.” She picked up the larger jar. “This is the very last of our supply of wolfsbane.”

I felt my face fall. Shit. What were we supposed to do now?

Lakini studied my face. “Can I ask why you need so much of it? Wolfsbane is very strong.”

“Um…” Maybe it was the lack of wolfsbane talking, but the idea of catching Lakini up on the drama of the past few weeks sounded exhausting. Actually living that kind of drama was not much fun.

“It’s an ingredient in a very important spell,” I explained, hoping I could get across how seriously I needed it. “To help my pack.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Lakini frowned sympathetically. “But that’s all we have, and we’re not set to restock for another week.”

“But we can’t wait that long!” I blurted out, which only made Lakini look more confused. “We need it now. It’s urgent. I can’t go back without it!”

“I really am sorry.” Lakini put the jar back on the counter and held up her empty hands, helplessly. “I wish I could get you more, but this is all I can give you.”

“What about…” Ulysses cleared his throat. “… Him?”

Lakini scowled at the mention of this third party. Clearly this guy was no friend of hers. “No way, not that asshole,” she hissed as if that settled that.

Ulysses shrugged, though it didn’t look like he cared much either way. “I know, but if she needs it fast—”

“Who is it?” I asked, leaning against the counter. My heart was pounding. I was desperate to get moving and get what we needed. “I’ll go anywhere to get it as long as I can get it today.”

“Okay.” Lakini sighed and shot a dark look at Ulysses. “I’ll tell you. But I’m warning you, you’re going to have to be careful.”

“Why is that?” Mikah asked warily.

Lakini looked up at him, her dark eyes flashing. “This guy only trades in blood.”

**Episode 4333**

**Greyson**

I stood outside the Redwood pack house facing a long line of alliance werewolves. I’d never taught a class about hand-to-hand combat before, but I’d been in more fights than I could count, and I knew how to hold my own. The werewolves standing before me would need to be able to do the same.

I glanced over at Adair, who’d I’d enlisted to help me out. He’d been in plenty of fights himself, and he had knowledge of weaponry that I wanted him to share.

Together, we paced the line of wolves, looking them all over appraisingly. Finally, I stopped and clapped my hands together. “Okay, everyone. Welcome to your first human sparring lesson. Each one of you is accustomed to fighting on four legs with teeth and claws. But once the spell takes effect, that will no longer be an option. The only way for us to maintain the advantage is to be better at hand-to-hand combat than our opponents.”

“And with weapons,” Adair added. “I’ll be procuring some weapons that I can train some of you to use.” He glanced over at Gabriel, who nodded.

“I’ve already talked to some of my contacts, and they’re sending us some good stuff today,” Gabriel confirmed.

There was a buzz of excitement among the other wolves, but I held my hands up for silence.

“I want to make it clear that the weapons are meant to be an aid only. If we want to win this the right way, we need to use our strength and our force. Our bodies have that—even in our human form—so let’s use it.”

“Agreed,” Adair said, nodding. “Now, we do have a few things you can use now just to get the feel for fighting with a weapon in your hand.” He turned around and dragged a big plastic bin over. I saw a tangle of sports equipment inside—rackets, bats, golf clubs, et cetera.

“Pick your poison,” Adair encouraged with a wink. One by one, they stepped up to grab a weapon. Some people paired up in order to share and trade off.

Lola picked up an aluminum bat and gave it a few swings. The hiss it made cutting through the air was deadlier sounding than I would have imagined.

“Home run,” she called, pretending to watch a ball soar out toward the horizon. Jay snorted a laugh.

“Outta the park, babe,” he teased, landing a kiss on her cheek.

“Remember, you’ll still have your vampire side,” I told her. “You should use that to your advantage, too.”

“I plan on it,” Lola quipped before returning to her spot in line.

Now that some of the group was armed, Adair and I moved through the line, splitting everyone into pairs.

Rishika’s eyes immediately found mine, alight with the spirit of competition. I nodded and waved her over. Rishika would be good at demoing the skills to the group.

“Now,” I said loudly, speaking to the group, “what you want to do is to try to anticipate your opponent’s moves and counter them. Your killer instinct doesn’t have to make you impulsive. It can make you a keen observer as well. Use it to your advantage. Watch Rishika and me.”

Rishika leapt at me, wasting no time. I was able to shake her off fairly easily, but then she managed to wriggle behind me. Not wanting her to get the jump on me, I whirled around. We circled each other, waiting to see who would attack first. Something told me to be patient.

Rishika darted forward again. I dodged her swinging fists and swiped back at her ribs with her own attack, getting close enough her T-shirt rustled.

The almost-impact was enough to make her half shift on instinct.

Adair whirled at the sound of bones cracking. “No shifting!” he barked, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

“Fuck,” Rishika hissed. She took a deep breath, making a conscious effort to slow her breathing enough to shift back to fully human.

“I know it’s going to be hard fighting like this!” I called, looking around. There were a lot of pack members here who relied on their wolves. I thought back to the conversation I’d had with Elle about how nervous she was, but how she was willing to put her trust in me. “I know it’s not going to be easy to face off against the Bitterfangs like this,” I went on. “I know that. They’re strong and fast, likely even as humans, and we’re all used to being so much more powerful in our wolf forms when we’re locked in battle.”

“You can say that again,” someone from the Cobalt pack muttered.

I pushed a hand through my hair. Looking around at the pack members—none of whom had fighting experience in their human forms—I wasn’t filled with hope. I was starting to worry that maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

If we lost like this… the blood would be on my hands. Just like Ava had said. In fact, ever since she’d said it, I’d been hearing it on a loop over and over in the back of my mind.

I glanced at her. Ava had been paired with Marissa, and she was looking over at me. I’d brushed her off about the offer to help each other, but I knew I had to follow through on this. She was right—the blood would be on my hands if this went south.

I gritted my teeth. “Everyone keep working. This is going to take practice.” I turned to Rishika. “Let’s go again.”

We circled each other, waiting for someone to make a move. Finally, I leaned in, and Rishika was ready. She dodged my swing and punched me twice in the gut—two blows, one after the other. I hadn’t been expecting them so low and let out a grunt of pain.

Rishika stepped back with a smile. “Like that?”

“Nice one,” I said, rubbing my abs. “I’m just going to walk around a bit, see how people are doing.”

Rishika chuckled. “Sounds good.”

I walked through the ranks, watching as the partnerships sparred.

“Keep your head down, Calvin.”

“Hey, Willow, no shifting! I saw that!”

“Zander, this isn’t a ballet class, stop spinning.”

Everyone was working hard, but it was clear they were struggling, so I threw them a lifeline. “Let’s take five,” I called out.

Not needing to be told twice, half of the wolves drifted off to the pack house to grab water. The others took the opportunity to stretch or swing their weapons around or sit on the winter grass to rest.

“Hey,” Rishika said, walking over. “Should we be taking a break right now?”

“They need one,” I pointed out.

“I can tell your mind is miles away,” she told me. “Is it Cali? Are you worried about her? She’s out getting supplies, right?”

“I’m always worried about her when I’m not with her,” I admitted, trying not to wince at the thought of something awful befalling her in Portland. “But no. I know she’ll be safe with Mikah and Artemis.”

“Plus, she’s resourceful and can take care of herself,” Rishika reminded me.

“I know.”

I nodded. Rishika was right. As much as I’d always worry about Cali, I had to admit she was far from her spatula-wielding days.

“So what is it then?” Rishika asked. “If not Cali…”

“What if we don’t have enough time to train before this fight?” I bit out. “Everyone is so reliant on their wolves to fight, and now they’re leaning on the weapons. Adair and I just have a lot of work to do with everyone.”

“I hear you,” Rishika assured me. “But remember, we’re doing this because we have advantages that the Bitterfangs don’t. Big Mac and Kira are making us magic bombs. We’ll have vampires and Fae on our side. Without their wolves… we have a leg up.”

“But is it worth it if we’re without our wolves, too?”

“I think it is,” Rishika answered. “And I think you know it, too. You made this call because it puts them in the worst possible position and us in the best. That’s all you can do as Alpha.”

I knew Rishika had several points. And she was probably right. But it still wasn’t enough to banish all the worries and anxieties and potential variables that just wouldn’t stop occurring to me.

What if there was no way to know the right choice?

I heard a voice cry out from the trees behind me.

Rishika looked over her shoulder. “Lucian and Xavier must be back.”

We turned, but only Lucian emerged from the trees. He had shifted back to his human form, and his naked body was covered in blood.

My stomach tightened at the sight of him, and I sprinted toward him. Ava must have seen him, too, because she reached him first. He looked awful—his hair was matted with blood, and he struggled to remain upright.

I looked past Lucian into the forest. “What happened? Where’s my brother?”

“Where’s Xavier?” Ava demanded breathlessly.

Lucian didn’t answer for a moment. He was heaving in air, like he couldn’t catch his breath.

“Where the fuck is Xavier?” I repeated.

Lucian looked up, gasping for air. “He’s dead.”

**Episode 4334**

**Greyson**

I stared at Lucian, my ears ringing. I couldn’t have heard what I thought I heard. I just couldn’t have. It wasn’t possible. “What the fuck do you mean?” I demanded harshly. “Where is he?”

Lucian didn’t answer, so I pushed roughly past him and started toward the trees. Lucian was out of his mind. Xavier was just delayed for some reason. They must have gotten separated or something, and Lucian jumped to the worst possible conclusion.

“No, that can’t be right.”

I looked back at Ava, who was staring blankly ahead. Her face was frozen and bloodless.

“You’re right,” I growled. “I’ll go find him myself.”

“I’m telling you—” Lucian hacked a wet-sounding cough. “He’s dead! He told me to come here and tell you. He told me that with his dying breath!”

“Don’t you fucking say that again,” Ava snarled. Blood rushed into her face again, and her eyes flashed dangerously. “Xavier is not dead!”

“I’m sorry to have to deliver this news,” Lucian went on, his voice practically a sob, “especially to his Luna, but—”

“Shut the fuck up!” I roared at him. “You’re a fucking liar! Everyone here knows it!”

I saw a flicker at the corner of my eye. The other wolves had gathered by the tree line and were watching in shock. Of course they were, because Lucian was creating a scene with his nonsense.

I saw someone clap a hand over their mouth in horror, and the sight made me impossibly angry. Lucian was hysterical. A distraction from the actual problem at hand.

Ava rounded on them. “What are you just standing there for?”  she shouted at them. “The Samara Alpha is missing! We have to organize a search party!”

As she began to gather her pack around her, Rishika stepped toward me.

“Greyson,” she said. Her voice was level, but her eyes shimmered like she might cry. “We need more information.”

The part of my brain that was still functioning logically knew that what she was saying was right, but I also knew I didn’t want to hear her say it.

“The fact is that if Xavier is out there—” I shook my head, shocked at how thin my voice sounded. I cleared my throat, desperate to sound normal, to *be* normal. “If he’s hurt out there, the longer we wait, the worse he could get. Either Lucian is right, or there’s *some* truth in it—we have to find out which it is.”

Lucian put his hand to his eyes. He looked terrible and grave.

Aysel was at his side, practically holding him upright. “What happened, brother? What did you see out there?”

“We—we were—” Lucian struggled to get the words out. He looked about a decade younger in his sister’s arms. Seeing the tenderness between them made me want to cringe. It felt private and unfamiliar. It had never been that effortless with me, Xavier, and Colton. “Ambushed. On the way back. So many of them. We tried to fight our way out, but—Xavier took on half a dozen Bitterfangs so I could come back and tell you what we saw.”

“You left him?” I was in Lucian’s face before I even knew what I was doing. “My brother was under attack, and you decided the best thing to do was leave him behind to fight them all himself? Are you an asshole or just fucking stupid?”

“It’s what he asked me to do,” Lucian said, just a flash of his old pride in his eyes. He didn’t flinch away from my glare. “He asked, and that’s what I’m doing.”

Aysel put a hand on my chest and pushed me back. “Let him finish, Greyson.” She turned back to her brother. “What happened next?”

“I didn’t want to leave him,” Lucian said, his voice growing weak again. He looked up at me, his eyes pleading. “I swear to you, Greyson, I went back. And that’s when I saw him fall into the ravine. The bottom was filled with jagged rocks—like knives. He hit his head, and he was bleeding… There was so much blood…” He trailed off, sagging against Aysel again.

“Okay, he fell.” I nodded, urging him to keep going. “He’s strong. He can survive that. We just have to go along the river and start searching.”

But Lucian shook his head

“I did that already.” Lucian’s voice broke on the last word, but I couldn’t find it in me to care. “I ran down there as fast as I could. Fell most of the way, but I knew I had to see if I could find him—and I did.”

My heart sank like it was made of lead. I wanted to tell Lucian to stop. That I didn’t want to hear any more. But he kept going.

“He was so broken and bloody, I almost didn’t recognize him,” Lucian rambled, blood leaking from his mouth. He swiped at it with the back of his hand. “He wasn’t healing, and he was talking nonsense. Saying he had to do it for my own good or something? At first, I don’t think he even knew it was me—”

“If you found him,” I pushed out through gritted teeth, “why didn’t you bring him back?”

“He was in pain. He couldn’t help but make noise, and the Bitterfangs heard us and started toward us. Xavier told me to run.” Lucian looked at me now, his eyes filled with pain. “I didn’t leave him. I stayed with him—I watched as he took his last breath. Greyson, I swear I watched him die. It was only after I knew he was gone that I ran. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry—” He dropped his head as he fought against sobs. Aysel put her arms around him.

“No,” I murmured, shaking my head. Xavier couldn’t be dead. Because if he was dead, I’d feel something. Something other than this cold numbness. Xavier was strong. He’d survived way worse than a fall. Wars and battles and poison and our father. He couldn’t be taken out on a stupid recon mission. It just wasn’t possible.

I turned away from them all, desperately wishing to be alone. To think. To iron out what didn’t feel right in peace and quiet with no one looking to me for stability or answers. Rishika called after me, but I didn’t answer. I took off running as hard as I could, headed toward the trees. I wasn’t going to leave this to Ava and her Samara search party. I needed to do this myself—even if it was risky.

I shifted mid-sprint as I raced into the forest. It felt good to move. Right. Better than doing nothing. I called to Xavier through the mind link, and the forest became a blur around me. If he was in his wolf form, he’d be able to answer. Even if he was weak. Even if he was hurt.

*Xavier! Xavier, can you hear me? Answer me! XAVIER!*

I *had* to find him.

I opened my senses and took in the scents and sounds of the woods around me, sure I’d pick up on something that would lead me to him. I followed the smell of Lucian’s blood, waiting to catch my brother’s scent, but the idiot princeling seemed to have thrashed around so much it was hard to even pick up a hint of my brother.

I heard footsteps coming toward me and puffed up my chest. Bitterfangs. Maybe they had him, and I could beat Xavier’s location out of them. More than likely I’d tear them to pieces no matter what they knew.

*Greyson!* Rishika’s voice cried to me as her wolf appeared on my flank. *You need to come back. The pack needs you. It’s all dissolving into chaos.*

*Not until I find my brother*, I replied, trying to run but having to slow down when Jay appeared right in front of me.

*They need their Alpha*,Ravi insisted, not a hint of the usual humor in his voice. *Greyson, we’re at war. You can’t run off and get ambushed and die, too.*

Die, too.

Die. *Too.*

The words echoed in my head until I couldn’t hear anything else. I threw back my head and let out an anguished howl. A broken, lost sound I didn’t even know I knew how to make. The kind I’d held in all the lonely years when I’d gladly have said to anyone that asked that I didn’t have a brother.

And now my brother was dead.

I wanted to fight this—this feeling. To fight it, to battle it, to fix it… But how did you fight death? How did you fix something that couldn’t be undone?

I wanted to tear something apart—I wanted to tear Malakai apart.

*Greyson, please*,Rishika said softly. *Will you come back? We need you. Ava will head the search party. She’s already getting it ready. That’s her right as the Luna of the Samara pack.*

I slowed to a stop and dropped my head. *Yeah*,I replied, looking down at the forest floor, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. I felt empty and defeated. *Fine. I’ll come back.*

I knew I had to. As much pain as I felt, I knew this news was going to have an impact on everyone.

I had just turned to start back when I froze, my whole body growing icy cold.

Shit.

How the hell was I going to tell Cali?

**Episode 4335**

I always knew my sister was reckless and brave, but eating a very crumbly protein bar she’d brought from home in the back of Mikah’s car was… bold.

For his part, he hadn’t stopped her, but I could see him checking the rearview mirror more often than necessary to see if she was getting crumbs anywhere.

“So, this asshole,” Artemis offered conversationally, totally unaware Mikah was watching her chew with rapt attention. “Is he a vampire?”

“That’s what Lakini said,” I replied, reaching back for a little piece of protein bar. “And he probably prefers being called Rufus.”

“I don’t like this,” Mikah told me, watching the tiny morsel Artemis had deigned to give me enter my lips like he’d swerve off the road if I let a single crumb fall on his newly shampooed floor mats.

“Us eating in your car?” I asked, feeling immediately guilty for pushing him too far.

“No,” Mikah scoffed. “I mean, I’m not thrilled about it but… I’m talking about this situation. If this guy only barters for blood, he’s going to want the two of yours. You’re both Fae. And, as I’m sure you know all too well now, not many vampires can keep their cool when it comes to Fae blood. Its potency tends to make us lose our heads.”

“Right.” I nodded, feeling a twisting feeling in my stomach at all the memories of vampires looking at me like a bottle of top-shelf bourbon. The last vampire who drank from me had been Lola, and she hadn’t been too keen on stopping. And who could forget when Sabyr kidnapped me and tried to keep me as his little blood bag? Vampires drinking my Fae blood seemed to get drunk on my power. And not a happy, warm, giggly kind of drunk. The terrifying, possessive kind.

I wasn’t eager to see that happen again.

“But do we really have any other choice?” I asked Mikah. “I mean, we need to get this stuff today. And given how valuable our blood is, it should get us everything we need in exchange.”

“My blood being both Dark and Light Fae seems to affect them differently,” Artemis said. “So if he wants my blood, fine. I’ll do whatever we need to do.”

“Me too,” I said. This was bigger than having a little blood drawn.

Mikah pulled over on the side of the road, and for a second, I thought it was because he was pissed or something. I snuck a glance behind me, but Artemis was just lounging back without a crumb in sight.

“Are we here?” I asked.

“Yes and no. We have an hour until we meet with this guy, and I have an errand I need to run.” Mikah reached across me to grab his sunglasses case from the glove compartment.

“Wait, what? *Now?*” I squawked at him. “Aren’t we a little busy?”

“It’s important,” Mikah insisted, apparently unfazed by my worry. “Look, I know it’s not ideal, but I’ll meet you at the asshole’s place in an hour, okay? Stay out of trouble.”

“Okay…” I replied, not liking it but knowing I didn’t really have much of a choice.

“Would you mind getting out?” Mikah asked, not entirely unkindly. “Time is of the essence.”

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“What now?” I asked Artemis, watching Mikah’s car disappear around a corner.

“Lunch?” she offered with a shrug.

“How can you possibly still be hungry?” I asked, my grumbling stomach betraying that I was, too.

“There’s that family resemblance,” Artemis joked, putting an arm around me. “Now find me something to eat.”

“We’re getting it to-go, though,” I argued, steering us toward a few restaurants we’d passed on the way here.

Artemis only had eyes for the Mediterranean place with an impressive all-you-can-eat offer advertised in the window.

“What if I want to eat my falafel in peace?” Artemis grumbled after we ordered and I’d insisted on having it all boxed up.

“We have to meet Mikah in, like, forty minutes now,” I reminded her. “We have to use the time wisely.”

“What do you mean?” Artemis asked, already slurping at the dregs of her fountain soda.

“We have the address,” I explained. “Just because Mikah has some important errand to run doesn’t mean we have to wait for him. We can do a walk around the block and case the joint.”

“Case the what?” Artemis asked, mouth full again.

“It’s what bank robbers call it when they check out the bank before they rob it.” I kept my voice low as I grabbed our food. “See what kind of security the place has, look for escape routes, etcetera.”

“Didn’t realize you loved robbery so much,” Artemis replied with a stunning lack of judgment in her voice. But it didn’t stop the busboy near us from doing a double take.

“I learned it from movies,” I told her, blushing slightly. “I just think we should check it out. I don’t want to be caught unawares by anything when we meet this guy. This job is really important, and I want to do it well.”

“I’ll just take care of this, and then we can go,” Artemis replied, and before I could ask her what she meant, she unwrapped her falafel and ate it in three bites.

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“Well,” Artemis said, looking at the run-down, half-demolished building my maps app had led us to, “it certainly looks disreputable.”

We circled the perimeter, looking for any clue as to what was going on here. But all we found was a dirt alley behind the building with nothing magical-looking in sight.

“Do you think Lakini gave us the wrong address?” I asked, uncertain this was the right place.

“It’s possible,” Artemis replied, looking around skeptically. “Should we call her?”

“I don’t have her number,” I admitted, feeling like a complete and utter failure. A good Luna would have gotten her contact information. A good Luna would have probably done a lot of things differently. “Shit, we *have* to get this wolfsbane.”

I checked my watch. Mikah would be here any minute, and I hoped he’d have some kind of insight on what to do next. Because I certainly didn’t.

“Let’s do another walk around?” I offered, hopefully.

“Sure.” Artemis nodded. “Don’t freak out, okay? I feel like you might be freaking out.”

Before I could open my mouth to tell my sister that I was *actually doing totally fine, thank you very much*,I felt something clench inside my chest. Like a hand had wrapped itself around my heart and started to squeeze. Hard.

I clapped a hand to my chest. What could be making me feel like this? Could it be a panic attack? I’d had them before, but usually there was more warning. More sustained stress. Could I really be this scared to meet a vampire?

And then the hand squeezed again. So hard that I doubled over from the pain of it, gasping for air.

“Cali.” I heard Artemis at my ear and felt her rubbing circles on my back. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“I—don’t—” I choked out, only able to focus on the pain. “I don’t know. Hard to… breathe.”

Artemis grabbed my shoulders and led me to the curb, pulling my weight onto her shoulder so I barely had to use my legs.

“Sit down,” she ordered sternly. “You can’t catch your breath if you don’t give yourself a break.”

But before I could lower myself to the ground, it was gone.

Not the feeling—the ground.

And then we were falling, my stomach dropping like I was on a carnival ride. And before I could even fully process what was going on, we landed with a thud.

I was relieved to see I wasn’t alone, at least. But Artemis looked just as confused as I was.

“How did we get down here?” I asked, looking around for some kind of explanation. But I couldn’t even see where we’d fallen from. And the gross smell was starting to make me think it was a sewer we’d fallen into.

“The entrance must be hidden with magic,” Artemis commented, looking above us. “There.”

I followed her finger and spotted a manhole above us. If I squinted, I could see the faintest shimmer. An illusion. A trap. One I should have seen coming.

“Great.” I pushed myself to my feet. “Let’s just get out of here before an alligator shifter eats us or something.”

“Customers?” A voice came out of the dark from behind us and nearly made me jump out of my own skin.

I spun around, looking for the source of the voice only to find a pale man walking out of the shadows, smiling like a skull. His eyes were completely devoid of any light.

“What?” I heard myself say, still trying to wrap my head around the last few seconds.

“Who sent you?” the man asked, looking at us curiously.

“Um.” I glanced at Artemis, who had her jaw clenched and was clearly ready for a fight. “Lakini?”

“Ah, yes.” He nodded as if this were a perfectly normal kind of interaction to have—and for him, maybe it was. “What can I help you with?”

“Are you Rufus?” Artemis asked, taking a step in front of me.

“At your service.” The man even sank into a small bow. His old-fashioned manner and vaguely European accent reminded me of a vampire from an old black-and-white movie. Maybe living in the sewer was a bit much. I understood committing to an aesthetic, but was this really necessary?

“We were hoping you could sell us some wolfsbane,” I explained, trying to sound like a confident woman going about my business. Like I was used to being dumped in sewers.

“Ah, yes.” He closed his eyes like he was savoring the taste of something decadent. “Yes, I do have some…”

“Really?” I asked, stepping forward eagerly. Maybe this wouldn’t be as hard as I’d thought. Maybe I *could* be a good Luna and get what my pack needed, and without Mikah’s help, to boot.

But then Rufus caught a glimpse of something on my arm that made his eyes go wide as dinner plates.

I followed his gaze and saw a small scratch on the inside of my forearm. And a drop of ruby-red blood beading out of it, just about to trickle down onto my cream-colored sweater. There was no way I’d ever get the stain out. But that was the least of my problems.

Rufus advanced on us, almost in a trance. “It’s been so long since I’ve had Fae blood.”

**Episode 4336**

**Artemis**

Rufus lunged forward, eyes fixed on Cali’s forearm. It was easy enough to shove her behind me and take a swipe at him with my knife.

A knife was a warrior’s best friend. No need to reload, no need to spend a great deal of time concealing it. Having one within arm’s length was enough to keep you safe as long as you knew what to do.

I felt the blade nick his cheek and was pleased by the hiss of pain the vampire let out as he took a lurching step back.

He clawed at me, but I danced out of his reach with ease. Once he showed me his back, I leaned forward and slashed a hole in the yellowing shirt that ballooned around him, dwarfing his frame.

“Uncalled for!” Rufus cried out indignantly. “That was my only shirt.”

Pissed, he went for my throat, flashing his fangs. I ducked, hoping to trip him, and heard the crackling sound of one of Cali’s energy balls flying over my head and hitting the wall just behind him. Pride swelled in my chest. Cali had barely missed him, plus, it was just the distraction I needed to do a flying kick leap and shove Rufus against the wall.

“Maybe Greyson should’ve had me help him lead those hand-to-hand combat classes, huh?” I said.

Light poured down on us as someone clambered through the hole in the sky. I turned, keeping Rufus pinned against the wall with my forearm but ready to throw my knife at this new enemy.

“What the hell is going on?” Mikah asked. “You just couldn’t wait?”

Rufus wriggled from my grasp, taking this moment of distraction to his advantage. I heard the crackle of Cali forming another energy ball behind me.

“Stop!” Mikah called out.

We all froze. Rufus with his arms out like he wanted to throttle me. Cali with the beginnings of an energy ball forming in her palm. And me with the tip of my knife under Rufus’s chin.

Mikah sighed like he was dealing with some particularly annoying children and made his way over to me and Rufus.

“So, you’re Rufus?” he asked flatly.

Leave it to Mikah to show up the second I was taking control of things. He sure had finished his “errand” quickly. But I supposed it was good he’d shown up; he did seem to know how vampires like this operated.

Rufus threw back his shoulders and pasted a congenial smile on his face that fooled exactly no one.

“Why yes, I am, good sir,” he simpered. “What can I help you with?”

What the hell? Was this guy really trying to smooth things over with a few manners? Seconds ago, he’d been completely rabid, and now he wanted to make nice? Was it because Mikah was a vampire?

Needless to say, I didn’t trust the guy. I took a step back, eager to put myself between him and Cali in case more fighting broke out.

“My associates and I would like to buy some wolfsbane,” Mikah replied, straddling the line between firm and calm.

“Yes, yes.” Rufus nodded enthusiastically like he’d love nothing more than to help us. “Right this way!”

And with that, he turned on his heel and took off into the darkness, clearly seeing some kind of path I couldn’t make out.

Mikah glanced back toward me and Cali, brows raised.

“You really want us to follow him?” I murmured as quietly as I could in hopes that Rufus wouldn’t be able to hear.

“I could go alone,” Mikah deadpanned.

“No one’s going anywhere alone,” Cali insisted, chin jutting out in determination. “We stick together.”

With the vote at two versus one, Mikah nodded and led the way forward. I followed reluctantly, plastering myself to Cali’s side as we made our way through the dark.

The tunnel walls tightened around us as we walked, eventually forcing us into a single-file line. I hated this, but I knew it was smartest for me and Mikah to flank Cali to keep her safe. As much as her fighting skills had evolved, she was still the least experienced among us and needed protection.

Eventually, Rufus led us into a relatively more open space. The ceiling was higher, and there was actually room to stand side by side, but the place was littered with objects of questionable value. I could barely take a step without potentially crushing something or other beneath my feet.

“He’s a literal hoarder,” Cali whispered to me, taking in the mess. Having caught a few episodes of that show with Rishika one night, I couldn’t disagree. Rufus definitely qualified.

“How do you even move with all this stuff?” I called out to Rufus, hoping he was in a better mood.

“I don’t much,” Rufus admitted with a small chuckle. “I like tight spaces. The outside world? It’s far too big for my taste. To… diffuse.”

“Do you, like, never go outside then?” Cali asked, concern coloring her voice because of course Cali felt for this guy.

“It’s too big,” Rufus repeated with a jerky nod. “It’s safer here. Where it’s closed in. Where I can be with my things.”

“Wow,” Cali murmured softly. “Never thought I’d meet a vampire with agoraphobia.”

“Do you know where the wolfsbane might be?” Mikah asked, gently trying to move us back on track.

“Right-o,” Rufus replied, digging through a pile. How he told the difference between that and the dozen other piles within spitting distance, I did not know.

Could wolfsbane grow here? Or did he have it delivered? I looked over his wares. As a former bounty hunter, I knew how important it was to deliver goods in fine condition. If I had brought some of this stuff to my old employers looking for a payout, I probably would have taken a lashing instead.

I heard the crumple of plastic as Rufus pulled a bag out of an old wooden chest and offered it to Mikah like it was the finest gold. Mikah nodded graciously and brought the bag over to Cali and me to inspect. Sure enough, it was full to the brim with wolfsbane.

“Is this enough?” he asked Cali.

Cali nodded eagerly, relief blooming across her face.

“Yes!” she cried before looking over at Rufus.

I held up a hand. “What’s the price?”

This guy dealt with blood. We had to be careful, even if Cali and I were willing to give some up.

Rufus looked Cali up and down, practically drooling. I stepped a little closer to her, ready to shove her behind me again if I needed to.

“I haven’t had Fae blood in such a long time,” Rufus spoke in a solemn tone, like we should feel bad for him for never having been afforded the delicacy.

“We’ll be dealing in human blood,” Mikah replied in a voice that invited no argument. “And human blood only.”

Rufus’s lower lip jutted out like a sad little child but, thankfully, Mikah didn’t budge.

“How much do you have?” Rufus asked with a world-weary sigh.

“How much do you want?” Mikah asked back, knowing better than to make the first offer.

“Five liters should do it,” Rufus announced, his eyes still searching for any glimpse of Cali he could get. I’d bet that that price was inflated because he was pissed.

“Where are we going to get that amount of human blood?” Cali blurted out.

“Not to worry,” Mikah told her. “I’ve got it right here.”

He slid his backpack off his shoulder and opened it, showing off dozens and dozens of blood bags. Where the gods had he gotten all that?

“This should do it, right?” Mikah asked, holding the bag out to Rufus for him to sniff.

“Yes.” Rufus took a deep inhale, and I could practically hear him salivating over it. “Yes, good. That will do. Wonderful doing business with you.”

His hand closed around the strap of the bag, and a door appeared behind him, the light almost blinding now that my eyes had adjusted to the dark. I couldn’t help but sigh in relief. The idea of being enclosed in this space for much longer did not appeal to me.

Not needing to be told twice, Mikah began to usher us out. I could taste the fresh air on my tongue and couldn’t wait to feel the sun on my skin.

“If you ever do want to put your Fae blood on offer,” Rufus called at our backs, desperate for the sale, “I have many quality wares. A demon skull perhaps?”

I shuddered at the thought of giving that creep a drop of my blood. *Never going to happen.*

Once on the street with the door closed behind us, we all collectively breathed a sigh of relief. But the peace was short-lived.

“Did you *steal* that blood?” Cali asked Mikah with a shove.

“No,” Mikah scoffed, straightening his jacket. “I know someone who does this in Portland. He owed me a favor.”

“Did your *guy* steal it?” I asked, watching Mikah’s expression carefully so I’d know if I got the truth or not.

“Does it really matter?” Mikah asked, annoyed. “I thought you’d be glad to get the fuck out of there and get what we need.”

I looked to Cali, who just sighed and wiped her hand down her face.

“Fine.” She shook her head. “I guess it doesn’t really matter as long as we got everything Big Mac wanted. Let’s just get going before anything else goes wrong.”

Mikah led us back to his car. I actually relished the thought of being in the heated car. Maybe the human world, and all its technologies, was making me soft.

But all of a sudden, Mikah turned around, ducking behind the door of his car and pulling Cali down with him. I followed suit, sinking into a crouch as quickly as I could and steeling myself for Rufus or whoever else we’d managed to piss off.

“Stop,” Mikah said suddenly, putting out a cautioning hand. “I smell werewolf blood.”

**Episode 4337**

For a second, I could swear I was in the forest training with Artemis and Adair. That was how practiced my movements were.

Gone was the me that would have ended up splayed on the ground with a skinned knee. Yeah, I knew how to *fall* now. I couldn’t believe after all the time I’d spent tripping over my feet that there was a right way to do it and a wrong way to do it. A way to catch yourself to minimize damage to your body.

So there I was, on a street in Portland on the balls of my feet with my hips tilted forward and my knees brushing my ears, ready to spring into action for any attack. Except this wasn’t just practice. This time I could really get hurt.

“Bitterfang?” I asked Mikah, trying to keep my voice under the low rumble of traffic and pedestrians around us. “You’re sure?”

Mikah nodded. “Pretty sure.” I could see him taking deep inhales through his mouth and nose, not just smelling the air but maybe tasting it so he could figure out as much as he could from this distance. I didn’t know how vampires did it, but clearly, his ability to discern what pack the wolf was from was just about as good as some werewolves’.

“Let’s move,” Mikah hissed.

“Wait.” Artemis reached out and held him back by the elbow. “As much as I love an impulsive charge into battle, could you maybe tell us what you figured out by sniffing the air just a few seconds ago?”

Mikah stared at her blankly, so I translated. “Like, how many of them are there?”

Mikah, rolling his eyes as he humored us, took another inhale. He waited a moment, eyes closed as he took it all in.

“Honestly?” he admitted stiffly. “I think it’s just one. Definitely not more than two.”

“Then let’s fucking charge,” Artemis said with a conspiratorial grin.

“Are you serious?” I hissed at her, resisting the urge to shriek it at her in a manner unbefitting of a warrior. “No! We came here on a specific mission, and we’re almost done. Let’s just get the hell out of here!”

“You mean you don’t want to know if a Bitterfang followed us here? Why not?” Artemis asked, eyebrow cocked. “Seems relevant to the current war situation, no?”

“I mean, I guess you have a point,” I admitted.

“Then is there really that much harm in just trying to see what they’re up to?” Artemis asked with a sugary sweet innocence in her voice that should have had me shutting this entire thing down. “We could come back with what we were asked to get *and* helpful intel on our enemy.”

I looked to Mikah. If Artemis was the devil on my shoulder, maybe he wouldn’t mind acting like the angel.

But he just shrugged.

“Okay, fine.” I sighed, unable to find a reason not to at least *try* to be the useful Luna I dreamed of being. “Let’s do it.”

We followed Mikah as he tracked the scent. His deep breaths felt an awful lot like fuming, but I tried not to take it personally. He was just kind of default cranky. It was part of the package. Maybe it came with being a vampire. Along with the brooding.

Mikah stopped so short after a few blocks that I nearly bumped into him. Luckily, Artemis grabbed the collar of my sweater to keep me from falling face-first into Mikah’s leather jacket.

“It’s him,” Mikah murmured so softly I barely heard him. “He’s alone.”

I saw who he was talking about immediately. A young kid in a navy-blue hoodie, probably about Charlie and Violet’s age. Maybe a bit older. I watched him cross the street, hands tucked into his pockets and hood up.

What kind of mission would Malakai send this guy on alone?

“I think you’re right,” I whispered to Artemis.

“I’m always right,” Artemis replied before adding, “About what, exactly?”

“He’s just one guy,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “A kid, really. If we took him prisoner, we’d be able to question him and get some intel on our enemy. Maybe something that could help us get the Vanguard palace back.”

Before I even finished my sentence, one of Artemis’s knives appeared in her hand, catching the sun just so.

“Slow down, *Crocodile Dundee*,” I scolded, pushing her knife hand away by the wrist. “We’re still in the middle of a big city.”

“Fine,” Artemis grumbled, stashing the knife back in her shoulder holster.

“Mikah, can you go around the block and come up on the other side?” I asked. “That way Artemis and I can distract him by that alleyway, and we’ll have him cornered.”

He nodded, then disappeared around the corner without another word.

“Come on.” I yanked Artemis by her wrist down the street, trailing a comfortable distance behind the Bitterfang wolf. I didn’t want to draw attention by getting too close too soon. That would be a dead giveaway.

“Hey, Wolf Boy!” I called out just loud enough for him to hear once I had him where I wanted him.

The wolf spun around just a few feet away from the alley’s entrance. He looked almost scared until his eyes landed on me. Then a knowing sneer spread across his face, and most of the sympathy I had for him vanished as he took off down the alley, just like I’d hoped.

I tore after him, feet pounding the pavement as I made my way down the alley after him. I knew I may not be fast enough to catch him, but that didn’t matter. I just needed to keep his attention on me.

“Hey, Bitter-bitch!” I yelled after him, not even feeling that winded yet as I approached him.

One second, there was no one in front of the kid. Just a dead end and nowhere to go. Then I blinked, and there was Mikah with his arm out, ready to execute a perfect clothesline. Damn, I hadn’t seen him coming. The kid’s throat collided with Mikah’s arm, and he collapsed to his knees, coughing and sputtering.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Mikah quipped, hauling the kid up.

I jogged the rest of the way, for once able to catch my breath before I was done.

“Nice work,” I told Mikah with a grin. I was sure I didn’t imagine the twitch at the corners of his lips.

“I hated that,” Artemis grumbled with a scowl. “I didn’t even get to use one of my knives.”

“We both know you always manage to find a way,” I snapped. Then I glanced at the Bitterfang wolf, who looked… scared? Maybe the knife was useful. “But, I guess if he doesn’t talk…”

The Bitterfang must have been impressed by this casual threat because he immediately threw his hands up in the air in surrender.

“Don’t hurt me!” he cried. “Please—I’m not with them anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Mikah growled at him, slipping into the role of bad cop quite easily.

The kid just looked at him, searching his expression, desperately trying to size him up. Mikah grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a shake.

“Do I have to ask again?” he barked as the back of the kid’s head hit the wall behind him.

“I d-don’t *agree*,” the kid spat out. “With what Malakai is doing. So… I left, okay?”

“You went Rogue?” I asked, surprised. Armin had said there was dissent in the ranks, but it still felt… strange that someone would dare stray from Malakai. He certainly wasn’t going to like that…

“You won’t tell Malakai, will you?” the young wolf asked fearfully.

“Oh, uh, no,” I replied, seeing no reason to scare this kid any more. “We’d have no reason to.”

The kid sighed and flashed a shy smile. “Thanks.”

“So you just decided to desert your army?” Artemis asked, clearly still on the Rogue issue. “What’s your plan? Just go out on your own?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged, the smile disappearing off his face now that it was brought up. “A few of us left and split up so we’d be harder to track. I’m supposed to meet up with them in a few days.”

“Wow,” I murmured, unable to help it. Multiple Bitterfang members had deserted. And collectively, too. Which could only mean good things for us.

Maybe even more of them would desert. And then we’d end up fighting an army dwindling in numbers and confidence.

“You’d better go farther than Portland if you really want to escape,” I advised him. “The city is way too close. They’ll have contacts, eyes. You really ought to get out.”

“Totally.” The kid nodded, brightening now that he had a little direction. “Thanks.”

“Mikah, let him go,” I ordered, biting back a smile. Not only did I have positive intel about our enemy, but I’d also helped an innocent kid in the process.

“For real, though,” the kid blurted out, eyes continually darting toward Mikah in case he got grabby again. “Thanks!”

And then he was taking off the way he came, tugging his hood up once more.

I dug in my pockets for my phone, feeling myself swell with pride as I called Greyson to deliver the good news.

“Hello?” Lola’s voice greeted me at the other end of the line.

“Lola? Hey. Why do you have Greyson’s phone?” I asked, confused. “Is Greyson there?”

“Oh, Cali…” Lola sounded distracted, which was weird because normally she loved talking on the phone. “I don’t…”

She trailed off, and I frowned. Why was she being so strange? And she hadn’t answered my question about having Greyson’s phone.

“Lola,” I called out, surprised when I was still met with silence. “You… okay?”

“Yeah,” Lola answered a little too quickly. “I just—you should come home now. Okay?”

“What is it?” I asked, worried that there was more fighting amongst the Alphas.

“I can’t talk about it over the phone,” Lola replied, not giving me any more information to work with. “Just get here.”

My stomach sank. Maybe it was just Lola being dramatic. After all, she loved to do it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, growing increasingly concerned. “Tell me what happened.”

**Episode 4338**

**Ava**

“Okay, we’re going to head in together, but once we get to the ravine, we’ll need to split up. Got it?”

Marissa and Donovan both nodded. It felt surreal that I was even organizing a search party to look for Xavier. I was trying to concentrate, but it was hard, and everything I did felt strangely slow, like I was moving through wet cement. I couldn’t move fast enough. I needed to act—to get the hell out of here—but I also had to be a Luna for my pack. I had to find my Alpha.

“We can go out right now,” Marissa said. She looked back at the rest of the Samaras, who were looking on anxiously. They had circled up after Lucian had made his surprise announcement. “The whole pack. Lucian can come with us. He can take us back to exactly where he left Xavier.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea—” I started, but stopped when I felt something rip through my chest. Coughing, I put a hand to my sternum, certain I’d find a dagger buried to the hilt in my flesh, but there was nothing there.

“Ava?” Marissa took a step toward me, concerned. “Are you okay?”

“What the hell? Can you choke on air?” Donovan asked, baffled.

“Shut up!” Marissa snapped at him. “She’s obviously upset about the Alpha! Get her some damn water!”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, waving them away. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. “I’ve been having some weird heartburn or something for the last hour or so. It’s nothing. I’ll get over it. I have a search party to lead.”

Marissa still looked nervous. “Yeah, okay, but…”

“But what?” I snapped, feeling edgy as hell.

Marissa looked uncomfortable but determined. “But if there’s a possibility of Xavier actually being… you know, then the Luna is the next person in line. You need to be okay, Ava, because you’re who everyone’s going to be looking to,” she finished.

I felt like I was going to be sick. “Like a broken queen, you mean? Ripe for the taking?”

Marissa looked shocked, like I’d slapped her. “No, not like that. Like as a leader, Ava.” She shook her head. “Let’s just focus on one thing at a time right now. We’re getting a search party ready to go. Are you really okay? You can walk and everything?”

I nodded, trying to shake off the weird feeling I’d just had. “Yeah, I’m fine, but I want to talk to Lucian. Now.”

Marissa pointed to where Lucian sat in the dead grass. “He’s still over there. With Aysel. She’s trying to get him inside.”

We walked over to where he was sitting. Someone had bought him a blanket and some water, and it looked like Aysel was trying to get him to drink.

I looked at her. “I need to talk to Lucian. Leave.”

Her eyes flashed angrily, and Aysel opened her mouth to retort, but Lucian raised a hand to keep her silent.

“Just go, Aysel.”

Aysel got to her feet. Her eyes were strange as she looked at me. They held her usual coldness, but she looked shaken, too. “He’s gone, Ava. I’m sorry.”

Anger bloomed in my chest as I glared back at her. “Hey, Aysel, why don’t you go fuck yourself?”

When Aysel strode away, I rounded on Lucian. “You need to tell me what the hell happened out there.”

“You heard everything already, Ava,” Lucian said, sounding exhausted. The wind kicked up, and he shivered. “He’s dead. I’m sorry—” He reached for my hand, but I slapped him away.

“I didn’t come over here looking for comfort, and I don’t want any from you. What I want is for you to tell me where the hell he is. And stop saying he’s dead. He’s *not*.” Fury rose in me. “He can’t be dead! I would feel it! If he were dead, I would feel it, wouldn’t I…” I trailed off and felt myself going cold. I remembered the sudden pain I’d just felt.

I stumbled back a step, and Marissa—who’d been hanging back—walked to my side.

“Ava? Are you okay?”

I shook my head, then turned to the forest as Greyson emerged from the trees. He was in his human form and flanked by Rishika and Ravi. “Did you find anything?” I asked, abandoning Lucian and hurrying toward him.

Greyson shook his head. “No, but I—I had to turn around.”

“*What?*” I snapped. “Why?”

He looked grim. “I have to take care of the pack. All the packs. The alliance. This war is my responsibility, Ava. You said so yourself.”

I reacted without conscious thought and shoved Greyson as hard as I could, making him stumble back. “Are you fucking *kidding* me?! You turned *back*? You’re not even going to search for him? Your own damn brother?”

Greyson’s face had gone stony, and his jaw looked like it had been carved from granite, but he didn’t respond. He didn’t even meet my eyes.

I gave a bark of mirthless laughter. “Makes sense,” I said, shoving him again, willing him to actually look me in the eyes. “Because you’re probably *glad* he’s dead—”

Greyson stepped toward me and finally met my gaze. Up close, I could see his grey eyes sparking with fury. “*Never* say that again,” he said, his voice low and terrifying. “Never presume you know how I feel about my brother. Do I make myself clear?”

I held his gaze for a moment longer. Then—with a scoff of derision—I turned and pushed past Greyson, heading toward the woods. I turned to Marissa, Geraint, and Donavan, who were trailing in my wake. “You three—you’re with me. We’re going to go find our Alpha. End of sentence. We’re going to find him because there’s no other option. Is that clear?”

All three pack members nodded. We strode quickly to the edge of the trees and shifted, then sprinted into the forest.

It felt good to run—at least it was doing *something*. But when I opened my senses to try to track Xavier, it felt like I’d been hit by a speeding truck. I caught his scent, but it was the smell of his blood, and it was *everywhere*. It filled my senses, turning my stomach. The smell of his blood had always filled me with fear—ever since we were kids. It was the fear that he might be hurt or in trouble. And now the fear was that he could be gone.

And that was when the pain came back.

I gasped with shock, but it was worse this time, and it wasn’t letting up. It felt like someone had a vise around my heart, like some unseen force was squeezing it, trying to tear it out of my body. What the hell *was* this? It felt like *I* was the one who was dying. Or rather, something was dying inside of me.

*The mate bond.*

My knees went weak. Was it possible? Could this be the feeling of the mate bond dying?

I had just leapt over a frozen creek, and I couldn’t get my feet beneath me and landed face-first in the dirt on the opposite bank. I felt myself shift back to my human form, but it wasn’t intentional. I had never changed like that before, and it was terrifying. It felt like my wolf form had just given out. Like it had slipped between my fingers like water in cupped hands.

I panted against the earth, feeling the freezing ground beneath my naked body. I could feel myself inhaling dirt, but I couldn’t bring myself to move. I had to fight this. Whatever this was, I had to get these lies out of my head. They were going to kill me.

Xavier couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t be. Not when I’d just gotten him back. Not when we were finally together, finally *getting somewhere real.*

I couldn’t lose him. I *wouldn’t* lose him.

I pressed my forehead into the ground and screamed until there was no more air in my lungs.

The pain in my chest gradually receded, leaving only an emptiness behind. The emptiness felt more bearable, more manageable. Less like something uninvited was crawling around under my skin. Now I felt hollow, and I rolled onto my back, feeling like a shell.

Marissa had been running behind me, and I heard her call for me as she raced toward where I lay. Using the very last of my strength, I raised my head so I could look at her.

Seeing my tear-stained face, she stopped, and when she shifted back to her human form, I could see the shock on her face. “Ava? What’s going on?”

“Something’s wrong,” I rasped, my voice hoarse from screaming.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“With the mate bond. Something’s wrong with my bond to Xavier.”

Marissa sucked in a sharp breath. “What do you mean?”

The words felt like poison on my tongue, but I said them anyway. “I think he’s really dead.”

**Episode 4339**

**Greyson**

I knew Ava could hold her own, but it didn’t mean I liked the idea of her and the other Samara wolves heading out to roam in the Bitterfang-infested woods. She was strong, but if these guys could take Xavier out… no one was safe.

She needed to find my brother.

I hated that I couldn’t go myself. But Rishika and Ravi were right, and even Ava herself. I needed to take care of the packs right now. I was in charge of this war that we were still waging against Malakai and the Bitterfangs. As much as my gut wanted me to run out there after my brother, to find him, to bring him home, I couldn’t.

And I had to live with that.

With Xavier gone, would the Samaras even be able to stand with us? Losing an Alpha was like punching a hole through the center of a pack. Some packs never recovered from losing their leader. They just splintered off into groups of Rogues or melded with other nearby packs. It was always chaos. People needed structure at times like this.

I didn’t like thinking like this. Politically, strategically, unemotionally. But I had to. Too many people were looking to me for me to give it all up now.

After pulling on some clothes, I found Josephine. “Can you gather your pack?” I asked her. “I’d like to talk to them.”

Josephine nodded silently, but then nearby, Knox let out a little huff that sounded a lot like a scoff. Clearly, he took issue with the way I was trying to handle things.

“You can’t boss us around,” Knox said, sneering up at me. At least he had the balls to say something for once. “You’re not our Alpha.”

“Hey.” Josephine put a hand out toward Knox to steady him, clearly not appreciating his bullshit. “He helped Xavier decide to spare you. Show some respect.”

Knox turned back toward me, hands balled into fist. He didn’t look happy, but he didn’t seem that pissed at me either. “You’re right, Josephine,” he said, surprising me. “I’ll help gather everyone.”

I nodded. I didn’t feel much, but I still was surprised Knox was being so cooperative. Normally I might have questioned his motivations, but now there was no point in looking a gift horse in the mouth when everything was going to shit. You had to take good breaks when you could get them.

Now I just had to talk to the other Alphas. Then maybe I could take a minute, catch my breath… call Cali.

Just then, I saw Lola walk out of the pack house looking sick. I went over to her.

“Lola. You okay?”

“I talked to Cali,” she mumbled, a little dazed.

For half a second, I felt a flash of relief. Maybe *I* wouldn’t have to tell Cali about my brother after all. But then I shook the feeling off, because nothing about the situation made me feel relieved or at peace or happy. And if Cali had just been told about Xavier, she would be feeling none of those things right now, either.

“Did you tell her what happened?” I asked.

“No.” Lola shook her head, looking off over my shoulder. “I told her to come home. She needs to hear it in person. She needs to hear it from *you*.”

I nodded. She was right, and I knew that. I had to be the one to deliver the news to her. No one else. Maybe I could still control how Cali found out. I could make this the best it could be for her.

I wanted to stay with Lola for a second. We’d never been close, but I knew she would sit in silence with me for a second. Wait with me while I waited for all the parts of me that had exploded in the air to float down to earth and join the rest of me. Maybe once I was a little more whole again, I’d be able to keep going.

But there was work to do.

I headed into the house to find Duke and Porter. Lucian was obviously out of commission for now, so I’d have to check in on the Vanguards as well. How was it that I was still running my to-do list in his head, even now?

It was all falling apart. To the point where I felt jealous of the mess around me. Like I wanted to scream at everything and everyone, “Don’t you think I want to fall apart now?”

But someone had to hold it together. And if that person wasn’t me, there was every chance I was going to lose more people. And then Xavier’s loss would be all for nothing.

My brother’s death would have been for nothing.

I bumped into an armchair I passed two dozen times a day. I held onto it and almost crumbled. My brother’s death. It was real. Something that would divide my life into “before” and “after.” It still sounded absurd to even think.

Xavier was here just this morning. We’d talked.

We’d never had the perfect relationship, but things had been better now that we’d been able to work together as equals, toward the same goal.

For most brothers, it was a given that you’d always be on the same side when push came to shove. But that hadn’t always been the case for us. Lately things had finally felt… right. At least in a small way.

What was I going to tell Colton? Would he ever forgive me for his twin dying on my watch? He’d hate me for good.

Maybe I wasn’t meant to have a good relationship with my brothers.

I shook my thoughts off, focusing on finding the witches. They were outside my mother’s room, steaming mugs of tea held aloft as they discussed some ritual I’d never understand. For a second, I considered turning around. It was so obvious they didn’t know yet. And here I was to ruin their day with bad news.

Sabine caught my eye and waved.

“Spell coming along?” I tried to ask like everything was normal. Not because I wanted to lie, but because a part of me wanted to see if I could pull it off.

“Yes,” Big Mac answered, her brow furrowing. “But are *you* okay?”

So much for my poker face. My mother moved to my side swiftly, eyes filled with concern.

“Not that I’m judging,” she murmured, “or hovering or anything, but… You look a bit off, Greyson.”

“My—” I felt my lip tremble and forced it to stay steady. “My brother—”

I choked on the word. So much for normal. So much for remaining strong as the leader of these packs.

I straightened up, holding my fists behind me.

“Xavier is…” I clenched my fists and forced myself to get on with it. “Xavier died. We just got word.”

Kira gasped, dropping the book she was holding and covering her mouth with her hand.

Sabine’s arms were around me before I could stop her. I never thought of her as someone who could outmaneuver me, but maybe I’d underestimated her.

“I—” I tried to come up with something to say that would get her to let go.

*I can’t right now.*

*Please, don’t.*

*I will fucking fall apart if I stop moving, Mom.*

But none of it came out. So she didn’t let go.

“It’s okay,” she whispered in my ear, so softly I almost couldn’t hear it myself. “I know you don’t want to stop moving right now. And I’ll let you get back to it, I swear. But before you go off and deal with your responsibilities… Please just know I’m here for you.”

I let my eyes close just for a second as she held me close. It would only be a second after all.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” she told me before finally letting go.

I opened my eyes again, and seeing the sadness in hers, on all of the faces around her, made me wish I could just close them again.

Instead, I nodded. Cleared my throat and swallowed.

“I need to make sure everything will go smoothly on your end,” I told just my mother, feeling safe in the bubble that was her gaze. “The packs are already in disarray over this as it is.”

“I should go check on the Samaras,” Kira said, heading for the staircase.

“Josephine and Knox are gathering them already. I’d really prefer if you focused on this.” I held up a hand, stopping her. I could see how much that upset her.

“Please,” I added, not knowing what else to say.

Kira opened her mouth to speak but seemed to think better of it. She nodded and took a step back.

“We’ve got this,” Big Mac told me, stiff upper lip in place. “Go get your wolves in order. We’ll do our part.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled.

And with that, I turned on my heel and left. I found Duke and Porter in the den. I didn’t give them a chance to say anything to me. I didn’t want any condolences. I didn’t want to hear anything about my brother.

“We have to get working to make sure *every* pack is ready for the upcoming fight,” I insisted. “No more getting caught off-guard. We can’t afford it.”

Mace pushed through the door to the den, Blue Blood scouts on either side of him.

I braced myself for more pity. More silence I wished would be filled by actionable discussion and forward momentum. I couldn’t be still a second longer. But Mace surprised me.

“I know it’s bad timing,” he told me, “but you need to know that there are Bitterfangs on the move now. Headed our way.

Fuck.

“What direction are they coming from?” I asked. If they were near the city, they could cross paths with Cali. My stomach tangled into knots. I couldn’t lose them both. I didn’t know what I’d do if I did.

Mace pointed out a spot on the map, and I sighed in relief. They were east of us. The city was to the west. It wasn’t much, but it was a relief.

“Looks like they’re bringing the fight to us,” I said, hoping I seemed like my normal, decisive, authoritative self—or at least close enough. I looked up and met the eyes of each Alpha around the table. “Let’s show them we’re ready.”

**Episode 4340**

“And what’s that?” Artemis asked Mikah, pointing to one of the various luxe-looking silver buttons on his dashboard. She was really utilizing her turn to ride shotgun to the fullest.

“The seat warmer,” Mikah replied curtly.

I could tell he wasn’t particularly interested in talking, but for some reason I couldn’t really stand the silence. I kept thinking about that weird call with Lola. I was concerned. Extremely. She’d sounded awful, like she was going to cry at any moment. She’d claimed it was just allergies, but I didn’t remember her ever having any.

She hadn’t told me anything. *Anything*. No hints at all, which wasn’t like her. Had something happened at the pack house? To Greyson?

I gulped, my fears rising.

“So it warms up your butt?” Artemis mused. “I guess I can see the appeal.”

I hated being away. I knew I maybe wasn’t *the* most valuable member of the pack, and they could easily fend for themselves. Honestly, sometimes I was more of a hindrance than a help. But I still felt like I should be back with them.

I stared out the window and silently willed Mikah to go faster. He was already going ten over the speed limit, but we were all supernatural here. Human rules did not apply!

Well, unless he got a ticket.

“Cali,” Artemis wheedled, clearly able to sense my discomfort. “Come on. We’re coming back with everything they asked us for *and* good news. That kid confirmed it. Multiple people in the Bitterfang pack disagree with Malakai. Of everyone who stayed, who knows how many of them are loyal?”

“But how do we best use that to our advantage?” I asked. “Before the fighting starts, say, ‘Hey! Anyone feeling kind of on the fence, feel free to sit this one out and see what happens’?”

Mikah huffed a little laugh.

“Sounds like you have an opinion,” I noted, crossing my arms over my chest. “That wasn’t a serious plan. It was a joke. For the record.”

“Noted,” Mikah replied, dryly glancing at me in the rearview mirror. “If we’re putting things on the record, I’d just like to note that a man like Malakai rules with an iron fist. I’d assume he demands unwavering loyalty in his followers. The kid and his friends going Rogue could easily be a fluke. Even if people have their doubts, it’s unlikely they’re expressing them to each other. If someone heard, they’d have to make a run for it rather than being caught.”

“Can you imagine?” I asked, feeling secondhand stress at the thought of all that lying. “Living in constant fear like that? Even in your own home. Among your pack… your family. It’s so sad.”

I felt tears stinging at my eyes and a tightening in my chest. If I were alone, I knew I’d be curled up and sobbing within seconds. But I had a feeling Mikah’s car was a No Cry Zone.

Artemis must have heard something worrying in my voice, because she turned around and shot me a look of concern.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

I swiped at my tears, feeling deeply embarrassed to be caught like this. I wondered if I was just hormonal or something.

“Yeah.” I rolled my eyes, trying to brush it off. “I don’t know. Something about how hopeless and scary it would be to be a Bitterfang… Thinking about it just made me sad.”

“I mean…” Artemis’s brows knit together in confusion as she turned back around. “I guess it *is* kind of tragic. But if we beat Malakai, we can save the wolves who don’t want to live like that. That’s a good thing, right?”

“Mm-hmm,” I replied, not trusting myself to talk as another tear slid down my cheek. For some reason, I couldn’t seem to get them to stop.

I felt cold. Alone. My chest was burning. Like I had the worst heartburn of my life. I was never going back to that falafel place.

I pressed a hand to my chest, trying to put a little pressure on it to alleviate the pain. But then out of nowhere I felt something stabbing in between my ribs.

A gasp tore out of my mouth at the white-hot pain.

“Cali.” Artemis whirled around, eyes wide with worry. “You okay?”

I nodded, cracking a window in hopes the fresh air would help. The idea of us stopping or even slowing down made me feel even more panicky than I already did. I couldn’t delay us. Whatever was going on, I could deal with it at the pack house.

I took in gulps of fresh air. We were out of the city now, surrounded by trees. But the fresh scent of the pines didn’t comfort me like they normally did. The awful pain in my chest wasn’t going away. If anything, it was intensifying.

What the hell?

And then, as if someone were twisting a knife they’d stabbed into my heart, the pain flared up so much my vision went white. Instantly, I knew I was going to be sick.

“Um, can you stop the car?” I cried out. I could *not* puke here.

The tires squealed as we pulled over on the side of the highway. I disentangled myself from my seat belt with shaking hands and lurched out of the car, puking in the dirt with barely a second to spare.

I stood there, crouched over the puddle, with Artemis patting my back.

“You’ve been feeling weirdly sick for like half the day.” Artemis sounded worried. “Are you sure you’re not coming down with something?”

“I’m sure.” I spit, wishing I could wash the gross taste out of my mouth. “I’m not sick. I’m sure of it. Where would I even have picked something up?”

I glanced up at Artemis, who was looking down at me, eyes huge.

“You don’t think…” she whispered. “That you’re… you know… pregnant.”

I shook my head so hard I almost fell into the puke puddle. I took a very ungraceful step backward and leaned against the car to steady myself.

“No,” I answered firmly. “That’s impossible. I’m just stressed out. It has to be nerves.”

“Okay.” Artemis shrugged, still looking wary. “I just hope you’re right.”

I stood up to my full height and took a few steadying breaths. Being pregnant would be catastrophically bad right now. Greyson and I didn’t need another person to worry over and protect during all of this.

“I know I’m right,” I told her, trying to make my voice sound firm. “I’m not even late.”

“Okay then,” Artemis said. “Ready to ride?”

I nodded, and we both climbed back in the car.

Silently, I wracked my brain for the dates of my last cycle. Now that I was really thinking about things, I didn’t know if I’d been taking my birth control at the same time every day… I was pretty sure I hadn’t missed any, but you know, war.

*My last period ended on a Thursday? I think?*

I grabbed my phone to look at a calendar. If I was right—and I was mostly sure I was—then I was totally good. Totally not pregnant.

And good, because that would be way too complicated and confusing.

But if I wasn’t pregnant and I wasn’t sick, then what was happening? Could the pain I was having to clench my fists to endure really just be food poisoning?

I shook my head; I was torturing myself over something that could easily be nothing. I’d just take an antacid when I got home. Maybe ask Torin to take a look at me or brew me some sort of tea or tonic. A little rest would probably help.

I saw the pack house appear around the bend and instantly felt lighter. Mikah’s car glided up the driveway, and every second brought me closer to home. Nothing could be that bad if I was here. Where I belonged. With the people who knew me best.

I climbed out of Mikah’s car the second it stopped. Almost on cue, Greyson walked out of the front door and made his way over to us. I felt a grin spread across my face and opened my mouth to tell him all the good news. I couldn’t wait to show him what a good Luna I had been.

But then I got a good look at his face. His mouth was set in a hard line, and his grey eyes were dark with sorrow. He looked grim.

Morbidly grim.

“What is it?” I asked, rushing to his side. “What happened?”

My thoughts were a jumble. The packs had been training. Had there been an accident?

“I’m so sorry, Cali.” Greyson pulled me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me like he might never let me go. “Xavier is dead.”

**Episode 4341**

I had to have heard wrong. In my nightmares—many of them, over the past few months—I’d had those words said to me, but I’d always woken up. They’d never been real, never been the truth. I looked into Greyson’s eyes, waiting for him to tell me that he was just kidding, or that he’d meant the words to be interpreted differently, but no…

He was just watching me carefully and sadly.

Finally, I let out a surprised laugh. “You are not going to believe what I *thought* you said, but can you repeat yourself? I must have misheard.”

Greyson’s expression was pinched and pained as he looked at me and repeated the same words he’d just said. “Xavier… He’s gone.”

The smile slowly melted from my face. I looked around—surely Xavier was about to jump out from around a corner or something. Right?

*Right?*

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “No, you’re wrong.”

Pain was already simmering in my chest, but now it was flaring up into a vicious burn. I pressed a hand to my heart and attempted to catch my breath, but it felt like I couldn’t pull in enough air. There was a hand around my throat, invisible and cold, preventing me from breathing the way I needed to. My vision was blurring, and it felt like I couldn’t focus on any one thing. My ears were ringing, and at the same time eerily silent. I couldn’t hear a thing.

“Cali.”

Greyson’s voice sounded like it was coming to me from the end of a long tunnel, even though he was setting his hands on my shoulders now. I didn’t even realize that I was crying until I saw the droplets starting to hit his arms. It was like my body had already accepted what my brain couldn’t even touch. Because no. I refused to accept that. I couldn’t believe it.

Letting out a painful grunt, I clawed at my chest, praying for the pain to stop. I’d thought it was just hyperventilation at first, but it wasn’t—this was more profound, more significant. That unseen tether that connected Xavier and me was warping.

Breaking.

And if Xavier was alive, what reason would it have to do that?

“No!” I screamed, lashing out at Greyson. “No. No. *No!*”

“Cali.” Greyson was being understanding, even letting my desperate punches land on his arms and chest. “Shh. I know. I’m here. Come on, let’s go ins—”

“We can’t go inside!” I screeched. “We have to wait for Xavier! We have to wait here for him!”

Greyson’s expression softened even more, but it didn’t get any less sad. “Cali. I’m sorry, but he’s not coming.”

“He’s… He’s…”

I tried to form the words, convincing myself that if I continued to *say* that he’d be here, then he would be. But nothing else would come out. I felt hollow and frail. When Greyson grabbed me again, I jumped, half-afraid that I’d disintegrate under his touch.

There was no way this was true…

After carefully walking me inside, Greyson helped me into a chair in the kitchen, where Lola was already on standby with a cup of tea. She silently pushed it into my hand, then sat down in an adjacent chair and rested a supportive hand on my leg. But I couldn’t feel it. It was like the sensory receptors in my leg were all dead. I couldn’t feel Lola’s hand.

I couldn’t feel anything.

“How?” I finally managed to ask, my voice sounding numb and thready.

One of Greyson’s hands settled on top of my head. “We don’t have to talk about that now. I think—”

“*How?*” I screamed, sparks of my magic bursting off my skin like I’d quite literally short-circuited.

Lola and Greyson exchanged a weary look before Lola started talking. “He was saving Lucian from the Bitterfangs so that he could bring us some important information. He was a hero.”

I nodded. That sounded like Xavier. “He always takes on too much danger to protect other people.” I hesitated, then corrected myself. “*Took* on too much danger.”

It was that, changing my words from present to past tense, that sent me over the edge. A loud wail burst out of me as I collapsed against Greyson. His arms wrapped around me, and Lola slowly stroked my back. I sobbed past the lump in my throat, trying to cough it up, but it wouldn’t leave. It just sat there like a lead weight. A painful reminder, bringing a fresh set of tears to my eyes every time the old ones tried to leave.

I felt horrible for reacting this way in front of Greyson, but there was nothing I could do about that. I couldn’t help it. And I could imagine that Greyson was feeling devastated in his own way, too. He and Xavier had their problems, but I knew Greyson would’ve never wanted this outcome.

The thought of Greyson’s pain mixed in with my own pain and kept the tears flowing.

“Cali,” Lola said quietly. “Do you want to go upstairs and wash off the day? It might help.”

Nothing would help. There was nothing in this world or any other that would *help*. But I nodded nonetheless, and I rose from the chair as Lola pulled me to my feet. Greyson wrapped me in a hug, and I embraced him, breathing in his scent—possibly the only real comfort at a time like this.

I let Lola lead me up the stairs and into the bathroom, no more present than a specter, and then I just stood by as she drew me a bath. I didn’t even protest when she began to carefully peel off my clothes.

Once I was undressed, I just stood there staring at the bathtub. It felt like I didn’t even have the strength to lift a leg to get in, so Lola assisted me with that, as well—like a young woman taking care of her grandmother. She coaxed my legs up and over the edge, and then, once I was in, she guided me down to sit.

And then it was just me, in a tub full of water. I could barely feel it, like when Lola had touched my leg before. My skin just managed to register the temperature of the water and kept track of it as I cried and cried while it got colder and colder. Part of me thought the water wasn’t getting cold because of the passing time, but because I’d added enough of my own tears to the tub.

The water was as cold as my heart felt right now.

After a while, I was a pruning mess and beginning to feel like I might descend into hypothermia if I sat there much longer. I almost welcomed the idea, but I fought against the darkness that was seeping into my brain and used what little strength I had to climb out of the tub. Lola had laid a robe out for me, which I did manage to successfully put on, but that was as far as I got, clothes-wise. The thought of doing anything as trivial as picking out an outfit while Xavier was gone just didn’t compute.

So I just walked out into the hallway in my robe.

Immediately, I heard a loud crash from one of the guest rooms down the way. A few moments later, Torin came walking out of the room in question, carrying some shattered dishware.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Sadly, Torin replied, “Ava. The Samaras brought her back after they tried to go out on a search party for…” He trailed off.

I gulped. “For Xavier?”

He nodded solemnly. “She won’t come out, and she won’t eat or drink anything. And she’s throwing this stuff. I’m working on cleaning it up.”

“Oh.” I nodded, realizing that she was the only other person who was possibly experiencing something close to what I was going through right now. “Can you bring up some more tea?”

Torin frowned at me. “I can, but I really don’t think she’ll take it from me.”

“I know. I’ll give it to her.”

He raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced, but he still said, “Okay,” and headed for the kitchen.

I didn’t even bother to knock on the door; I just opened it and stepped into the room. At first, all I saw inside was a pile of blankets on the bed, but then the pile growled at me.

“I told you to fuck off!” Ava snarled.

I didn’t listen, of course, just walked farther into the room.

“Did you not fucking *hear me*? Do you want me to slice—” She sat up suddenly and turned to face the door, clearly enraged, but then her face fell when she realized it was me. At first, there was an anger there, so heavy that I could almost feel the heat of it, but then as quickly as it came, it vanished, leaving an empty expression in its wake. “Did you feel it, too?”

My nose started to burn, and I was finding it hard to swallow around that lump again, but I nodded and walked over to sit next to Ava. I half-expected her to shove me away, but she just let me sit there—the world’s most depressing slumber party.

“It felt like having a piece of my heart ripped out,” I whispered.

She nodded slowly. Her lips parted like she was going to say something, but nothing came out as tears filled her eyes and she began to cry. She pressed her face into her hands, which was probably a good thing, as Torin came creeping into the room with the tea. I silently motioned for him to set it down on the dresser, which he did before ducking back out and closing the door behind him.

Once he was gone, I looked down at Ava and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Her head lifted, and her wet eyes met mine. “I guess I’m sorry for you, too.”

For a moment, I hesitated, but then I did what felt like the best thing to do in that moment—I reached out and wrapped my arms around her. I pulled back to check her expression after barely a half-second, unsure if she’d welcome the embrace, but her temporary shock quickly turned to need. Regardless of all our twisted history, right now, I was the only person in the world who understood what Ava was going through, and vice versa. She nodded at me, and I leaned back in, pulling Ava into a tighter hug this time, and I felt her arms curl around me as well.

And we just sat there. Two women united in our grief for the man we both loved.

“I don’t know how I’m going to cope with this,” I whispered against Ava’s shoulder.

“I know what I’m going to do,” she said shakily. “I’m going to fucking *kill* Malakai.”

**Episode 4342**

**Greyson**

Pacing back and forth across the kitchen simply wasn’t cutting it for me. I kept stopping, like I needed to do something. Eat? Battle plan? Wash up? Go for a run? Break down? But before I could make a decision, I always started pacing again.

Lola was back at the table, working on a cup of tea and watching me like I was an active tennis match. She’d come right back down after helping Cali into the bath, obviously extending her concern to me as well—and while I appreciated it, it wasn’t really welcome.

I wanted to be doing… *something*. Something more than this.

I had the thought that I should’ve been helping Cali. It was obvious how hard this was on her. It had looked like she’d been in physical pain when we’d first told her the news. For a second there, I’d been afraid that she was going to cling to denial and keep standing out there waiting for Xavier, but then when she’d gone numb, it had almost been worse. I hated seeing her in that degree of pain—even more than that, I hated that there was nothing I could do to stop it. Cali didn’t deserve this agony.

What was I doing standing around when I needed to be looking for a way to support her?

“It’s been a while since you helped Cali upstairs,” I said to Lola.

She nodded. “Yeah, but she’s probably taking her time. She’s… suffering.”

“I should go check on her.” I was already twisting around to do so, but then I felt a hand on my arm. Lola had quickly gotten out of her seat and caught me before I could get too far. “What?”

“Maybe it’s not my place to say—although I *am* Cali’s best friend—but I think that you should just… leave her alone for now.”

I frowned at her. “I’m not just going to leave her alone. She’s hurting. She needs me.”

“Maybe,” Lola said. “And if she does need you, she’ll come find you. But until then, I think you should just leave her to her grief. Not just because Cali processes emotions differently from the average person, but because…” She hesitated and shot me a nervous look.

“What?” I barked.

She slowly pulled her hand back. “Well, I just don’t think that denying the… complexity of the situation is going to help anyone, here. While emotions are still so high, a little distance might be good for the two of you.”

*The situation*. Yeah. I was painfully, miserably aware of the situation. Of the fact that *my* mate was upstairs right now, mourning my brother. And I felt useless, because what could I honestly do or say that would make her feel better? Nothing. Not to mention, I’d be making myself suffer by witnessing the evidence how fucked-up this whole mess was.

And then I’d be forced to face the fact that I was just focusing on the Calipart of it so that I wouldn’t break down myself.

“Yeah,” I said softly to Lola. “I get it. You’re right.”

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” she said, uncharacteristically somber.

I shook my head at her. “I’m okay. Thank you for your insight, but I'm okay. You should go check on Jay.”

She nodded and left.

I’d said I was okay twice—not because I was trying to convince Lola of it, but because I was trying to convince myself. I was barely managing to keep my own pain at bay, but I knew I couldn’t let myself get too bogged down with the despair of losing Xavier—of losing my brother. I had to be strong for the packs. That was what Xavier would’ve wanted. After all, he’d loved both the Redwoods and the Samaras. And Cali. I would have to be the strongest for her. *And* I still had to figure out how to tell Colton.

For a long moment, I covered my face with my hands. This was all too much. The sheer thought of that conversation made my internal dam start to crack and leak. I shoved the thought away and decided that I would hold off on breaking the news to my other brother—at least until we had a body, and a funeral planned.

The dam cracked more.

Until this moment, I hadn’t even thought about the fact that I was going to have to plan a funeral. A burial. My nose started to burn as I imagined myself looking down at Xavier’s lifeless body, lying in a casket. Knowing that I’d never hear that cynical tone again, or feel the world shift with the drama of his eye rolls.

*Stop it, Greyson*.

Pulling in a deep breath, I shoved my growing to-do list into a mental box and put it as far away from conscious thought as possible. I needed to prioritize, and right now, I had to get the packs ready for the Bitterfangs.

That spurred me into action, and I shifted gears to start preparing for battle. I found Mikah and Artemis and brought them into my study for a full debrief about the Bitterfang wolf they’d caught. There was definitely dissonance within the Bitterfang pack, and that was an angle I wanted to work.

“I think there’s probably a way for us to sow more discontent through the Bitterfang army,” I told Artemis and Mikah. “But how?”

“That tracks with what Xavier and I saw at the palace,” said a new voice. I looked over and saw a freshly showered Lucian walking into the room. It *almost* seemed like he was trying to wear his usual haughty coat of armor, but when his eyes landed on mine, he lowered his head a bit. “I’m… sorry for the way I broke the news to you about Xavier.”

“It’s okay. You were in shock, and you’d just run away from the Bitterfangs.”

Lucian winced, probably at my choice of words. Had I been unintentionally harsh, phrasing it that way? Or had I been intentionally mean?

It would’ve been a lie to say that I didn’t resent Lucian a little. Here he was, standing before me, safe and sound—squeaky clean, even —while my brother was dead. I couldn’t even go to retrieve his body for a proper burial. But I chased those thoughts away. This wasn’t Lucian’s fault—it was Malakai’s, and Xavier would’ve done the exact same thing for anyone else in Lucian’s shoes.

“What was it that you saw, exactly?” I asked Lucian, choosing not to add the words that skittered across my brain. *What information was so important that my brother had to die for it?*

“The Bitterfang army can cope with losing a couple of Rogues,” Lucian said. “There are *masses* of them camped out at the palace—but that’s not the most important part.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What is?”

“Honora appears not to agree with Malakai’s methods,” Lucian said. “I think she’s the key to creating a rift between Malakai and his pack.”

My chest tightened. If that was true, that was huge. “You’re sure?”

Lucian nodded. “We overheard them arguing, and Honora was *pissed*.”

No wonder Xavier had died to make sure we had that information. It was a silver lining to this whole horrible mess, however dim.

“Okay, this is good,” I said. “We can definitelyuse this, somehow. Let’s wait for the others to arrive, and then we can talk specifics.”

Eventually, the other Alphas arrived, and we met in my study to go over Lucian’s information and figure out what to do next.

“Did you send more wolves out on patrol?” I asked Mace and Porter.

Mace nodded, and Porter said, “They just got back with their report.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Now that we’re all here, we need to figure out a good defensive strategy. We have the magic shield that Big Mac made us and Rowena helped enforce, but it won’t hold forever.”

“Is that why the Bitterfangs haven’t arrived yet?” Duke asked.

I frowned. “Maybe, but they haven’t even tried to pass through the shield yet. That’s what’s confusing.”

Porter nodded. “I don’t get it either. Why aren’t they trying to attack us yet? What’s their strategy, here?”

I could practically see the exact same question balancing at the forefront of everyone’s minds—it was on mine, too. It was our most frightening unknown at the moment.

“How quickly are the Bitterfangs approaching?” I asked Mace. “What did the patrol see?”

“They’re moving slowly,” he replied. “Not sure why, maybe more out of practicality than anything else? If they wanted to be here, they would be.”

“It seems like they’re not worried about being seen, either, since they’re not really trying to hide,” I added.

“I guess they’re confident that they’ll be able to overpower us,” Mace concluded.

I scowled at the thought that they were underestimating us. They’d had a couple of victories against us, sure, but you could only knock someone down so many times before they turned feral.

And we were a *lot* of someones who’d been knocked down.

“We have more weapons on our side than the Bitterfangs think,” I hissed.

Duke looked at me. “Will the spell be ready in time for this battle?”

I shook my head. “We can’t depend on it this time. We’ll have to just use whatever magic we have that’s ready now.”

**Episode 4343**

In the wake of speaking with Ava and really crying it all out, I decided it was time to go find Greyson. We hadn’t really had a chance to talk, and while I was crushed from losing my mate—so much so that it felt like part of my soul had been destroyed—Greyson had also lost his brother. Alpha or not, tumultuous relationship or not, he had to be devastated.

Maybe we’d be able to comfort each other through this—though it wasn’t like we were swimming in time to do so.

As I walked around, I noticed that the house was buzzing with activity. It seemed the other Alphas had come back while I’d been upstairs. I wondered if Greyson was busy with official Alpha business, but as I wandered, I spotted all the other Alphas, none of them talking to Greyson. Eventually, I found him out on the front porch, staring off into the distance.

When I stepped out to join him, he turned and saw me. He opened his mouth to say something, and I opened my mouth to say something, but neither of us actually spoke. Instead, we just fell into each other’s arms and held each other in total silence.

I could hear people running around and chattering inside the house, preparing for the inevitable battle. I knew that we didn’t have time for this—to just stand here saying nothing, doing nothing—but we both needed it. We needed each other.

It was Greyson who broke first, stepping back, but keeping his arms around me as he spoke. “How are you doing?”

“I’m… numb,” I admitted. “I don’t really know what to think or feel. It’s…” I let my voice fade away. I honestly didn’t know the answer to the question. “I want to know how *you’re* doing.”

Greyson’s expression hardened as he glanced at the house, no doubt also hearing the insanity inside and thinking that he really needed to be inside, dealing with it. “I’m trying to focus on what has to be done.”

“That’s not how you *feel*, Greyson,” I said. “It’s okay to grieve. To let your guard down.”

“I will,” he said. “But right now, I have to make sure that the pack is ready to face the Bitterfangs.”

He started to move toward the door, but I grabbed his hand to stop him. He looked back at me, clearly waiting for me to say something.

But I had nothing to say—or rather, there was *too much* to say.

There were so many things that I wished I could tell him right now. Things to help Greyson, to help *us*, but he was right—we didn’t have time for that right now. Still, something in the way I held onto him must have let him know that I wasn’t ready for this moment to end just yet, because he wrapped me up in his arms once again.

“Cali…” he said softly. “I don’t know what’s going to happen out there, but I want—no, I *need* you to be careful. Everyone’s emotions are running high right now, which is good for a fight, but please be careful. I just lost my brother. I can’t afford to lose you, too.”

I nodded, and with that, Greyson finally released me and went back inside, leaving me alone. He might as well have ripped my robe clean off my body for how cold it left me to lose his heat as he walked away—but I knew it wasn’t just the chill of the night. I’d simply never felt more alone in my life. I’d been trying to tell myself that I could get through this, but I felt so defeated.

I’d never even imagined my life without Xavier—he’d been a part of me for as long as I’d known him.

“I hope you’re ready to use your magic while you’re just standing there.” Adair’s brusque voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I swiped away a tear and nodded at him, unable to speak. “Now’s not the time to wallow in grief,” he added. “There’s a fight coming, and everyone needs to focus.”

“How do you do it?” I asked, my voice shaking.

He was already jogging down the steps of the front porch, but he stopped to look back at me. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You’ve been in countless battles,” I said. “You’ve seen your share of death and destruction. How do you not let it get to you?”

Adair came back up the stairs until he was pretty close to me. “It always gets to me,” he said with a rueful smile. “There would be no point in living if it didn’t—but there’s a time and a place to give in to your emotions.”

“When *is* that time?” I asked. “Because if I’m being totally honest, I kind of need it.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to tell you when the right time is. That’s something that you’re going to have to decide on your own. Do you want some advice that I *can* give you?”

I nodded, sniffling. “Please.”

“Take your grief and use it as a weapon.” His hands balled into fists, and I knew instantly that he was speaking from experience. “Take that mix of emotions onto the battlefield and make them pay for what they’ve done.”

“I understand.”

It was like how Ava had reacted—I just hoped that she hadn’t been serious about going off on her own. The way she’d said it certainly hadn’t led me to think that she was just blowing off steam, but I was hoping that she’d realize that taking off without any backup would be a bad idea. Though, knowing Ava… *Shit. I should’ve told Greyson.*

If we were going to defeat the Bitterfangs once and for all, we were going to need to fight as a unified force.

Whatever Adair had originally planned to do outside, in the wake of our conversation, he decided not to do it and went back into the house. Part of me felt bad. Maybe my questions had dredged up bad memories. Hopefully he’d be able to turn whatever was weighing on his heart into a weapon, too.

We were going to need all the help we could get.

I turned to follow him back inside, but before I could, I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye. Slowly, I stepped down from the porch, moving as cautiously as I could. It looked like a wolf, slinking through the tree line.

Could the Bitterfangs have managed to breach the magic shield? *How?*

My magic was surging inside me, fiercer than I’d ever know it to be. If it *was* a Bitterfang, they’d made a grave mistake, coming here.

Thinking of what Adair had justtold me, I channeled all my anger and all my sorrow, and it seemed to make my magic surge, like a pot of water that had been left on high heat. It was buzzing and crackling, almost like it was alive.

I was just about to step forward, but then I hesitated—only because I’d just remembered that Greyson had asked me to be careful.

But if I couldn’t even find out if we had a Bitterfang intruder, then what good was I to the pack?

Hurrying after the wolf, I stayed low and maintained a safe distance. At one point, I ducked behind the shed to keep myself out of sight, and then I kept going when I was sure it was safe. I crept toward the edge of the woods, taking one careful step at a time until I could see the wolf up ahead.

The ensuing rush of adrenaline—the white-hot rage I felt over Xavier—made my magic almost uncontrollable.

I concentrated, getting ready to blast, but then the wolf paused and looked back. I was just about to release my magic in a furious surge when I realized it was Ava. We stared at each other in silence for a moment. She knew I understood what she was feeling, just as I knew *she* understood, and yet neither of us moved. We hardly breathed. It was almost as if Ava was waiting to see what I would do, but when I didn’t move, Ava turned her back on me and ran off into the woods.

My magic had almost reached a boiling point, and it was nearly impossible to hold it in, but I lowered my hands and forced it to dissipate. I couldn’t stop Ava, and maybe I didn’t want to. She had failed at searching for Xavier once; I understood the impulse to try again, the need to *do something*.

But I at least needed to warn Greyson about what she was doing.

I ran back to the house, bursting through the front door just as some of the pack was gathering in the hall. Greyson was standing nearby, so I grabbed his arm and pulled him to the side.

“I think Ava’s about to do something incredibly stupid.”

**Episode 4344**

**Ava**

As I ran through the forest, I almost wished that Cali had tried to stop me—then I would’ve had a good reason to deck her. I’d seen that look in her eyes—she’d definitely been *hoping* that I wouldn’t go—but in the end, she’d made no move to stop me. Maybe because she’d realized that what I was feeling was beyond even *her* comprehension.

Yes, we’d shared a moment of acknowledgement—of mutual loss—but it had been fleeting, at best. I wasn’t about to deny the pain that Cali had to be feeling, but I was Xavier’s Luna, his active mate. I had to do this alone, and if Cali had tried to stop me, I would’ve had no choice but to put her in her place.

But this wasn’t about Cali anymore. It was about Malakai. Malakai, and the way he’d robbed me of everything I held dear—my mate, my love, my life. Someone was going to pay for that. Someone *had* to pay for it. No matter the price, I was going to avenge my mate.

I had no real plan, just a singular focus: to make Malakai pay for Xavier’s death. Was ripping Malakai’s throat out of his body and watching the life drain from his eyes going to bring Xavier back? Of course not. But his blood would still taste sweet. I was going to relish the moment when I got to stand over Malakai’s corpse and howl at the moon—a yearning cry for my lost love, loosed in the hope that somewhere in the afterlife, he would hear me and know that I’d fought for him.

When Malakai was dead, I’d drag him to the nearest cliffside, set him on fire, then throw him over the edge. I’d watch as his burning, lifeless body fell to the depths below, and only then would I know that I’d at least avenged Xavier’s death honorably—even though I’d failed to save his life.

I knew I was taking a risk, of course. Not only had I left the Redwood house alone, but the Bitterfangs had also been sighted not far from the edge of the magical shield. But I just needed to make it to Malakai. All I needed was one chance—just one—and I would make good on it.

I just had to get to him.

Moving with caution, I kept pausing to search the trees with all my senses. I was still haunted by the scent of Xavier’s blood. Fuck, if only this were a nightmare—if only I could’ve blinked awake and found myself in bed beside him in our new pack house. At that moment, I would’ve given anything for his rough, sometimes careless tone, or his growling sarcasm. I’d have taken Xavier at his worst over this.

I just wanted him back.

As I moved, a noise drew my attention. I whipped around, just as a large wolf plowed into me and slammed me to the ground.

I snarled and snapped at my attacker, trying to throw him off, catch him with my claws, bite him, anything, but he was much bigger and stronger than me. I was so upset, so full of anger and pain, that I didn’t realize until I was unceremoniously pinned to the forest floor that my attacker was actually Greyson.

*I’m going to shift*, he mind linked to me. *Don’t run off—please. I just want to talk.*

I huffed but shifted back to human along with him.

“What are youdoing, Ava?” Greyson asked. “Don’t you realize that with Xavier gone, the Samara pack needs their Luna now more than ever?”

As furious as I was, as much as I wanted to ignore Greyson and run off and continue with my mission, deep down, I knew he was right. Part of me wanted to listen to that little voice that was telling me I had a responsibility to the Samaras. If I ran off and something happened to me, they’d be totally without leadership.

“You need to come back and be the Luna the Samaras need,” Greyson continued.

But even though I knew he was right, I didn’t want to hear it. I was *going* to kill Malakai.

“I’ll be the Luna they need when I get back,” I snapped. “Right now, I have a job to do.”

“No. You can’t just run off to do this on your own. Look at what happened to Lucian and Xavier.” My stomach clenched. “I understand how you feel—”

“*No!*” I roared. “*No one* understands how I feel!”

“Xavier was my brother as much as he was your mate,” Greyson snarled. “Nothing would please me more to see Malakai dead. Believe me, if I could drag him to the pack house so that we could all get our shot at him, I would—but that’s not our reality. The Samaras need you. The alliance needs you. We can’t afford to lose a strong, brave warrior like you.”

“Greyson,” I hissed. “I don’t want to hear—”

“And look!” His head turned, and I followed his gaze to a spot where, not far from where we were, the shimmering light of the magical barrier was just barely visible. “If you’d gone just a littlefarther, you would’ve been trapped outside the shield. What you’re trying to do is too dangerous, Ava. I know you’re upset, but I’m begging you to see reason, here.”

With that pointed out to me, I stopped arguing with him. I was annoyed, but I knew I couldn’t keep pushing the issue. Not right now.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Fine. I’ll come back to the Redwood pack house with you.”

“If I turn around and you take off, I’ll have no choice but to drag you back, Ava. It’s what my brother would’ve wanted,” he warned me in a heavy tone.

“I’m not going to run,” I told him. “You’re right—I don’t want to get trapped beyond the shield.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t take his eyes off me, and he didn’t move.

To prove that I was truly committed to returning to the house, I started off in that direction. After a couple of seconds, Greyson fell into step beside me.

“Greyson,” I said as we walked, “I want to be the one to kill Malakai.”

He let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, but I can’t promise that. You’re overwhelmed with emotion, and—”

“Malakai killed my mate,” I said. “I deserve to be the one to kill him.”

“I get it,” Greyson said. “But we allhave our reasons for wanting Malakai dead. In the end, his death is all that matters. I need to know that you’ll keep fighting, regardless of who kills him. The Bitterfangs might keep fighting until they’re all dead.”

In lieu of responding, I just let his words hang silently in the air. He was right, again—but if I admitted that, it would mean I was agreeing to let someone else kill Malakai, which I just couldn’t do.

Iwould be the one to kill him. *Me*.

As we approached the house, I spotted Cali watching us from the porch and immediately suspected, with some annoyance and anger, that she’d clued Greyson in on my little excursion.

“I’m going to gather the alliance outside,” Greyson said, then he paused and looked at me. “Thank you for coming back. I *can* promise you that we’lldefeat Malakai and avenge Xavier’s death.”

“I understand,” I said, playing along. But as soon as Greyson and Cali retreated inside to gather the packs, I moved to a spot off to the side where I wouldn’t easily be seen.

As the packs started to assemble outside, the chatter grew, and it was clear that everyone was filled with nervous energy. Under any other circumstances, I would’ve been, too, but this loss was shattering me to my core. Only one person came close to being able to truly empathize with me—Cali—but Xavier left her for me, so this was my fight.

Once enough of the packs had gathered, there was enough noise and distraction that no one was paying attention to me, so I casually slipped back toward the woods. As soon as I made it past the tree line, I shifted and broke into a sprint, determined to put as much distance between myself and the pack house as possible.

I remembered what Greyson told me—that the shield would prevent me from returning—but I also didn’t care. Because Greyson had been wrong when he’d said that Malakai’s death was all that mattered, regardless of who caused it.

The only thing that mattered was that Malakai died by *my* hand—and if I never made it back, if it cost me my own life, that was unimportant.

I was approaching the shield when I picked up several unfamiliar scents. Crouching low, I moved into a position where the breeze wouldn’t give me away and waited. To my surprise, I soon spotted a group of Bitterfang werewolves, approaching the shield from the other side—too many for me to take on. They stopped before they reached the shield, but my heart plummeted when I saw that the shimmering magic was faltering—and the Bitterfangs saw it, too.

*Fuck*.

The alliance packs were in grave danger—but would I be able to get back to warn Greyson in time?

**Episode 4345**

**Greyson**  
I was trying to stay calm, but I was finding it incredibly irritating that I’d been forced to chase Ava down and drag her back to the pack house. Did she not realize that she *needed* to stick with the alliance so we could see this through as a unit? She was too crucial to the Samaras to take off on her own, and I hoped I’d managed to drum that message into her head. If we wanted to defeat Malakai and the Bitterfang army, we were going to need every single asset we had at our disposal—Ava included.

But I had to move past that now. I was with Ravi and Rishika, giving them their orders for the attack. I was putting Rishika in charge of the pack’s left flank and giving Ravi the right, and I was going to lead the frontal assault. It wasn’t exactly a delicate strategy, but it was going to have to work.

When I looked up again, I saw Cali approaching, and I realized that she was probably expecting to be by my side during the assault—the de-wolf spell wasn’t ready yet, so the witches wouldn’t need her to shield them this time. I knew Cali had shaped herself into an incredible fighter, and I knew that her magic wasn’t something we could afford to go without during this battle, but I meant what I’d told her earlier—I couldn’t lose her. Still, if Cali had shown me anything during this war, it was that she was adamant to fight by my side. How could I protect her and keep her away from the front lines without upsetting her?

It was probably impossible.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m going to join everyone outside.”

“Wait,” I said. “I actually want you and Charlie to stay with the witches.”

“What?” Cali asked blankly, clearly taken aback. “But I need to fight.”

“And you probably will,” I said. “The witches need to be protected, and between your magic and Charlie’s hunter skills, you’re our best bet to keep them safe. I’m still holding out hope that they’ll be able to use the de-wolf spell against the Bitterfangs, but we know that will affect us, too. And even if they can’t, we have to get the Bitterfangs on the run.”

I was pretty sure I’d just laid out a good, rational argument, but Cali still narrowed her eyes at me. “I think you’re being overprotective.”

“No,” I argued. “I don’t see it that way. The witches are important, and—”

“I’m talking about me,” Cali interrupted. “You can’t protect me all the time. We’re in the middle of a war, Greyson.”

I knew she was right. As much as I wanted to tell her to stay in her room until the war was over, just to ensure that she stayed safe, I knew I couldn’t do that. Still, I was doing everything I could to protect her without coddling her, and this felt like the closest I was going to get.

“I know that, Cali,” I said. “I’m genuinely thinking of the witches, here. If they fall, so does the alliance. They’re our secret weapon, and right now, we need every advantage we can get.” There was one card up my sleeve that I’d been hoping not to play, but I was now officially desperate. “I hate to put my foot down on this, Cali, but I’ve made up my mind. You and Charlie are staying back to protect the witches—and that’s an order.”

The disappointment in Cali’s eyes was a gut punch, and almost enough to make me back down and let her do what she wanted. But when I thought about the possibility of losing her on the battlefield, I knew that her being disappointed was far better than her being dead.

Fuck, I wished I could just hold onto her and never let her go, but time was running out, and the Bitterfangs weren’t going to wait until the alliance was ready for them.

“Greyson? Grey—” Zainab came running into the study. “Greyson—I just saw Ava run off.”

I nodded. “I know, I already brought her back.”

“No, just now,” Zainab said. “I just saw her run off just now, as in *after* you came back with her that first time.”

“Shit,” I hissed. There was a headache pressing at my temples that seemed to intensify every time someone tried to take creative liberties with our battle plans. What was the point of an alliance if everyone just ran off and did whatever the fuck they wanted? “I really thought she’d listened to me,” I groaned. “It seemed like she understood what I was trying to say.”

“She is dealing with a *lot* right now,” Cali mumbled.

I slammed my hands down on the desk. “We all are! My *brother* is *dead*.”

After a moment of silence, Cali spoke. “What should we do?” she asked. “Do you want to send someone after her?”

I paused, realizing the same thing I’d realized when Ava had run off the first time—that Xavier would want meto bring her back. But that didn’t matter right now. I didn’t have time to babysit my brother’s mate. I was in the middle of trying to wrangle the alliance and get us all through a war. There was only so much I could do, and there were other things on my plate that mattered more.

*Sorry, Xavier.*

“We can’t afford to go running after Ava,” I said. “I already talked to her about this—she knows the risks, and she chose to go anyway. This time, she’s on her own.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What about her pack?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t have a whole lot of options here. I was hoping that Ava would do the right thing, but even knowing that we need her, that her *pack* needs her, she still took off. So I guess that means…”

I trailed off as the horrifying truth finally occurred to me. Ava was gone, and that meant I was left with Knox. The very thought filled me with despair. I knew that Xavier had been trying to make Knox into a better pack member, and maybe he’d had some success, but from what I already knew of him, the kid just wasn’tAlpha material.

But what other options did I have? You had to play the cards you were dealt—although when all of this was over, the universe and I were going to have to have a nice long chat about stacking the goddamn deck.

I went to find Knox and pulled him aside. As I looked down at him, I was far from impressed. “Knox. With Xavier… dead, and Ava gone—”

“What?” Knox interrupted. “What happened to my cousin?”

“She’s determined to go after Malakai on her own. She disobeyed my direct orders and ran off to find him,” I said. Then I took a deep breath. “Which leaves you.”

Knox’s eyes widened, and I saw about twelve shades of fear race across his face. “Me? Well… Xavier and I have been training, and I think I’ve learned—”

I grabbed him forcefully by the shoulders. “Knox, I need you to tell me if you can take over as Samara Alpha. *Temporarily*.”

He puffed out his chest and nodded. “I *was* the Samara Alpha. Of course I can take over.”

“Do not forget that your number one priority is to protect your pack,” I said. “They’ll be depending on you, and you’ll have to do whatever it takes to see them through this—even if it means putting your own life on the line. Do you understand?”

Knox’s bravado seemed to fade, then, but he still nodded. “I’m ready. I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

I really hoped that he was telling the truth, because we just couldn’t handle any more hiccups.

Just then, the door burst open, and Ava came sprinting in, breathing hard.

“Ava!” Knox said. “I’m so happy you came back!”

“Greyson,” Ava said, totally ignoring her cousin. “I need to speak to you. It’s important.”

“So was my order to stay,” I spat, glaring at her, “but you certainly ignored that. So listen to me this time: Stay. Put.”

I shoved past her and went to find Charlie. He was outside with Violet and Lilac, and I was just about to head over and talk to them when I felt a pressure on my arm. I glanced back and saw Cali.

“Greyson,” she said. “You need to listen to Ava.”

Whatever was going on, it must’ve been pretty important for Cali to go out of her way to tell me to listen to *Ava*, of all people.

I turned back to Ava and motioned for her to speak.

“The Bitterfangs are right atthe edge of the shield,” she said. “And the magic’s starting to falter—I saw it. It’s only a matter of time. Like, before the night is up.”

My heart started to pound. “We’re not ready.”

Cali looked at me, shocked. “What do we do?”

Abandoning the group, I bolted upstairs into Big Mac’s room, where all the witches were working on the wolf spell. When I rounded the corner and saw how pale Big Mac looked, I stumbled to a clumsy halt.

She gave me an irritated glance. “Can you see we’re busy? You coming in every few minutes to interrupt is only going to delay the spell.”

“What about the shield?” I asked. “Ava says it’s faltering.”

A look passed between Kira, Big Mac, and Rowena, and then Kira cleared her throat nervously. “We were going to tell you soon—we can’t keep the shield up any longer.”

**Episode 4346**

When I gasped, everyone in the room jumped, Greyson included. Apparently, he hadn’t realized that I’d followed him up to Big Mac’s room. And because he’d immediately commanded everyone’s attention just by bursting into the room, no one else had realized I was there, either.

“The shield is coming down?” I burst out. “How much longer do we have?”

Big Mac, who was looking a little worse for wear, growled, “We can’t do everything!”

“I know that, but *please*, justdo what you can,” Greyson said. “Ava’s just informed me that the Bitterfangs are massing right at the border ofthe shield. As soon as it comes down, they’ll be on us.”

Without waiting to see what any of the witches had to say, Greyson turned around to head back downstairs, apparently very aware of me this time.

“I need to get the pack ready to fight,” he said. “We weren’t expecting it this soon. I need to make sure they know we could be thrown into battle at any moment.”

Keeping pace with Greyson as he rushed and hearing the tension in his voice was causing my anxiety to build. Everything was happening so fast, but I still knew that I wanted to be *genuinely* effective in the upcoming battle.

“Greyson, doesn’t this change things?” I asked.

He side-eyed me. “What do you mean?”

“Shouldn’t I be with you?”

He stopped moving and looked at me. There was so much urgency in his eyes that it was almost frightening. “Cali, it’s even *more* important that the witches are protected, now. When the shield goes down, the Bitterfangs will come. I *need* you here to guard the witches.”

Seeing how serious he was, I nodded. He let out a shaky sigh of relief before leaning in to give me a kiss. After a few seconds, he tried to pull away, but I lifted my hands to cling to the sides of his shirt and held him in place. I deepened our kiss momentarily before pulling back, just enough to press my forehead to Greyson’s.

“Please be careful,” I whispered. “I can’t lose you, too.”

He smiled at me and nodded. “Always.”

With that, I finally released him, and he headed out. My stomach was twisting, making me a little queasy. This was it. There was no more waiting, no more preparing—whatever we were prepared to do *right now* was all we’d be able to do.

“Cali, there you are.” Charlie had come to find me. “So… What’s the plan?”

“Oh…” I frowned. “Right.” It hadn’t really occurred to me until that moment that *I* would have to plan this, but I *was* basically the Redwood Luna, after all, and Greyson had practically ordered me to protect the witches. This was on me. “Well, if I’m being honest, I think the best thing we can do is protect the entire house. I know that sounds daunting—the pack house is massive—but I think it’d be better for the witches if we can keep the whole place secure, not just the one room.”

Charlie pulled in a deep breath. “I don’t disagree with you, but that *is* daunting.”

As we walked away from Big Mac’s room, Adair came up the stairs and joined us.

“I’ll be guarding the witches with you,” he said.

I imagined that this was because Dani was one of said witches. Tabitha must’ve asked Adair to keep her sister safe. But regardless, I was grateful for the extra help. It made me feel a little better to have Adair there, although it did feel like he should’ve been put in charge—he had *much* more battle experience than I did.

We arrived downstairs just as the rest of the pack was heading outside. The tension was almost strangling. It felt like just breathing this air was difficult, but based on the looks on everyone’s faces, I was far from the only person who felt that way.

Lola passed us as we reached the bottom of the stairs, and I quickly snagged her and pulled her into a hug.

“Please be so safe,” I begged her.

She nodded, then gave me a kiss on the cheek. “You know me, babe. No one’s slowing this train wreck down.”

I laughed at her optimism and watched her bounce away, and then turned to find my sister standing next to me. For a moment, I let my guard down and let my head fall onto her shoulder. I *almost* felt like crying again, in spite of all the tears I’d already shed. I was sad, I was angry, I was hurt, I was overwhelmed, I was… everything.

Artemis gently rubbed the back of my head. “How are you holding up?”

“I feel strange,” I admitted. “It feels like I’m on autopilot, doing everything without really thinking about it. I think I’m afraid that if I think too much, I’ll…”

I stopped myself right there. My throat was already knotting up, and I could feel myself breaking down. This wasn’t the time. I hadto be strong.

Artemis held me close. “When all of this is over, we’ll have time to process. Don’t forget—you’re strong, you’re brave, and you can do this.”

I nodded, then stood up straight and looked at Artemis, willing myself to draw strength from her ever-present confidence. “Thanks.”

She nodded. “You’ve got this.”

She gave me a kiss on the cheek. She went and gave Adair a hug, exchanging a few words I couldn’t hear. Then she slung her bow and quiver over her shoulder and walked out the front door.

Everyone was gathering outside, preparing to start marching forward, and I so desperately wished I could go with them. I’d been practicing so hard. No, my magic and fighting skills still weren’t perfect, but I was certain they’d be useful in the battle.

“Cali,” Adair said. “Let’s head back inside. It’s time for you to tell us how you’d like to proceed.”

I followed him back into the house. With most of the pack gone, the place felt almost oppressively empty and large. In the hallway, Charlie was giving Violet a big hug, telling her to be safe. It was a touching moment, and I hoped the two of them would be safely reunited soon.

I suspected that no matter what happened, the witches would be fine in Big Mac’s room—even if the Bitterfangs managed to make it past the three of us, they’d stillhave to fight the witches themselves, and that was always a daunting proposition.

“So,” Adair said. “What’s the plan?”

There was that question again, and it gave me just as much anxiety this time as it had when Charlie had asked it, but at least now I had more of an answer.

“I think that we should patrol the house from the outside,” I said. “That way, if the Bitterfangs get close, we’ll be able to see them and attack out in the open. Obviously, we should stay as quiet as possible, make it *seem* like no one is here, but if you see any Bitterfangs, stealth goes out the window—you scream as loudas you can so the rest of us can come running.”

Adair and Charlie both nodded, and together we went back outside, ready to put my plan into action.

The last of the alliance wolves were shifting and heading into the woods, and I watched them go, hoping that they’d all be safe. I couldn’t suffer any more loss—not after Xavier. I needed Greyson to come home. I needed my best friend and my sister to come home, too, for that matter.

Everyone. I needed *everyone* to come home.

Adair, Charlie, and I started walking laps around the house, and it all felt so surreal. I’d met Xavier in this house, when I’d first come to Oregon. This was the house where he’d frightened me, but also stirred feelings so passionate, I’d been helpless to resist. My stomach churned at the thought that I’d never see him again.

“Cali.”

I looked over and saw Charlie and Adair. They were together, which wasn’t good.

Charlie pointed to the woods at the far end of the backyard, through which a group of Bitterfangs were approaching. Shit, the shield must’ve finally fallen. It was already happening. The alliance packs were fighting, right now.

But I couldn’t think about that. Greyson had left me here to protect the witches, and that was exactly what I was going to do.

There were at least half a dozen Bitterfangs in the approaching group, so the three of us silently prepared to fight. Charlie armed his crossbow with a silver-tipped arrow. Adair held out his hand, and his whip materialized and unfurled to the ground, crackling with energy. I raised my hands, summoning my sword and shield.

“We’re the last line of defense,” I told Adair and Charlie. “We’re fighting for everyone.”

Adair rested a hand on my shoulder. “Just remember what I taught you.”

I nodded, praying that I wouldn’t forget anything important.

Charlie was the first to step out of our hidden vantage point, firing his crossbow and hitting the closest wolf. Its dying breath burst free in the form of a loud yelp before it collapsed, dead. That might as well have been a ribbon-cutting, because all hell immediately broke loose, and the remaining Bitterfangs charged toward us. I lunged into the open to meet them, Charlie and Adair flanking me on either side.

Two wolves came at me right away—it felt almost targeted, as if they recognized me from an earlier fight, but I didn’t care. That meant they knew what I was capable of, and I was more than happy to demonstrate for a second time. They lunged at me in tandem, and I used my shield to knock one away, taking advantage of the resulting inertia to lash out at the other with my sword. I sliced into the wolf’s side, and it jumped back, not dying, but severely wounded.

After their initial assault, the remaining Bitterfangs suddenly started to move more slowly. They were watching us carefully now, and I remembered what Julia had told us—the Bitterfangs were afraid of magic because they didn’t know how to fight it.

Hopefully that was true.

With his magical whip still cracking in one hand, Adair yanked a dagger from his belt and hurled it at a Bitterfang who’d just tried to lunge at him. The wolf dodged, but was clearly rattled, so I lunged forward with my shield and sent it flying. It let out a loud yelp as it hit the ground, but immediately got back to its feet and took off into the woods.

Except I wasn’t about to let any scouts report back to the herd.

I took off after the wolf, ignoring Charlie and Adair when they shouted at me to stop—I wasn’t going to let her get away. I bolted into the woods and found the Bitterfang slumped against a tree, trying to catch its breath. I raised my sword above my head, prepared to finish the wolf off—but then, out of nowhere, the world went black.

**Episode 4347**

**Greyson**

All I could hear was the sound of paws pounding against the forest floor as we charged toward the inevitable battle. I was leading a group that included Lucian, Elle, Gabriel, Mikah, and a few others. I’d been hoping to put some real distance between us and the pack house before the fighting started, but we’d only been running for about three minutes when I caught the scent of the Bitterfangs.

*Be ready!* I called out to the alliance via mind link. *For anything and everything. Look out for yourselves, and look out for each other!*

They all sent me some kind of affirmative reply, and then my heart started to beat a little faster as it truly sank in that this was *it*. So close to battle, I was both glad and unhappy that Cali wasn’t with me. She would’ve been a potentially deadly distraction, but I still missed her. I wanted to be close to her, to always be able to see her and protect her, but putting her in charge of protecting the witches hadn’t just been for the sake of my own peace of mind. We were going to need their magic, including hers, in order to defeat Malakai.

Rishika and Ravi were running on either side of me, heading up the pack’s left and right flanks. My heart clenched a bit as it finally hit me that, for the first time, I was going into battle withoutmy brother. We hadn’t always seen eye-to-eye on things—well, Xavier and I had rarely seen eye-to-eye on *anything*, especially Cali—but whenever we’d fought together, side-by-side, we’d been unstoppable.

But I’d never experience that perfect synchronicity again. Xavier was… dead. My stomach twisted, and again, I felt that swell of emotion I’d been repeatedly swallowing down since I’d heard the news of my brother’s death. It was trying to come up, trying to take hold of me—the same way I’d seen it latch on to Cali and Ava—but once again, I shoved it back. The lump was getting larger and ever harder to swallow, but in spite of the pain, I pushed it down and kept running.

Eventually, I’d have to deal with the loss of my brother—but not now. Not when the pack’s survival was at stake. There would be a time for mourning. I just hoped that I’d make it through this battle without having to add anyone else to my grieving to-do list.

The loss of my brother on its own was… devastating. I didn’t think I’d be able to withstand another shot of grief.

A snarl up ahead snapped me out of my spiral, and before I even had a chance to think, a group of Bitterfangs were sprinting right for us.

Ava had been right—the shield must have come down.

I sped up, putting myself in front of my people so I could lead the charge. As I met the Bitterfangs head-on, something I hadn’t expected hit me with all the subtlety of a bulldozer.

The moment the Bitterfangs were close enough for me to reach, I was filled with an all-consuming, white-hot *rage*. It made each individual strand of my fur stand on end. These were the wolves who’d killed my brother, and they didn’t stand a chance.

A Bitterfang lunged at me with unearned cockiness. I let out a rabid snarl that had been brewing deep within my gut and sank my teeth into its neck. Without a moment’s hesitation, I hurled the wolf away, biting down harder so that a massive chunk of its throat stayed trapped between my teeth.

The kill was so fast, so efficient, so brutal*,* that for a brief moment, all the Bitterfangs in the attacking squad actually *stopped*. Instinctively, I knew they were all wondering if they’d made a mistake, targeting me and my people—but it was a mistake they couldn’t come back from. I spat out the first wolf’s throat and bared my bloodied teeth at the quaking group in front of me.

And then I charged.

*We’ve encountered a small group, but we should be able to handle them*,Ravi mind linked to me.

A few seconds later, I got a similar report from Rishika. *There’s a handful of Bitterfangs over here, but we should be done with them soon.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I registered a blur of charcoal grey and was shocked to see Mikah dart past me and lunge at a Bitterfang. Gabriel was pinning an enemy wolf to the ground, but there was another one coming at him fast. I charged forward to help, but then someone plowed into me from the side, knocking the wind out of me and sending me sprawling.

That same Bitterfang tried to lunge for my neck, but I spun out of reach and leapt into the air with a counterattack. I would’ve handled him easily, except another Bitterfang came to his aid, jumping at me from behind and sinking its teeth into my leg. I let out a snarl of pain as I went down, but then a silver-furred wolf leapt over me, and I watched as Elle knocked the Bitterfang away from my leg. It went slamming into a nearby tree before jumping up and starting toward Elle, but her mate was right there to defend her. Lucian appeared out of nowhere, catching the wolf by the neck and pinning it to the ground so he could tear its throat out.

I gave them each a pointed look but didn’t have the time to stop and thank them. The wolf who’d first plowed into me was still coming at me. It was strong and fast, expertly dodging my attacks, but every time I missed, I got angrier, and soon I was ripping into him with every new movement—his leg, his shoulder, his back… The wound in my leg was healing, and I could feel my strength returning. I used that strength to rake my claws across my attacker’s stomach, just as the wolf tried to leap over me. Blood rained down on me, and the wolf landed in a heap, dead.

Every Bitterfang wolf I encountered today would die.

That vow turned into a rampage as I worked to take out wolf after wolf. A large one, possibly the leader of the whole company, was hanging back like a coward, and I immediately locked on to my next target. When the wolf saw me coming, it ran at me, attempting to duck down and headbutt me in the chest, but I foiled that plan by screeching to a halt. The wolf rushed at me, but I had total control and was able to drag my claws across its face. It howled in pain and instinctively ducked its head, showing me the back of its neck—a grave mistake. I ripped into the Bitterfang and relished its dying howl as blood filled my mouth.

Abruptly, I began to wonder if I was more like my father than I’d always thought. Silas hadn’t just killed out of necessity—he’d *loved* it. And right now, I was channeling that energy. All my anger over losing Xavier, over the threats to Cali and to my pack, over the assault at the palace—I sank all of it into my drive to keep killing.

*Greyson, they’re retreating*, Rishika mind linked. *Should we pursue?*

Mikah stepped in to handle another attacker for me so I could pause and think. Why would the Bitterfangs have mounted such a half-assed attack? They had the superior numbers—though I hadn’t seen much evidence of that, during this fight. Why hadn’t they deployed all their fighters and forced us back to the pack house?

Trying to figure out their logic was making me increasingly nervous.

*Hold off*, I told Rishika. *If this was enough to make them retreat for now, then I’m hoping it’ll buy us enough time to add the witches’ spell to our arsenal. Chase them off our territory, but go no further. I’m not about to fall into another trap.*

I switched over to Ravi, giving him the same instructions.

It was time for Malakai to worry about what *our* next move was going to be.

*We’re chasing them out of our territory and stopping there*, I told the entire group. *Unless we’re attacked again, we’ll wait for the witches to finish their spell*.

Part of me was worried that Lucian was going to follow the Bitterfangs right back to the palace, but I was relieved when he obeyed my orders to the letter. We chased the Bitterfangs to the edge of Redwood territory and stopped. I’d just started to wonder if we could take a moment to enjoy our victory when I heard my name being screamed from somewhere behind me.

I whipped around and saw Charlie and Adair sprinting up to us, out of breath. Quickly, I shifted back to human.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded. “What about the witches?”

Charlie looked at me with panic in his eyes. “The Bitterfangs—they got Cali.”

**Episode 4348**

**Greyson**

It felt like my entire world was spinning on its axis. I heard Charlie’s words—they were hitting me over and over like helicopter blades—but it was like my mind was simply refusing to let them sink in. Maybe it was because of the ambiguous nature of Charlie’s statement. *They got Cali.* What did that mean? “They got her,” as in…?

Was she…?

I couldn’t even get myself to ask the question. The thought was too devastating to consider. I had to hope that Charlie or Adair would elaborate without being prompted, because right now, I couldn’t speak—I could hardly breathe.

“The Bitterfangs reached the pack house not long after you left,” Adair said. “We were fighting them off and doing pretty well, but one of them retreated, and Cali went after them. She never came back.”

Charlie eyed me warily. “And then the rest of them just turned around and left. It was really bizarre. They retreated out of nowhere, but then we realized Cali hadn’t come back. We ran after her, but she was gone.”

It felt like I’d been punched in the gut. No—it felt like I was being *repeatedly* punched in the gut. This couldn’t be happening. Cali should’ve been protecting the witches; she should never have gone chasing after enemy werewolves. That was the *point*. All I’d ever tried to do was protect her, and… And I’d failed.

I’d lost my brother, and now I’d lost Cali, too.

*Cali?* I shouted down our mind link. *Caliana!*

But my efforts were in vain. I wasn’t getting anything back, and I knew in my gut that that wasn’t going to change.

“Hey!” I looked over and saw Artemis charging up to us, a look of terror on her face. She’d been assigned to Rishika’s group, but clearly she’d noticed Adair and Charlie and put two and two together. “What are you two doing here? Where’s my sister?”

Charlie looked at her sadly and shook his head. “We don’t know.”

“You *don’t know*? What does that mean?” Artemis rounded on me. “*What does that mean?*”

As much as I hated to say the words out loud—especially to Artemis, *especially* because I was dealing with the loss of a sibling and knew how much it hurt—I choked out an explanation. “It seems the Bitterfangs have captured her.”

Artemis recoiled, her eyes wide. “What the *fuck*? Why aren’t we going after her? We have to go after her!”

I nodded, still struggling to wrap my mind around this. “Of course I’m going after her, I just need to make a plan. I need more details.” I looked over to Charlie and Adair. “Take me to where you last scented her.”

Within a few minutes, they’d led us to a heavily wooded area. I immediately found Cali’s scent, but that only upset me more.

“Why didn’t you two keep running after Cali?” I growled.

“We tried!” Charlie said. “We followed as long as we could, but we kept running into more Bitterfangs—there were too many.”

“They probably took her to the palace,” Adair said quietly.

“How do you know that?” I demanded.

“Along the way, we saw no signs of blood or a fight—nothing to suggest that Cali had been hurt. And where else would they take her? They’ve made the palace their base. It makes sense that it’s where she’d be.”

What Adair was saying made sense. If the Bitterfangs truly wanted Cali dead, they would’ve just killed her. In fact, knowing Malakai, they would’ve tried to rattle me by leaving her body for me to find. That logic coursed through me and created a tiny flicker of hope.

“She may still be alive,” Lucian said. “But is what awaits her any better than death?” I glanced at him, and he kept talking. “Don’t forget what they did to Armin and the others. They tortured them.”

Artemis put her hands over her ears. “That’s enough! I don’t want to talk about it anymore! We need to go and get Cali back *now*!”

Lola, Violet, Charlie, and some of the other Redwoods immediately voiced their agreement. Of course I wanted to go and get Cali back immediately—no, I *would* go and get her back immediately—but I also had to weigh what was best for the pack, and what risks I could justifiably take during my rescue attempt. One thing was certain, though—despite the risks, despite the chaos my capture or death would cause for both my pack and the alliance, I was going after my mate.

“Rishika, I need you to look after the pack,” I said. “I’m going to bring Cali back.”

“Not without me, you’re not,” Artemis said, stepping forward.

Looking in her eyes, I knew instantly that *nothing* was going to deter Cali’s sister—not that I had any intention of turning her away. Artemis was a bounty hunter. A *Fae* bounty hunter. Together, we’d actually stand a fraction of a chance.

“I’m coming, too,” Lucian said firmly. “Nobody knows the palace better than me.”

I nodded. “Fine.” I was mainly agreeing because I didn’t want to waste time arguing. “If you can help, I’ll take it, but if you get in my way—”

“You can’t go, Greyson.” My mother’s voice cut through the commotion, and we turned to see her striding forward.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you were with the witches.”

“MacKenzie sent me. She needs to talk to you,” she said. “The witches are fine, but you can’t go after Cali.”

Her words temporarily stunned me into silence. She *knew* what Cali meant to me. How could she even *suggest* something like that?

But before I could ask, she pulled me to the side.

“I understand how you feel, Greyson,” she said, her tone gentler than before. “But I need you to see reason, here. Are you seriously going to rush off into a trap? Isn’t that exactly what happened to Xavier?”

I glanced between a determined Artemis and my equally determined mother. How could I answer that? My mother was right—Xavier and Lucian had gone scouting and been quickly overwhelmed by the Bitterfangs. That error had resulted in Xavier’s death.

“I’m saying this not just as your mother, but as a fellow pack member,” my mother continued. “They took Cali because they *want* you to go after her.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I argued weakly.

“Greyson,” she said. “What happened after the Bitterfangs lured Cali away?”

As she spoke, I realized that my mother was onto something. “They retreated. Suddenly, like they’ve done before.”

Every time they did it, it made me suspicious—the illogical retreats *always* turned out to be part of some greater scheme.

“I know that this is one of the most difficult decisions you will *ever* have to make, Greyson,” she said gently. “And believe me when I say that I don’t relish it. But if you want to bring Cali back, you have to be smart about it. Don’t do what the Bitterfangs want.”

My nose burned as emotions swelled up inside me, and even though I understood what my mother was saying, I still felt sick to my stomach. How could I possibly be smart about this? If I couldn’t just charge in and grab her, how was I going to get Cali back? Because I sure as hell wasn’t going to do *nothing*.

“You’re right,” I told my mother, and then I turned back to the pack and raised my voice. “Everyone, we need to get back to the house so we can regroup.”

“What?” Artemis demanded breathlessly.

At this point, my mother took notice of Cali’s distraught sister and addressed her directly. “Artemis, please. I know you’re upset, but charging in without thinking will help no one. You might even put Cali at greater risk by doing so. We have to move as a unit—doing what’s best for the pack will be what’s best for Cali.”

Artemis wasn’t buying it. My mother had managed to get through to me—she had a certain advantage, what with my being both her son and the Alpha—but Artemis was a different story. She had no reason to listen to my mother, and she wouldn’t—not so long as my mother’s plan didn’t involve immediately going after Cali.

Artemis thrust her shoulders back. “I’m going to get my sister back, whether you—”

“Artemis,” I interrupted. “*Enough*. I’ve given my orders.”

She stared at me in abject shock, and as the others started to trail back toward the house, she stormed up to me—but I quickly put up a hand for her to be quiet.

She obeyed my unspoken order, thankfully, and once everyone was out of earshot, I closed in on her and lowered my voice.

“I have to put my pack first, Artemis,” I said. “I’m their Alpha.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but I kept talking before she could get the words out.

“I’m their Alpha, but Cali is my mate and your sister,” I said. “If anyone has the skills to slip past the Bitterfangs, it’s you. I can’t leave my pack right now. They need me. But I *can* send you.”

**Episode 4349**

**Artemis**

All the roiling anger I was feeling toward Greyson evaporated in an instant. I stared at him, stunned. His agony at being unable to go and fetch Cali himself was written all over his face.

“You’re… You’re giving me permission to go?” I asked him, just to be clear.

“Not at all,” Greyson said. “I’m *ordering* you to go.”

My grip on my bow tightened, to the point where my knuckles were starting to turn white. “You don’t have to tell me twice. I’m going to get my sister back.”

Greyson nodded. “I think it’s best to send you alone. Even bringing Lucian into this could waylay things—he cares more about his palace than Cali. But do you need anything from me?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I only wish I had more arrows left.”

Greyson eyed the quiver on my back. “Is that not enough?”

My eyes narrowed as I looked into his eyes and let all the fury and determination boil up inside me again. “This is plenty, but the more I have, the more dead Bitterfangs I can leave in my wake. It’s the least I can do to pay them back.” I turned around and prepared to head off, but Greyson grabbed my arm and pulled me back. I looked up at him, annoyed. “What? I can’t waste any time.”

“Artemis, listen to me.”

Greyson’s voice was thick with emotion, and I could tell that he was hanging on to his control by his fingertips. He’d *just* lost his brother—I could only imagine how he was feeling now that Cali had been captured. I admired his determination to stay with the pack, but I didn’t share it. Nothing mattered more to me than getting Cali back.

“I’m listening,” I said.

“I know you’re pissed,” he said. “I am, too. But you need to avoid the Bitterfangs if you can. The goal here isn’t to even the score—it’s to get your sister back.”

Even though a part of me was burning—with a fire I doubted would be extinguished with anything but Bitterfang blood—I understood where he was coming from. I’d never forgive myself if I let my need for vengeance cost me the chance to get to my sister.

“I understand,” I said. “I’ll be as careful as I can.”

Greyson didn’t say anything else, just shifted and headed off after the rest of the pack. I watched him for a few seconds before starting off in the direction of the palace.

I only made it about three feet before I heard a snarl. I whipped around, prepared to fight, but then I recognized the wolf who was staring me down. A wolf I should’ve realized would have a bone to pick with this plan.

Rishika shifted mid-stride and walked over to me, grabbing my arm to hold me in place, like she thought I’d run from her. “Where are you going?”

I met her accusatory stare, understanding why she was upset, but also knowing that her reaction didn’t change anything. “You know I have to do this.”

Her gaze softened. “Then let me come with you.”

“I appreciate the offer, but the pack needs you more. Greyson needs you more,” I told her. “Don’t worry. There’s nobody better equipped to do what I’m setting out to do. That’s why Greyson chose me.”

Rishika frowned, and I saw her bottom lip start to quiver. If I’d learned anything about her, it was that she *hated* showing emotion, almost as much as she hated the fact that our relationship almost always brought it out of her.

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I said. “I won’t fall into any traps.”

Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes, but she was quick to blink them away. “You’d better come back to me.”

Without hesitation, I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. I felt the slight tremor in her body, but I hoped I’d be able to push some of my confidence through to her.

When we pulled back, I said, “That’s a promise I intend to keep. A Fae promise.”

I wasn’t worried about the consequences of breaking it—I’d fight like hell not to.

Rishika pulled me into a hug and held onto me for a few long seconds before finally releasing me. “Come find me the *second* you make it home.”

After saying goodbye to Rishika—which was admittedly difficult—I made a beeline for Vanguard territory. It only took me a few minutes to get to Three Devils Point—the far edge of Redwood territory. As I crossed the border, I could feel it in my gut—there was no turning back now. From here on out, I was on my own.

This wasn’t all that different from the time I’d spent bounty hunting for the Kollector. I’d primarily been on my own then, too, and I’d always done my best work like that, without having to worry about anyone else. But back then, I’d tracked people down for money. This was different. Cali was my sister—the sister I’d never even known existed, back then. Hell, if someone had told me about her, I probably wouldn’t have believed them. Now, I was willing to die to protect her.

No matter what Greyson said, I was going all in on this.

As I moved stealthily through the words, a horrible thought occurred to me. If I didn’t succeed—if I died trying—who was going to tell our mother? Or if I did make it back, but without Cali—if I was too late to rescue her—would I have the strength to tell her and Tom? The thought alone made me shudder. I knew that our mother would be devastated if I died, but if Cali died… Our mother loved me, I didn’t doubt that, but the connection between her and Cali was on a whole different level.

My mind started to paint a picture of the string of people I’d have to break the news to, if I wasn’t able to save Cal—from Greyson to Lola to our mother and Tom. Every time I had to repeat those words would be like a stab to the gut—it would be like watching my sister die all over again. I could already see the looks on all their faces. They were all counting on me to bring her back. If I failed, they’d claim that they didn’t blame me, but the question would always be there, dripping off the end of every word they said to me—why hadn’t I been able to save her? How many of them would wish our roles had been reversed? How many of them would beg the hand of death to reach up and take me and leave Cali in my place?

No, I’d never be able to do it. I wouldn’t be able to survive it. There was only one way to avoid that future—I’d just have to bring Cali back.

I eventually crossed into the Vanguard territory. It was surprising that I hadn’t encountered any Bitterfangs yet—they had to be looking out for a counterattack, surely. Mrs. Smith had suggested that Cali’s kidnapping had been specifically designed to lure Greyson out, so I’d expected there to be hordes of Bitterfangs on standby, waiting to spring the trap. It was slightly concerning that I hadn’t run into a single Bitterfang wolf, and I refused to let my guard down—especially when my sister’s life was at stake.

I found an especially tall tree and scaled it, easily spotting the palace in the distance. As best as I could, I peered down through the maze of branches, searching for Bitterfangs, but I just didn’t see any.

Was *this* a trap?

Slipping out of the tree, I continued on to the perimeter of the palace grounds, ducking behind a tree to assess my surroundings. I finally spotted the first Bitterfangs I’d seen since the battle, moving in a group toward the palace entrance. Peering through the darkness, I could see that they were dragging something along the ground. Getting a clear view was difficult, but it looked like a person with a bag over their head.

Malakai appeared in the palace doorway with a disgusting smile on his face. “Bring the half-Fae to the dungeon.”

My heart skipped at the words. It was Cali. She was alive—at the very least, she didn’t *appear* to be dead.

Knowing that my sister *right there*, I had to fight to control myself. My hand was already reaching for my bow, completely without permission. I could take Malakai out from here—I was that good a shot. But if I did that, the Bitterfangs might kill Cali a second later.

I eased back into the shadows of the trees. If they were taking Cali to the dungeon, then maybe I’d be able to slip in through one of the tunnels. There would probably be guards, but they’d be waiting for a whole werewolf rescue party, not a single Fae. I knew how to move in silence. I knew how to *kill* in silence.

I’d started to turn toward the tunnels when I froze—there was a group of Bitterfangs charging *right* toward me.

**Episode 4350**

My head was pounding so hard, it felt like my skull was about to explode. I couldn’t see anything—only endless black. I could hear voices, drifting in and out, but I had *no* idea where I was. Was… Was I dead? Was this the spirit world? I’d heard stories, but were people usually unable to see, there?

But then I twisted my head and felt the brush of fabric against my skin and realized that the reason why I couldn’t see was because there was something covering my eyes—a bag, maybe? And the pain I was feeling in my head… I had a *distant* memory of standing over a Bitterfang wolf before everything went black. Had I been knocked out?

*Greyson?* I tried to mind link. *Greyson, are you here?*

There was no reply.

There were arms dragging me along, but I was too weak to stand up and too weak to fight back. It made me feel helpless, knowing that I couldn’t do anything—I just had to let myself be dragged.

Since there was nothing I could do physically, I decided to try piecing things together mentally. The last thing I remembered was standing over that Bitterfang. We’d been in the woods, and I’d had my sword up, ready to finish the wolf off, but then… nothing.

All of a sudden, I heard a familiar voice that send chills of terror down my spine. “Bring the half-Fae to the dungeon.”

*Malakai*.

Hearing that gravelly, forceful voice helped everything fall into place. I’d been kidnapped by the Bitterfangs. Had the wolf I’d chased lured me into the woods on purpose, just so the others could capture me? I couldn’t believe I’d let my guard down that much. In the back of my mind, I could still hear Charlie and Adair shouting after me, telling me *not* to run into the woods. I’d totally ignored them, driven by anger and grief. If I’d been able to shove myself into a better state of mind—put the damaging emotions away, like Adair had told me to do—I wouldn’t have been in that position, but at the time, I’d just seen red.

And then black.

I tried to summon my magic, but I couldn’t even walk on my own, let alone do anything more complicated—I was too weak. There was some foreign, bitter taste in my mouth, and at first I wondered if I’d cut my lip, but then I started to think it was probably traces of some kind of drug. Had they slipped me something to disorient me? So that I wouldn’t be able to move?

I tried to pull my arms free, but the attempt was totally pointless—the Bitterfangs were holding on too tightly. I tried to speak, but my throat was way too dry. I strained to listen for signs of where I was or what was going on. I heard doors opening and closing, footsteps, and creaking floorboards. Finally, the air grew cool and stale as I was dragged into what had to be the palace dungeon.

Finally, the bag was ripped off my head, and I was shoved into a cell. Due to my current lack of control over my body, there was nothing I could do to keep myself upright, and I collapsed to the ground, hissing in pain. The Bitterfangs who’d brought me down cackled as I fell.

I even heard one of them hiss, “Magic bitch,” before laughing again and moving off.

Even though the air around me was rank and stale, I still pulled in a few deep breaths, trying to claw back a little control over my body. Every part of me felt like it would never be able to move again. But then when I urged my leg to move, it slowly bent, and when I used my arms to sit up, they weakly obliged. Whatever drug they’d given me was affecting me, certainly, but the effects were starting to wear off.

Looking around, I took a moment to get my bearings. I was in one of the palace’s drab cells. There was a thin cot next to me, and I used it to steady myself as I struggled to my feet. The world was spinning, and as soon as I was upright, I had to stop moving and just stand still to keep from falling over again.

The world slowly started to straighten out, but that did little to make me feel better. This situation *sucked*. I’d seen what the Bitterfangs had done to Armin, and I knew they’d forced Knox to kill Jesse. What did they have planned for me?

At that point, a thought made my heart clench. Had Charlie and Adair been captured, too?

“Charlie?” I croaked. “Adair?”

But instead of either of their voices, I heard footsteps approaching. I braced myself, swallowing hard. Were they already coming to torture me?

But then Malakai appeared, Honora hovering slightly behind him. He had his usual sickening smile on his face, but he stopped a few feet from the bars. Did he just hate to look at me? A half-Fae human who wasn’t a werewolf like him? But that didn’t seem right… No, the way he was looking at me was almost… almost like he was afraid to get any closer.

Wait… That couldn’t be right. Was Malakai afraid of *me*? I guess it did make sense with what we’d learned from Julia. He was afraid of magic, after all, which meant he was afraid of me. I couldn’t help but give a weak smile at the irony.

To test my theory, I summoned up all the strength I had and lunged toward the bard.

Delightfully, Malakai lurched backward so forcefully that he bumped into Honora and nearly knocked her to the ground. She had to do a little dance to stay on her feet, and I found it disgusting that Malakai didn’t so much as glance in her direction after nearly toppling her over. I clung to the bars, using them to hold myself up, and glared past them.

And then I saw it. The way Malakai’s smile gave way to a look of fear. And just like that, I had confirmation that Malakai’s fear of magic extended to magic users—to *me*. I was in this cell right now, but out of it, *I’d* have the upper hand, not him. That realization was huge.

But Malakai’s look of fear faded as quickly as it had appeared. He peered at me like I was an animal in a cage and growled, “You’d better watch yourself.”

I glanced at Honora, but the Bitterfang Luna remained quiet and expressionless, so I let my eyes find Malakai’s again. “Why am I here?”

Malakai’s disgusting smile returned. “Bait,” he said simply, and then he pointed a crooked finger at me. “*You* are the bait. Now that I’ve taken care of the Samara Alpha, I’m waiting for the Redwood Alpha to come for you—and he *will* co—”

I cut him off with a loud, anguished scream that came from so deep within me that I barely recognized it as belonging to me.

“You killed my mate!” I shrieked. My hands shot through the bars, desperate to claw at him, to scratch his face, but Malakai was careful to stay out of range.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Ah, of course—you have two mates. *Due destini*. You’re a freak of nature, and you shall pay the price for it. I intend to restore true order to the werewolf community.”

That was all Malakai said to me before he turned to take his leave, motioning for Honora to follow. In a last-ditch effort to do something, *anything*, I started shouting at Honora.

“How can you do this?” I demanded. “How can you let *him* do it?”

To my surprise, Honora’s gaze lingered on me. Her expression was unreadable. Did she feel bad about this? Did she feel *anything* about it? She opened her mouth to speak, but then she stopped herself and walked away. As I watched the couple leave, the adrenaline that had thrown me at Malakai abruptly abandoned me, and my strength faltered. I dropped to my knees and leaned against the bars, the loss and defeat beginning to fill me up once again. I’d thought before that I’d never felt so alone, but that paled in comparison to what I was feeling now.

I’d been trying to come to terms with Xavier’s death, but hearing Malakai mention it so flippantly had only twisted the knife. And to know that Malakai intended to use me to lure Greyson to his death… I couldn’t control my feelings, and they were starting to overwhelm me.

*Drown me.*

Resting my head against my knees, I started to surrender myself to a good long cry—but then I heard a noise. I held back my sobs to listen, trying to identify the sound.

Had it just been the building creaking, or was someone else down here?

**Episode 4351**

**Greyson**

I was on my way to Big Mac’s room when Rishika came storming up to me. “I’m going after Artemis—I never should’ve let her go alone. Don’t you try to stop me!”

I paused and turned to face Rishika, battling with my need to take care of the other million fires burning around me. With the battle looming, Rishika’s reaction wasn’t surprising, but that didn’t make it any easier to deal with her concerns when I had a mountain of my own.

“Rishika,” I said, trying very hard to sound calm and steady. “I understand your frustration and your concern for Artemis, but you’re needed here with the pack. You have to know that I would’ve gone myself if that were possible—you know what Cali means to me.”

“And you know how much Artemis means to me, Greyson! That’s why I need to go and make sure she’s safe—and Cali, too!” she retorted. “I just can’t help but keep thinking it wasn’t the right call. I have to go help her!”

“Rishika, I respect what you want to do, but I can’t let you. You have to be here, just like I have to be—for the good of the pack. It kills me to think that the Bitterfangs have taken Cali prisoner. I would die for her, just like you’d die for Artemis. But as Alpha, I have to put the pack first, and that means facing the reality that right now, the pack needs us more than Cali and Artemis do.”

Rishika sniffed and looked away, crossing her arms. “This is fucked.”

“I know it is, Rishika, but I need you. You’re one of the most capable fighters in human form, and if the witches perform the de-wolf spell, that will mean everything,” I said. “Please trust that I would’ve sent you with Artemis if it were possible.”

Rishika sighed. “I understand. You’re my Alpha, and I’ll obey your orders.” She met my eyes before continuing. “But *you* have to understand that if anything happens to Artemis, I will never forgive myself.”

With that, Rishika turned and walked away.

I watched her go, feeling overwhelmed and helpless. I’d only told her the truth, but it was still a hard pill to swallow—for me, too.

*This is the part of being Alpha that I hate more than anything else—the times when you have to forget your personal desires. I’d give anything to go and rescue Cali right now, but I can’t. It’s like I told Rishika—I have to stay here to protect the pack. I don’t have a choice.*

There was a reason why I’d stayed a Rogue for so long. There were no responsibilities in that life, and no one to worry about but yourself.

I entered Big Mac’s room and found the witches hunched over her altar, busy mixing ingredients and chanting fragments of spells. Tabitha was standing off to the side with Dani, and she gestured to Big Mac when I came in.

The ornery witch looked up from the altar and narrowed her eyes at me. “What is it now, Greyson?”

“I think you know why I’m here,” I said. I was hoping she’d take it at least a *little* easy on me—I didn’t know if I’d be able to handle her sharp tongue right now on top of everything else.

“And I think you know that we’re obviously still working on it. And if we weren’t being interrupted every five seconds, we might’ve finished up by now!” Big Mac closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. When she opened her eyes again, she looked a little less annoyed. “Sabine told me about Cali. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” I said gruffly. “What can we do to protect you if Cali can’t provide the shield? Once the fighting picks up, you’ll all be vulnerable without her.”

I could see the worry on Kira’s face as her gaze darted between me and Big Mac. I imagined that this was a discussion the witches had been having since the shit had hit the fan.

“Maybe you can spare a few werewolves to help guard us while we cast and maintain the spell,” Rowena suggested. “Maybe Porter and a few Cobalts? That should be enough to cover us.”

“But remember, they won’t be able to shift into wolf form,” I said. “Without that edge, they’ll just be humans fighting humans—something most werewolves aren’t used to. I’m going to need as many people as possible to overtake the Bitterfangs and drive them out of the palace.”

“That’s on you to figure out,” Big Mac said. “In the meantime, we need to get the spell working, or it won’t matter either way.”

“Got it,” I said, already edging out the door. There was no easy answer here. Between the Cobalts that Rowena wanted and the rest of the alliance who’d be there anyway, there should’ve been enough bodies to protect the witches from the Bitterfang advance. I just hoped we wouldn’t be walking into a bloodbath.

I was having trouble thinking clearly, and I knew why. No matter how much I tried to focus on the upcoming battle, my mind just kept returning to Cali.

*I can’t let the situation with Cali deter me from the task at hand. The alliance wolves might not be the best fighters in human form, but I doubt that the Bitterfangs or their allies are in any better shape than us in that regard. The playing field between us and the supercharged Bitterfangs will become even, which is the entire point of the witches casting this spell.*

I had a lot of experience fighting as a human, at least. I planned to draw on that experience, and I hoped that it would give me an edge.

I jogged downstairs to address all the wolves milling about restlessly in the living room. “Everyone back outside! The break is over. I know we’re all processing a lot of things, myself included, but we need to keep pressing forward.”

It’s what I knew Xavier would do, too. And I would never let my brother’s death mean nothing. I would make the Bitterfangs pay in their blood for what they’d done.

*If nothing else, it’ll help them focus and give them hope that we at least have a chance of seeing this through. I know how frustrating it is for a werewolf to be unable to draw on their natural instincts in a fight—and those natural instincts are to shift and tear any and all opponents apart. We’ve never had any need to sharpen our human fighting skills.*

If the witches succeeded—and our victory depended on it—we would have no choice. We had to be at our best for this fight, or we would lose, and that just wasn’t an option.

I watched from the porch as everyone gathered out in the yard.

“I’m going to take you all through some basic techniques,” I called. “How to punch, counterattack, feint, parry, and everything in between. Everyone line up and do as I do!”

I demonstrated some basic attacks that had served me well in human-form fights. I moved slowly, so that they could easily follow me, and then went down into the yard and started correcting everyone’s form.

As I watched them absorb my training, I saw a glimmer of hope in their eyes—and I felt it, too. Maybe things weren’t so dire after all.

Rishika was more than capable. She was quick and had good instincts in both her human and wolf forms. Ravi wasn’t bad, either, and he had power and viciousness on his side, which would serve him well. Once Artemis returned with Cali, she’d be a key advantage in the fight, too, alongside the other Fae. This battle would be right up her alley, and the Bitterfangs wouldn’t know what hit them once we unleashed the Fae on them.

“Great job, Charlie!” I said, circling the young werewolf as he showed off the skills he’d picked up during his hunter training.

Mikah had his vampiric speed and strength on his side, Jacs was brutal and fast, Torin had his frankly terrifying reverse-healing magic at his disposal, and Adair was an extraordinary warrior. Our odds were beginning to look better and better.

I glanced at Rishika. She was sparring with one of the Cobalts, and giving him way more than he was able to handle—probably channeling her anger and worry over Artemis.

*Artemis*. I wondered how her mission was going. Artemis was capable and strong, but the Bitterfangs were deadly, and had the home court advantage at the palace.

*Has she managed to find out anything about Cali? Is she safe? If she runs into any Bitterfangs, and there’s a good chance she will, will she be able to hold her own?*

The more I thought about it, the more I began to worry. Had I made a grave mistake by sending Artemis instead of going to rescue Cali myself?

**Episode 4352**

**Artemis**

I quickly nocked an arrow, raised my bow, and did a quick assessment of the situation. There were three Bitterfangs coming right for me. I didn’t know how they’d spotted me so quickly, but here we were. They’d formed a semi-circle and were trying to fence me in, and they had murder in their eyes. They weren’t interested in taking me prisoner; that much was clear.

*So much for Greyson’s warning not to engage with the enemy. That’s not an option anymore. It’s kill or be killed, and I’ll be damned if I’m the one who dies. I’ve come way too far for that shit.*

I held my ground, swinging my bow between the three Bitterfangs. Every time I aimed at a different wolf, that wolf hesitated. I narrowed my eyes, sizing them up. I needed to figure out which of them posed the biggest threat and make them my target first. Take down the biggest one, then let the others fall. But I also had to move fast, because as soon as I shot one of them, I had no doubt that the others would go in for the kill.

The one to my right had a nasty scar where his left eye used to be, and he was also significantly larger than the others. He was the one who had to die first.

I aimed my bow at him and let the arrow fly. I pumped my fist when it hit its mark, sinking deep into the werewolf’s eye. He yelped and stumbled back in shock before collapsing to the ground.

I reached for my quiver, but I didn’t have time to grab another arrow. The other two wolves lunged at me at the same time, howling and snarling. I dodged their initial attack, drawing the dagger Adair had given me.

I dove to the ground and thrust it upward, sinking it into one wolf’s neck. Blood splattered my face as the wolf collapsed on top of me, knocking the wind out of me but creating a much-needed barrier between me and the remaining wolf.

Groaning with effort, I wrenched my dagger arm free and slashed at my final attacker, stabbing him repeatedly but not hitting anything vital. A snarl cut through the air and, seconds later, sharp pain radiated through my arm as the wolf sank its teeth into my flesh. It ripped and pulled, like it was trying to rip my arm off.

I lashed out with one last desperate swipe, slicing deep enough to make the wolf back off. Then my fingers spasmed open, letting the dagger fall. Blood was dripping down my arm, and my grip was weak. My fingers scrabbled weakly through the leaf litter on the ground, searching for the dagger, but my arm was too weak to stretch far.

*That’s not going to stop me. I’m trained to use both hands in a fight.*

The wolf was circling me, looking for another opportunity to attack. I kicked it away, struggling to breathe underneath the dead wolf. I gritted my teeth and used every bit of my strength to slide out from underneath the mass of dead weight. I gasped once I was free, and, wasting no time, I grabbed my dagger with my good hand and slashed at the wolf’s leg. It howled in pain and staggered back, barely staying upright.

Ignoring the searing pain in my arm, I charged, driving the wolf to the ground. I straddled him and pressed the blade to his throat. I suddenly remembered that the Bitterfangs carried silver capsules—I needed information, which meant I couldn’t let this one bite down on his.

I grabbed a fallen branch and used it to wedge the wolf’s mouth open.

“Shift!” I screamed. “Shift now, or I’ll make sure you don’t get a quick way out of this life!”

The wolf struggled in vain for a few moments more before it finally shifted, panting and twisting in my hold, still trying to break free. Using my good arm, I slammed him to the ground and pressed the blade to his throat, so tightly that if he made even the tiniest false move, he’d die.

“Fuck you!” the man hissed, as soon as I yanked the branch from his mouth.

“Fuck you, too!” I hissed, grabbing the silver capsule from his neck. It was mine now. “Now tell me what Malakai is planning to do with Cali, or I’ll kill you right here!”

“What? Cali? Who the fuck is that? I don’t know what you’re talking about!” the Bitterfang snapped. “I’m just a soldier. I don’t know anything about what the higher-ups are doing.”

I wasn’t buying it. I applied a little pressure to my blade, and blood trickled down his neck. He squealed and went still.

“You have one more chance. What are they planning to do to my sister? The Redwood Luna.”

“She’s bait!” the man shouted. “Malakai is using her to lure the Redwood Alpha to the palace. He knows he’ll bring the other Alphas, too, and when they get there, he’s going to slaughter them.”

This was hardly a surprise. In fact, it made perfect sense. Malakai had been desperate to get his hands on Greyson since before the war had even begun, so it was no surprise that he was willing to do whatever it took to kill him.

“And what if the Alphas don’t take the bait?” I asked.

“How the hell am I supposed to know? I’m not in Malakai’s brain!”

I dug my blade into his neck, creating another stream of blood.

“Please!” he burst out. “Stop! I’ll tell you!”

“Then tell me—and be quick about it!” I snapped. “I’m losing a lot of blood here, and my grip isn’t what it usually is. I might slip at any second, and then you’ll have lost your only chance to save your miserable life!”

“If the Alphas don’t show, Malakai will kill the *due destini*! No matter what happens, the half-Fae Luna will die. Malakai hates her—hates the Redwood pack—and he’ll do anything to wipe them off the face of the planet. That’s all he cares about.”

*I have to warn Greyson. If he gets impatient, he might forgo his whole “I’m the Alpha and have to put the pack first” thing and rush right into Malakai’s trap. I can’t let him do that.*

I glanced up at the Vanguard palace. I considered sticking to my plan to sneak in and save Cali on my own, but I was in excruciating pain and bleeding like crazy. I was in no state to fight—at least not as well as I usually could. The Bitterfangs would take note of my weakness immediately, and then I’d end up in the same position as Cali—or worse. I had to be smart about this.

*As much as I want to charge in there and rescue my sister, I’m not in any position to do it. I need Torin to heal me, and then I’ll be ready to go. But that means I have to head back to the pack house, first. Fuck.*

“How long will Malakai wait before he kills Cali?” I asked the Bitterfang wolf.

He shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. “I don’t know! I swear! That’s up to Malakai. Please let me go! Don’t kill me, please! I told you everything you wanted to know!”

I felt no sympathy for the man, but I wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. I pulled my blade back, just only a little, trying to decide what I should do with him—but then he suddenly struck out at me, digging his fingers into the wound on my arm.

I screamed, releasing my grip on the wolf. I rolled onto my back, my vision blurring from the pain. Shit, how had I not seen that coming?

The Bitterfang scrambled away from me and started to shift. If he got the jump on me in my current state, I was finished. I grabbed one of my arrows that had fallen from my quiver and raised it, just as he pounced on me. The arrow’s tip sank into the wolf’s chest, and he dropped like a stone.

*Serves you right.*

I rolled his limp body off me and struggled to my feet, my arm burning with pain. I was losing a lot of blood, and the wolf digging his disgusting fingers into the wound certainly hadn’t helped matters. If I didn’t get to Torin soon, I was going to bleed to death.

Grimacing, I tore a strip off of my shirt and used it as a tourniquet, tying the fabric tight. It was soaked through in seconds, but it would have to do for now. I jumped when I heard wolves howling in the distance, my heartbeat tripping into a sprint. Was that the alliance arriving? Did I want to find out if it wasn’t?

Gritting my teeth and clutching my arm, I started staggering back toward the Redwood pack house.

**Episode 4353**

I peered into the darkness, my heart pounding. I could’ve sworn I’d heard something… Or someone. When I’d first been thrown into this cell, it had been too dark for me to see more than a few feet in any direction. The darkness had been so impenetrable that I hadn’t been sure of much, except that this was the last place I wanted to be.

Now, my eyes were starting to adjust, and I was just able to make out the shapes of things. The first thing I was able to focus on was the cell next to mine. I listened hard, straining to hear even the slightest sound.

*Did I imagine that noise? Am I really alone down here? No, that doesn’t seem right… Malakai’s been holed up in the palace for days, now. Does he have someone else locked up down here? Did we miss someone in one of our packs?*

The thought made me feel horrible. The idea of someone missing and us not realizing was too awful.I was tempted to call out, but I didn’t want to risk aggravating Malakai further. I definitely didn’t want to give him a reason to keep me more forcibly restrained. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle being bound and gagged, for instance.

*But if there’s someone else down here, I have to reach out.*

Cautiously, I crawled toward the other cell, feeling my way through the darkness until I reached the bars. Gripping them tightly, I slowly lifted myself to my feet, struggling to stay upright as the throbbing in my head intensified. I peered into the next cell, searching for any sign that I wasn’t alone down here.

*Is that shape on the floor a body, or just a heap of filthy blankets? What if Malakai sent a Bitterfang down here to spy on me?*

The cells’ occupants were more likely to be alliance members, though… Maybe even Charlie and Adair. I hoped they’d stayed free and told Greyson what had happened to me. I didn’t even want to think about how worried Greyson would be once he found out where I was.

“Charlie?” I whispered. “Adair? Can you hear me? It’s me, Cali!”

The silence was deafening. A rush of hopelessness overcame me, but I knew I couldn’t give up. If there really was someone else down here, we might be able to give each other comfort and encouragement and—more importantly—work together to find a way out. Armin had found his way out of here, so maybe I could, too.

“Charlie? Adair? Anyone there?”

Still no response.

*Maybe it really* was *all in my head. And if there* is *someone else down here, who’s to say that they’re even conscious? It’s not like the Bitterfangs treat their prisoners well. Jesse, Marissa, Armin, and Knox are proof of that.*

I shuddered at the realization that the person in the next cell could be dead, or dying, or injured and in need of help that I was in no position to give them. I felt a pang in my chest as I thought of Xavier, and how badly I wished I could’ve been there to help him, to save him from his fate. My eyes welled up with tears, and I swayed a bit, like I might collapse. I gripped the bars tighter to steady myself.

*Don’t think about Xavier right now. You can’t. You have to focus on finding out what that sound was, or if it was even real.*

My head was throbbing mercilessly, so hallucinations weren’t so far outside the realms of possibility. The bitter taste in my mouth made me think again that the Bitterfangs might’ve slipped me something to make me all sluggish. I could feel my magic inside of me, but it felt like if I tried to use it right now, it’d be like trying to fight someone with a pool noodle.

*Which I could probably make work, honestly, given my track record with unlikely weapons.*

I slumped against the bars of my cell, trying to pluck clear thoughts out of the clouds that were fogging my brain. I closed my eyes and immediately thought of Greyson. I wished he was here right now.

I braced at the sound of footsteps. They were soft at first, but they got louder as they got closer. I tried to shrink against the back wall of my cell, but a second later, a bright light spilled into the room, blinding me.

I squinted against the light and spotted Honora coming toward me with a lantern dangling from her hand. The light gave her a ghoulish look, but I couldn’t ignore how puffy her eyes looked—as if she’d been crying.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, unable to keep the suspicion from my voice.

Honora pressed a finger to her lips, and I snapped my mouth shut. She knelt down right beside my cell and spoke in a whisper. “Malakai doesn’t know I’m here, and it’s better that he doesn’t find out—for both our sakes.”

I was suddenly hopeful. Was she going to help me escape? Was she hoping to form a secret bond between Lunas? Did Honora *actually* have a kind bone in her body?

“I want to make one thing clear,” Honora began. “I don’t approve of the *due destini*.”

“What else is new?” I demanded. “Why are you here? Just to insult me?”

Honora’s eyes grew distant for a moment before they took on a desperate look. “I’m sorry. I just came to ask you… Is my daughter okay?”

I saw the pain in her eyes, and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. In this moment, she was just a mother worried about her child.

“Julia is safe,” I said. “Greyson won’t let anything happen to her, so you don’t have to worry.”

Honora smiled. “Thank you, Cali, I appreciate how kind you’ve been to her.”

With that, she rose to leave.

“Wait!” I said, conscious of the obvious desperation and fear in my voice.

*There’s something there in her eyes—a glimpse of her love for Julia. I can use that. If I’m going to get out of here, I’m going to have to manipulate any shred of compassion Honora might have for me.*

“Honora, there’s no reason why you can’t be reunited with Julia,” I said. “That way, you’ll be able to see for yourself that she’s okay—if that’s something she wants, too.”

Honora leaned close. “How?”

“Help me escape, and I’ll reunite you with your daughter,” I said.

But Honora shook her head. “I can’t do that. I won’t. I might not approve of my husband’s extreme methods, but I’m not going to go against my Alpha’s wishes. If I could help you without defying Malakai, I would, but there’s no upside to crossing him.”

“But why not?” I persisted. “You could just let me go. Nobody would have to know you were responsible. I’m Fae—they’ll probably assume that I used my magic to escape.” I stared into Honora’s eyes, wondering if I was imagining the softness there. “You had an opportunity to get Julia during the battle, but you didn’t take it—I saw it. You *care*, Honora. You’re not the heartless monster that Malakai is.”

Honora stiffened, and her open expression vanished. “He’s not a monster.”

“Maybe not,” I said, backtracking, desperate not to get on her bad side again. I was making headway, and I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. “It’s great that you wanted to check on Julia, but if you don’t help me, Honora, Malakai will kill me. Do you want to have that on your conscience? *Please* help me.”

A noise caused Honora to jump up and back away from my cell. Her eyes darted back to find mine in the flickering lantern light.

“I’ve said too much already,” she said, a pained look crossing her face. “Tell Julia…”

But then she seemed to change her mind, and Honora slipped away before she could finish her sentence.

Once again, I was alone in the dark. Frustration invaded my mind.

*I was getting through to her, I know it. I think. If only I had a little more time, I might’ve been able to convince her to disregard Malakai’s wishes and do the right thing for once. She and I have had our differences, but I understand what it means to want to support your Alpha, no matter what. But that doesn’t mean she can’t think for herself.*

Honora was obviously terrified of Malakai, just like everyone else. She probably didn’t want to admit it to herself, but deep down, she knew that Malakai wasa monster—and the worst kind, at that. He didn’t even seem to realize that he was awful. He truly thought that by terrorizing everyone he didn’t agree with, he was serving the greater good of werewolf kind.

I slumped back in despair when I heard that noise again. Once again, I turned toward the adjacent cell and squinted into the darkness. Finally, I heard a voice.

“Cali?”

**Episode 4354**

**Greyson**

I watched the alliance wolves pair off and start sparring hand to hand, in human form. They looked good, capable, and ready. My hope grew. What they lacked in technique, they more than made up for in spirit.

I glanced at the time and was wondering why Artemis hadn’t come back yet when I saw Rishika break away from the training grounds and sprint toward the woods. I was about to run after her, thinking that she’d decided to defy my orders and follow Artemis after all, but then I saw what—or rather who—she was running toward.

Artemis emerged from the woods and collapsed into Rishika’s arms. The sight of her rocked me to my core. Not only was Artemis clearly injured, but she was alone. Cali was nowhere to be seen.

“Torin!” Rishika screamed. “Somebody get Torin!”

“On it!” Sage shouted, sprinting into the pack house.

Artemis was a bloody mess. She had a piece of fabric wrapped around a wound on her arm, which was hanging limply at her side. She clung to Rishika as she walked them back toward the pack house, and even from here, I could see how pale she was.

“Come on, I’ve got you,” Rishika said. “Torin’s coming. He’ll fix you up, and then you’ll be good as new.”

Rishika looked up at me—not with accusation, like I’d predicted I might see, but with pure worry. It almost looked like she was in just as much pain as Artemis.

I sprinted over and wrapped an arm around Artemis’s waist, and together, Rishika and I helped her up the porch stairs.

“We were right,” Artemis rasped. “They’ve captured Cali.”

I was hit with a mix of relief and outrage. Relief that she was still alive, outrage at Malakai’s audacity. As if it wasn’t enough that he and his sadistic Bitterfangs had killed my brother, now he’d gone after Cali, too.

“Malakai took her as bait,” Artemis rasped. “He’s expecting you and the other Alphas to come running to rescue her.”

“How predictable,” I said bitterly.

I supposed it was a good thing that Malakai was so obsessed with killing me and the other Alphas he disagreed with—otherwise, he might’ve just killed her outright.

Artemis gasped and latched onto my arm, squeezing it as she pulled in a wheezing breath, her pain obviously mounting. “And if you don’t go, they’re going to kill her.”

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A short while later, I sat alone in my study, paralyzed with indecision. The Alpha in me knew that I needed to put the pack first. We were in the middle of a war, and the pack needed me now more than ever. But now that I knew that Cali was alive, but with a death sentence hanging over her head, I was wavering.

*I warned Cali that I can’t live without her, and up until now, I’ve been acting as if that isn’t really true. But it is. Without Cali, I’ll literally be the walking dead. I’ve already lost Xavier, but if anything happens to Cali, I won’t be any good to anyone. Not myself, and definitely not the pack, or the alliance. I’ll be nothing without her. Nothing.*

Now was the time for me to really think about what I was willing to do. Was I willing to lose Cali in order to protect the pack I’d sworn to defend with my life? Was I prepared to give up on both Cali’s life and my own? I didn’t know. And I hated Malakai more than ever for forcing me to have to make that decision.

There was a knock on the door before Rishika poked her head in. “Hey, you got a minute?”

“Of course,” I said, beckoning her in. “How’s Artemis?”

“She’s weak, and she’s lost a lot of blood, but Torin’s expecting her to make a full recovery,” Rishika said.

“That’s great to hear,” I said. I let out a sigh. “And I’m sorry for telling Artemis to go alone. I should’ve sent someone with her. I just did what I thought was best at the time.”

Rishika shook her head. “No, I get it. I know why you made the decision—even though it turned out just as badly as I knew it would.”

I winced but said nothing. What could I say? Not only had Artemis come back without Cali, but she’d been badly injured. I doubted that Rishika would be so understanding if we didn’t have Torin around.

“Anyway, I didn’t come here to talk about our differences,” Rishika said. “We both know what needs to be done. Cali will be killed unless we rescue her. Artemis is my girlfriend—she’s everything to me. If her sister’s in danger, I have to do whatever I can to rescue her.”

“*We* have to do whatever we can,” I amended. “I’m right there with you, Rishika. Cali is *my* everything. Not getting her back… It’s not an option. Not as long as I’m alive.”

*Should I ditch the packs to go save her, even though I know the risks of making that choice? I have a responsibility to the pack that I can’t just throw to the side because of my mate—no matter how much I want to do exactly that.*

“I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place,” I said to Rishika. “I want to rush over to the palace to save Cali, the same way you want to go after Artemis… But like I told you, we’re at war, and the pack needs me here. We don’t know when the Bitterfangs will attack again.”

“I know—it’s definitely a difficult decision,” she said. “On the upside, I’d say we’re in a better position than you might think. I’m confident that the pack can protect its witches and still go on the offensive, but someone is going to have to make sure that Cali isn’t endangered by the alliance assault.”

“You’re right,” I said. “If we go after the Bitterfangs guns blazing, Cali could get caught in the crossfire.”

“Exactly,” Rishika said. “So, I think I have a solution to your problem.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’ll go after Cali,” Rishika said.

I sighed. “Thank you, Rishika, but no. Everything you’ve just said is correct, but I can’t put anyone else in danger. I know it might be the wrong move, but I’m going to have to go after Cali myself. If I don’t go and see for myself that she’s okay, I won’t be able to function well enough to lead the pack.”

“But if you do that, you’ll be playing right into Malakai’s hands,” Rishika argued. “He’s expecting you to go after her, which means he’s going to be ready for you.”

“I know, but if we try an assault without securing Cali first, Malakai will kill her immediately. By now, I know him well enough to understand how he reacts to situations like this. And I’m sure you know that I can’t risk losing Cali.”

“I know,” Rishika said.

I started for the door. “You’re in charge of the Redwoods while I’m gone. I’m going to ask Mace to handle the alliance, so you’ll need to report to him. I’ve already wasted enough time.” I put my hand on the doorknob and then turned back. “And as soon as the witches and Dani are ready, organize their bodyguard team and make sure the packs are ready.”

As I walked toward the door, I couldn’t help but think that Cali would be upset to know that I was putting her above the pack. But if our positions were reversed, she would’ve done the exact same thing. I was sure of it.

I walked outside and stood on the porch, pride warming my heart as I took a moment to watch the alliance wolves spar.

“Hey, everyone!” I called out. “There’s nothing I want more than to stay here and train and prepare with you, but the Bitterfangs have taken Cali, and I have to go rescue her. I promise not to be gone any longer than I need to be.”

Everyone erupted into cheers of encouragement, which dashed away any doubts I’d had about how the alliance might react to my decision.

“Go get Cali back!” Sage shouted.

“Yeah, our Luna needs you!” Jay shouted. “We’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone!”

“We’ll be ready, don’t worry,” Ravi said, throwing a few air punches.

“Thank you all,” I said before going to speak to each of the Alphas directly to make sure I had their approval.

“I’ll come with you,” Lucian said once I told him the details of my plan.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’d rather you stay with the Vanguards and lead them when the time comes.”

Lucian ducked his head in agreement. “Fine. But promise me you’ll watch yourself.”

“I will.”

I stood back and looked at the combined packs as they continued to work together to sharpen their human hand-to-hand combat skills. It was really starting to look like we were going to have the advantage, when the time came.

“Good luck,” I said to Porter, Lucian, Duke, and Mace, who’d all come to see me off.

Without another word, I shifted and sprinted into the woods, hoping to hell that I wasn’t already too late.

**Episode 4355**

Now I *knew* I was imagining things, because there was no other explanation for what I’d just heard. I would’ve known that voice anywhere. It was Xavier’s.

*But that can’t be. Xavier’s dead. It must be the drug, making me hear things—or a hallucination from being knocked on the head. Maybe I just want him back so badly that I’m literally creating him out of thin air.*

Either way, something inside me was stirring—something I’d felt a million times before. A pull. The pull that meant one of my mates was nearby. I wouldn’t be able to dream that up, would I?

I heard a shuffling sound, and the raspy, weary voice called my name again. “Cali?”

My heart leapt. It was him. It had to be. It sounded too real to be a hallucination.

I pressed my face to the bars and squinted into the darkness of the adjacent cell, knowing that I’d finally lost it. Xavier was dead—so how the hell was I hearing him right now? I felt clearer than I had when I’d first been thrown into the cell, so it seemed less likely that I was imagining things now—though that felt like the most viable explanation for what was happening.

*That’s Xavier’s voice. I’d know it anywhere. Whether it’s in my head or in real life, it’s him.*

“Xavier?” I whispered, as if saying it too loud would confirm that it was all a fantasy. Maybe the *due destini* was finally making good on its promise to drive me mad.

Gasping breaths filled the air, and then the dark mass I’d seen before began to move. I held my breath as a figure emerged from the shadows and came close enough that I could see it properly. *Xavier*. It was him. There was no mistaking it now. He was right there, looking at me.

I gasped. “You’re alive!”

*Have I gone crazy? I must have. Lucian said he was dead. Everyone knows he’s dead!*

I took another look. No, I hadn’t lost my mind—it was him. Xavier was right there, on the other side of the bars, which meant that the pull I’d felt was as real as the man in front of me.

I stifled a cry of excited surprise, not wanting to draw attention in case there were guards nearby.

“Cali,” Xavier rasped. “Cali, I…”

He crawled forward a few more feet, then he gasped and collapsed. That sharp pain sliced through my chest again, and I stumbled back, suddenly gasping for air. It was the same pain I’d felt right before Greyson had told me that Xavier was dead. I had an inkling of what it might mean now, but I didn’t want to believe it.

“Xavier?” I scrambled over to the bars and strained to see him in the darkness.

He wasn’t moving. He was so still that I had to wonder if he was even breathing.

Fighting through the pain in my chest, I stretched a hand through the bars in an attempt to comfort him, or at least touch him. He remained out of reach, like a phantom, and once again I started to think that none of this was real, that I was imagining things.

*Maybe he’s a ghost. He* can’t *really be here. Lucian saw him die, right? Is it possible that he held on long enough to see me one last time? Did he die just now, here in this god-awful cell? I don’t know what I’ll do if I really just witnessed my mate die right before my eyes…*

“Xavier!” I called out, frantic now. “Tell me you’re okay!”

No response.

I reached out via mind link.

*Xavier, it’s me. Can you hear me? Are you okay? I love you, Xavier. I never stopped, and I know you never stopped either. We’re meant to be together, Xavier, and we will be—just as soon as we get out of here. You just have to answer me. Speak to me! Tell me you’re okay!*

More silence.

I reached through the bars in vain, desperate for even the smallest touch—anything to prove to myself once and for all that Xavier really was lying in that cell.

“Xavier!” I hissed.

I tried to summon my magic, ready to blast my way through the bars. I knew it was risky, and that the noise might alert the guards, but the risk was worth it if it meant I’d be able to hold him again. If I could comfort him when he was in so much pain, it wouldn’t matter if they pulled us apart moments later. He’d know I was there; he’d feel me there with him.

He’d know he wasn’t alone.

*If he’s dying, then he shouldn’t have to die alone. I thought he was already dead, and that I’d never get the chance to hold him again. I’m not going to let this opportunity pass me by. I have to be near him. I have to make sure he knows that I’m here.*

I backed away from the bars and concentrated, trying to reach down inside myself to gather enough magic to blast the bars, but leave Xavier unharmed.

It took a little longer than usual, given whatever drug Malakai had given me, but soon I felt the magic swelling inside me, and excitement bubbled up in my stomach.

*I’m going to do it. I’m really going to do it. Just a little more…*

I lifted my hand—and my magic faltered. I was still so weak. I wasn’t going to be able to do this. And if I was… It wasn’t going to be something I could control, I feared.

“*Shit*, why can’t I do this?!” I hissed, that hopeless feeling returning.

*I can’t give up. Not yet. I have to try again.*

“Come the fuck on, Caliana Hart,” I muttered, reaching for my magic once again. I felt the vibration of it inside me, and I lifted my hand and aimed it at the bars, desperately hoping that it would work this time. The magic sparked silver at my fingertips, then faded away to nothing.

Just as I was getting ready to try one more time, fighting my weariness with a glimmer of hope, the clank of a heavy door drew my attention. I shrank back into the darkest corner of my cell as footsteps approached.

In the darkness, I could just make out the hulking figure of a guard walking toward Xavier’s cell, holding a couple of food trays. He peered in at Xavier and banged on the bars.

“Hey, wake up in there. Chow time!”

Xavier didn’t move a muscle.

“Whatever,” the guard said. “I suppose a dead man can’t eat.”

He moved over to my cell. I was trying to stay calm after what he’d just said, but panic was beginning to creep in. I did my best to steady my voice as the guard slid the tray into my cell.

“Do you know who’s in the cell beside me?” I asked. “I think he needs medical attention.”

The guard shrugged. “It’s way too late for that,” he said, before shuffling away.

I waited until I heard the door close, and then I rushed back to the bars.

*Too late? It can’t be. I won’t believe it. Xavier and I are* due destini*. Fate brought us together, then and now. This can’t be our ending. Xavier dying in a cell only a few feet away from me? Hell no. We can’t lose each other when we’re this close to finding each other again. Life can’t be that cruel, can it?*

All I wanted was to hold him one last time and let him know that I’d never stopped caring, never stopped loving him. I just had to make sure he knew that I forgave him for everything. If he was that injured, then he deserved to at least feel that. To know it from his pack, from his brother, from me.

“Xavier! Xavier! Answer me!” I called out, no longer caring if the guard heard me. “Xavier! Wake up! Please wake up! I love you, Xavier—please just wake up and tell me you’re okay! Nothing else matters, as long as you’re okay!”

But he still didn’t respond.

*Xavier!* I mind linked. *Can you hear me? If you’re still with me, I’m going to do whatever I can to get you out of there! To get you help! You just have to answer me!*

When he didn’t answer, I started crying, but not even the sound of my pain roused him. I couldn’t remember ever having been this miserable. It felt like the world was falling down all around me, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it.

I collapsed to the ground, feeling so hopeless and overwhelmed that it was almost too difficult to breathe. Then a hand landed on my shoulder. I jumped and twisted around, just in time to see Xavier sag against the bars.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Oh, Xavier! You’re alive!”

**Episode 4356**

**Xavier**

A jolt zapped through my body as Cali grabbed my hand. It was as if an electric current had come to life between us.

*This can’t be real. I’m dreaming. I have to be. There’s no way Cali’s here with me right now.*

My entire body was wracked with pain. I couldn’t focus, and I’d been slipping in and out of consciousness for god only knew how long. Something was clearly wrong with me, especially if I thought that the love of my life was really here—wherever *here* was.

*This must be one of my unconscious moments. That’s the only explanation. Cali can’t really be here with me, touching me and comforting me. This can’t be real. It makes no sense.*

It had to be a wishful dream—or better yet, another hallucination. Just another form of torture from Adéluce, a cruel way to build up my hope before snatching it away and leaving me distraught and in despair once again.

I tried to pull back from Cali’s touch and rid myself of any sense of her. I had to clear my head and ignore the immense pain long enough to figure out where the hell I was and how I’d gotten here. I wasn’t going to fall into one of Adéluce’s traps so easily.

*Maybe none of this is real? But if it’s not real, then where am I, really?*

I didn’t know, but one thing was for sure—I needed to try to sleep through this. That was the only thing I could think to do at the moment.

*Sleep is the right thing to do. When I wake up, this will all be gone. I might even be back at the pack house with Ava. Adéluce wouldn’t let me have it any other way. I’m probably in bed with Ava right now, dreaming.*

I sank to the ground, and the soft but strong hand tightened its grip on mine. I resisted the urge to bring it to my lips. It felt so much like Cali’s that I never wanted to let it go.

“Xavier?”

I knew that voice as well as I knew my own. But it couldn’t be her. It was impossible.

I was confused and trying to fight it, wanting to believe but knowing there was literally no way that this was real.

*Where the hell am I? Why does everything hurt? Isn’t the physical pain enough? Why is Adéluce so hell-bent on hurting me mentally, torturing me, manipulating me like this? Taunting me with the woman I love but can never have again?*

I ripped my hand away. “Stop doing this to me! Stop it! It’s enough! Don’t you see that it’s enough? I’m broken, just like you wanted!”

I heard Cali’s voice again. “Xavier, it’s okay. It’s me. It’s me, I promise. I thought I was imagining you, too, but I wasn’t, and you’re not imagining me, either. We’re here together. I’m right here.”

I peered up at her through the bars and shook my head in denial. “None of this is real. This is torture.”

I closed my eyes tight, vowing not to open them until I was back in reality.

Cali’s mind link found me. *It’s me, Xavier. It’s really me. I’m here, and I’m so happy to see you.*

I tried to cover my ears, as if that would help, but my arms could barely move. The pain was the only thing that came close to making me believe that any of this was real. I didn’t think pain this bad could be imagined. I closed my eyes and sagged against the bars, hoping that the worst of it would pass soon.

Cali’s voice echoed through my head once more. *Please. Come back to me, Xavier. You have to come back to me. I’m waiting for you.*

I drew in a deep breath and was hit by Cali’s scent. It was unmistakable. I looked up, expecting to see Adéluce looking down at me, sneering and taunting me, finally done with her ruse. But instead, I found myself looking at Cali, her dirt-smeared face shining with tears.

She reached through the bars and stroked my cheek, eliciting a rush of emotions and memories of tender moments shared between us. I pushed myself up, drawing in her scent once again. I took in the soft planes of her beautiful face, and the look of open love that I saw in her eyes.

*Even if Adéluce is responsible for this, I don’t care. It’s real enough for me, and I need it. If this is the closest I’ll ever get to Cali again, I want to make the most of these moments before they fade and reality comes back to smack me in the face.*

I locked eyes with Cali, and she smiled.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered. “Everyone did.”

She reached out to caress my face, and I leaned into her hand, absorbing her warmth, relishing her gentle touch, soaking up the comfort that she always brought me.

With a great deal of pain, I reached through the bars to touch her lips, and she kissed my fingers. The rush of the contact cleared away the haze the pain had created in my brain. This had to be real. It felt real. It felt right. I wasn’t dreaming. Not even a dream could’ve been this sweet.

“I can’t believe this,” Cali said, laughing as she wiped tears from her eyes. “They told me you died, fighting the Bitterfangs.”

At Cali’s words, a flash of memory zapped through my mind—me falling and hitting the ground, and the unmistakable sound of my bones shattering against the rock. The pain had been so intense, it had blocked everything else out.

“I think… I think I remember what happened,” I said, wincing. “But where am I now?”

“The Vanguard palace,” Cali said. “We’re being held prisoner here.”

I was confused. “You’re saying that Lucian did this?” I growled, already imagining ripping the princeling’s throat out.

Cali looked alarmed. “What? No, Xavier. Don’t you remember what happened at the palace? How Malakai and the Bitterfang army invaded it?”

In a near-overwhelming wave, all my recent memories came flooding back to me. Malakai was holding us captive, the bastard.

“How the hell did they get *you*?” I burst out.

“I was tricked into chasing the Bitterfangs, and they kidnapped me the moment I was alone,” Cali said.

I cursed and struggled to stand up.

Cali put a calming hand on my shoulder, and, once again, I leaned into her touch.

Her very presence gave me the motivation I so desperately needed.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to get us out of here,” I said defiantly.

As I inched my way to my feet, clinging to the bars for support, I started to wonder if this was what Adéluce had meant when she’d warned me that she wasn’t done punishing me for the moment Cali and I had stolen at the memorial.

*Did Adéluce help the Bitterfangs catch Cali, just so that I’d be forced to see her like this?*

It sounded convoluted, and like it was more trouble than it was worth, but I wouldn’t put anything past Adéluce—especially when it came to the unique brands of torture that she never hesitated to subject me to.

*If I want to get out of here, I’m going to have to work for it. Who knows what else the vampire-witch has in store? Better yet, who knows what Malakai has planned for Cali and me?*

Finally, I was upright, but staying that way wasn’t easy. My entire body was threatening to give out at any moment. Luckily, I had Cali. She reached through the bars to help keep me on my feet, her face hovering close.

“Be careful, Xavier,” she said. “You don’t have all your strength back yet.”

I wasn’t listening. I was too busy looking at her, gazing into her eyes and taking in the gentle curve of her lips. Her absence from my life had been too much to bear, and I wasn’t in any state to resist her—Adéluce be damned.

I reached for her with a shaky, aching arm, then drew her into a gentle kiss. Cali’s moan vibrated against my lips, and for a quiet, intense moment, time stood still.

Nothing else mattered. Not Malakai, not our imprisonment, not the *due destini*, not Ava or Greyson or any of it. The only thing that mattered—the only thing that existed—was the two of us… And then reality came slamming back into my brain, and I recognized the danger I was putting Cali in by succumbing to my need for her.

I jerked away, as if our contact had shocked me. I retreated from her, clutching at the wall for support as I put an appropriate distance between us, my breath coming in ragged gasps after the intensity of the kiss.

“Xavier, what is it? Did I do something to hurt you?” Cali asked.

I shook my head and licked my already dry lips. “No. I just… I can’t do this.”

**Episode 4357**

**Greyson**

I was on my way to the palace, running hard and making pretty good time. I was hoping to hell that I wouldn’t run into any Bitterfangs this far out. If I did, it would probably mean they’d sent out more patrols after Artemis’s little incursion—and that would make it that much harder to reach the palace undetected. This mission was only going to succeed if I had stealth on my side.

*I never should’ve hesitated to go after Cali. Even with my responsibilities to the pack, rescuing her was always the best and the only choice for me. How could I ever have thought otherwise? If Xavier were alive, he would’ve fought tooth and nail to get to Cali, and he would’ve kicked my ass for being so indecisive.*

It was majorly disorienting to think that Xavier was really gone. It still didn’t seem real. My brother and I had fought far more than we’d ever gotten along, but now that he was gone, it was hard to imagine what life would be like without him.

Xavier had gotten under my skin in ways that no one else ever would—save for Colton, maybe—but I’d never wished death on him. I just couldn’t believe that I’d never fight with him or beside him ever again. It wasn’t fair. And even if it had been his time to go, Xavier hadn’t deserved to die at the hands of the Bitterfangs.

*To think that he won’t be around to tell me how stupid I was to send Artemis alone instead of going myself is depressing and sobering, all at the same time. Xavier is one of the best fighters I know, so if the Bitterfangs were able to take* him *out…*

I didn’t finish the thought, knowing that I had to keep my head clear and stay positive if I was going to get to Cali. I had to believe that I could at least outsmart the Bitterfangs, if nothing else—but I had to admit that time and time again, the Bitterfangs had shown themselves to be far more formidable than I ever could’ve predicted.

Sending Artemis to the palace should’ve been a foolproof way to solve my Cali problem, but even with her amazing fighting skills, the Fae had been no match for the Bitterfangs.

It was clear to me now that rescuing Cali was an Alpha’s job—and I was more than up to the task. The Bitterfangs were vicious, but nothing was going to stand between me and Cali.

My only regret was that I sent someone else first. I’d failed to keep my little brother safe, but there was no way I was going to let Cali meet the same fate.

I kept telling myself that I was off to save Cali because it was what Xavier would’ve wanted, but that was disingenuous. This was a purely selfish mission to reclaim the love of my life, my mate, and the woman who was absolutely crucial to our campaign against the Bitterfangs, because I simply couldn’t do this without her.

I crossed into Three Devils Point and had to force myself to slow down and be cautious. The Bitterfangs would definitely be keeping an eye on this so-called neutral territory, watching for attacks.

Sure enough, I’d only gone about a mile farther when I picked up the unmistakable scent of a wolf. Likely a Bitterfang.

I slowed and crouched down, waiting, listening, my senses on high alert. I picked up scents from other packs, too—the Ironwood, Hackberry, and Northwind packs. I imagined the taste of their blood on my tongue—sweet revenge for what they’d done to my pack, to my alliance, to Cali and Xavier and Artemis. They’d crossed lines that no other pack would ever have dared to cross, and they were going to pay.

Still, I was going to have to restrain myself—no easy task, given that I wanted nothing more than to kill each and every member of the Bitterfang alliance with my bare hands. But I couldn’t get caught up in an unnecessary fight just because I wanted to draw blood. I had to keep my eyes on the prize—getting Cali out of the palace dungeon unscathed.

I heard Bitterfangs on the path ahead. Rather than risking crossing paths, I quickly altered my course and moved in a wide arc around them, pausing frequently to make sure I wasn’t being followed.

Once I was convinced that I’d successfully eluded that group, I pressed on until I entered Vanguard territory. I knew that there was no way I’d be able to go in through the front door of the palace, so there was no point even heading in that direction. No, I was going to have to use the tunnels—assuming the Bitterfangs hadn’t wised up and sealed them off.

I moved toward the tunnel opening and wasn’t surprised to find four werewolf guards standing right outside. I slowed down, knowing that I had to be careful. If they picked up my scent, they’d be on me in seconds.

*I need to separate these two guards so that I can take them out one at a time, and as quietly as possible.*

I resorted to an old tried-and-true trick: I grabbed a rock and threw it as hard and far as I could. The rock hit the ground several feet past them with a satisfying thud. The guards immediately turned to look behind them, snarling.

I watched as one of them made his way toward the sound. Then I waited a tense moment and darted forward as quickly and quietly as I could, biting down on the neck of the second guard, who’d never seen me coming. His warm blood filled my mouth, and I had to hold myself back from howling in triumph.

The wolf barely made a sound as he slumped to the ground, dead. I released his neck and backed away to prepare for the other guard’s return—and then I heard the low rumble of a growl. I spun around to see five wolves running toward me.

*Fuck.*

I considered booking it into the tunnel, but if I did that, then I’d be trapped, and the Bitterfangs would know I was down there. I had one major advantage over this group—I was the only Alpha. I was stronger and faster than the rest of them, not to mention much larger. There was a chance I could take off, lead them far away from the tunnel entrance, and then sneak back—but I’d have to be quick about it.

Deciding to try that course of action, I broke into a sprint and shot off into the trees. The Bitterfangs charged after me, their howls and snarls reverberating through the air, along with the rhythmic thudding of their footfalls on the near-frozen ground.

I raced through the woods at breakneck speed, ignoring the slicing pain of the branches striking my face as I whipped by. I hazarded a glance over my shoulder and was happy to see that the Bitterfangs had fallen behind—though not by much. They were nearly keeping pace with me, which would’ve been impressive if it weren’t the absolute worst-case scenario.

I pivoted to change direction, hoping to lose them by running through the stream that cut through the territory. The water would make it impossible for them to track me—but only if they fell back far enough not to *see* which way I went.

I heard something crashing through the brush and spotted yet another group closing in on me.

*Shit. How many of these bozos are there?*

Once again, I was forced to change course. I sped away from the stream, that idea dashed now that I was being pursued by two different groups. I picked up speed—only to skid to a stop a few moments later when I reached a craggy, rocky slope that was too steep to climb.

I turned to face my attackers, ready to kick some ass. I was outnumbered, there was no denying it. Even if I fought harder than I’d ever fought, even though I was still bigger and faster and definitely more skilled than the rest of them, that wouldn’t matter. Not when it was ten to one. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to take a hell of a lot of Bitterfangs down with me.

One of the wolves broke away from the rest and lunged at me. I easily dodged him and planted my feet, ready for whoever wanted to try coming at me next. I suddenly wavered on my feet as I was hit by a disorienting pulse of dizziness.

I stumbled as my stomach lurched and twisted. It felt like my insides were being ripped right out of my body.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

My confusion only grew when I felt the unmistakable sensation of my bones cracking under my skin. Despite my best efforts, I wasn’t able to stop my body from shifting back to human—just as a trio of Bitterfangs lunged at me.

**Episode 4358**

I couldn’t stop staring into Xavier’s eyes, searching for whatever it was that had such a hold on him that he still wouldn’t allow himself to express his love for me.

“Xavier, are you really going to do this to me again?” I demanded. “What’s wrong with you? I thought you were dead, and now we’ve somehow found our way back to each other, and you’re still acting like you can’t even stand to be near me. Is a kiss really too much to ask?”

Xavier shook his head and looked away. “I’m sorry, I’m not thinking straight.”

I waited for him to say more, and when he didn’t, a fresh wave of confusion rushed through me. “I don’t get it. Are you apologizing for kissing me, or for stopping?”

As I waited for his answer, I realized that neither of those options were ideal. The only thing I wanted to hear him say was that he still loved me and was sorry for treating me so badly.

Rather than give me any kind of answer, Xavier staggered back, putting more distance between us. “Now’s not the time to be making out, anyway. We need to find a way out of here.”

I wasn’t buying it. He was even refusing to look at me, now.

I clutched the bars and gave him a searching look. “What did they do to you?” He looked like hell, and I wished I could comfort him. “And tell me what you meant before, when you said to ‘stop doing this’ to you. Were you talking to me, or the Bitterfangs?”

Xavier just looked confused.

“Do you even remember saying it?” I asked.

Xavier shook his head, but I couldn’t tell if that was an answer or a refusal to answer.

I didn’t know what to think. His behavior was once again fitting the pattern that had started when he’d turned his back on everything he knew and walked away from the Redwood pack.

*Is the magic that Kira sensed on Xavier responsible for this? What’s causing it? Has he been dealing with this a lot? Has Ava even noticed it?*

I started to ask him outright, but stopped myself at the last second. I couldn’t ask him. Kira had made it very clear that doing so would jeopardize Xavier’s safety, and I had no desire to put him in any *more* danger.

Xavier was standing in the center of his cell, just staring at me, too far away for me to touch.

“Come closer, Xavier,” I said. “Why are you being this way? Just tell me whatever it is that’s keeping us apart. I didn’t ask for this, and I don’t think you did, either.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Worried that I might’ve shown my hand, I backpedaled. “Nothing. I’m just frustrated, that’s all.”

Xavier moved closer. “I’m sorry.”

I waited for more, but that was it. “Are you sorry that we’re trapped in here? Or is it something else? Whatever it is, Xavier, you just have to tell me.”

Xavier looked torn, and I started to think I might finally be getting through to him after all this time. He opened his mouth to say something—just as a group of Bitterfangs came walking in.

Without a word of warning, they unlocked my cell and grabbed me.

“Get off me!” I shrieked, kicking and punching at them until one of them locked his arms around mine to keep my hands at my sides.

“Kick me again, and I’ll throw you headfirst into the bars,” he barked in my ear.

“Let her go!” Xavier snarled, charging the bars and pulling at them, almost like he was trying to snatch them right out of the floor.

“Shut up!” snapped one of the Bitterfangs, whacking the bars of Xavier’s cell with a scary-looking baton. “Or we’ll make you shut up. Trust me, we have our ways.”

“Please stop, Xavier,” I said. “I’ll be okay.”

I didn’t know if that was true, but I didn’t want him to irritate the Bitterfangs so much that they started hurting him. Xavier was a powerful Alpha, but right now he was behind bars and at the mercy of the Bitterfangs, who’d shown time and time again that they were capable of just about anything.

Xavier calmed down, but that didn’t mean he shut his mouth.

“Cali!” he roared as they dragged me away. “Cali! I’ll come for you, wherever they’re taking you!”

“I thought he was half-dead, but now he’s screaming at the top of his lungs?” one of the Bitterfangs grumbled as he slammed the door to the dungeon behind us, cutting off Xavier’s protests.

“Where the hell are you taking me?” I demanded as they dragged me down a dark hallway. “And what are you doing to Xavier? He didn’t do anything to any of you! None of us did! We don’t deserve what you’re doing to us!”

The wolves just stared at me blankly, and I started dragging my feet, trying to make moving me as difficult as possible, all the while attempting to summon my magic. They dragged me down the hall and paused in front of a staircase. I stared into the darkness above, wondering what was next.

I fought the Bitterfangs as they hoisted me up the stairs, trying to damnedest to break free, but they held firm. It was hopeless. I was still too weak from being knocked out and most likely drugged—not that I’d have stood a chance without my magic, anyway.

*Maybe if I play docile, they’ll relax their grip and I can* really *try to get away.*

I was taken to one of the palace’s nicer, non-dungeon rooms—a place I recognized as Lucian’s library. Many of the old, rare books that had lined the shelves before were gone. Malakai had probably ordered some kind of purge.

I turned to the guards to ask them why they’d brought me here, but before I could get a word out, the door was slammed in my face, and I heard the click of the lock.

I rushed to the door and pounded on it. “Let me out of here!” I shouted. “Now! This is against the law!” I yelled for a few more minutes before I gave up.

Could anyone help us at all to get the hell out of here? I’d hoped that Honora would have a change of heart and help me, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen. Xavier was in no condition to help, either. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him look so beaten.

*I wish I had Torin’s healing powers. I would’ve been able to fix Xavier up, and then he’d have torn those Bitterfangs apart.*

I grimaced, thinking about all the hell the Bitterfangs must’ve put Xavier through already.

*I have to get us both out of here before they do anything else to him. I don’t think he can handle even one more injury.*

I stormed over to one of the windows and tried to open it, but it was locked. I tried another one across the room. Same thing. I wondered if I’d be able to break the glass.

I attempted to summon my magic to blast the glass out of the window frame without cutting myself, but once again, it came in a weak trickle that wasn’t powerful enough to move a feather, let alone break anything. I tried again and cursed as the curtains fluttered with the force of the negligible burst of magic I’d managed to dredge up.

I grabbed a heavy book and was just lining up to throw it at a window when Malakai stepped into the room. He smiled coldly as he lifted the book from my hands.

“What? Not a fan of heretical scripture?” he said with a smirk. He tossed the book to the floor. “Neither am I.”

“What do you want?” I snarled.

Malakai frowned. “I thought I’d made that abundantly clear. You are a *due destini* mate—a freak of nature—and you must be dealt with.”

A shiver of dread coursed through my body.

“What does that mean?” I asked, my voice shaking.

Malakai gestured to a group of Bitterfangs. “Bring her!”

More than ever before, I wished I could summon my sword and use it to lop his head off. As the wolves grabbed me, I tried to grab my magic again, but it still wasn’t there. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t summon it.

I was dragged to the ballroom, which was strewn with broken furniture, shattered glass, dust, and miscellaneous debris. I couldn’t help but think of the fit Lucian would’ve thrown at the sight of it.

Malakai led the way to a box, sitting in the center of a table. He opened the box and pulled out a dagger, which he placed on the table before me.

“What’s going on?” I asked, hating that my voice was still shaking. “Is that silver?”

“Clever girl,” he said. I shuddered. “It is.”

Then Malakai nodded to one of the Bitterfangs. Moments later, Xavier was dragged in. He didn’t look any better in the light. He was still bruised, bloodied, and haggard, and my heart clenched at the sight of him.

“You have a choice,” Malakai told us. “You will fight to the death. One of you will walk out of here alive, or both of you will die.”

**Episode 4359**

**Greyson**

I stumbled back, staring down at my human hand, which had been a paw only seconds ago. My shift back to human was complete, and while shifting never hurt, being *forced* to shift was officially one of the most unpleasant things I’d ever experienced.

But I only had a moment to contemplate what had forced me to shift before the rest of the Bitterfangs dogpiled on top of me.

I rolled out of the way of their teeth and claws, fending them off as best I could, but I didn’t stand a chance. A human against a pack of wolves? There was no way I’d be able to win, here. I knew I was a damn good fighter, but some obstacles couldn’t be surmounted—and when I was stuck in human form, a pack of werewolves was one of those obstacles.

I felt a dull, gnawing pain in my arm and lashed out instinctively, but instead of punching fur, I made contact with warm, smooth skin. I looked up to see that my attacker had shifted back to human and was currently trying to bite my arm.

*What the hell is happening? Why is she doing this?*

I threw the startled woman off and scrambled to my feet. I could easily fight them as a human if they were human, too—and I was pretty sure I had a lot more experience than they did in doing just that. The tide had finally turned in my favor.

I immediately threw a series of punches at the shocked Bitterfang woman, and then I lashed out with a final strike that sent her tumbling to the ground. As she fell, the rest of the wolves began to shift back to human, too, their cries of confusion ripping through the air as they writhed on the ground and the transformation took hold.

Taking advantage of their confusion, I descended upon them, kicking, punching, using every move I’d shown the pack and more. Cries of pain mixed with yells of pain and anger as they fought to shift back and discovered that they couldn’t.

The Bitterfangs didn’t know what had hit them. They stumbled around as I worked to finish them off, taking advantage of their complete disorientation. I wasn’t sure what had caused everyone to shift, but I had to believe that Big Mac and the witches had finally cast their spell. What other explanation was there?

*But where are the witches? Is someone protecting them? The Bitterfangs might be shifting back to human against their will, but there are still so many of them—they’d easily be able to overtake the witches if they found them.*

I pushed that worry out of my head. I’d left Rishika in charge, and she was more than capable of keeping the witches safe while they cast the spell that was definitely going to give us the edge we needed in battle—if I’d had any doubts about that before, I certainly didn’t now.

The remaining Bitterfangs were clearly floundering. They were gritting their teeth and straining, yelling into the air as they attempted to shift, but it was no use. They were wasting their time. If the witches had done what I suspected, their wolves had been ripped away, just like mine had. I was still a little disoriented, too, but at least I’d been somewhat prepared for it. The Bitterfangs were completely in the dark, and I wasn’t about to give them the time to reorient themselves.

I advanced on the remaining Bitterfangs, recalling all the techniques I’d used while fighting in the ring for money. I’d taken on significantly better fighters than this group of amateurs. Like most werewolves, they were tough and unstoppable in wolf form. But as humans? Not so much.

This turn of events filled me with hope. I’d known that the spell was coming, but it couldn’t have come at a better time. As we’d intended, it had swung the odds dramatically in our favor. I’d have to thank Big Mac for the spell the moment I saw her again. Just like she had so many times before, she’d come through for us—for me—in a big way.

As I fought the Bitterfangs, throwing hard kicks and following them up with punch after devastating punch, I thought about how prepared I was for this fight. My days in the ring were behind me—hopefully forever—but I was thrilled to see that my muscle memory was still fully functional.

I cleared my mind as I concentrated on doling out precise, deadly strikes that would make quick work of the disoriented, wildly outgunned Bitterfangs. I was feinting and striking and countering their weak attacks, and my confidence grew with every fallen Bitterfang.

I’d already knocked two out cold and was starting to close in on another when I felt a sharp pain in my back. I spun around and saw a Bitterfang wielding a branch like a club. He swung the branch at me again, and I ducked just in time. I followed up with a sweeping kick that knocked the guy onto his back.

I pounced on him, but I realized that I was possibly losing my edge, since most of the group had finally realized what had happened to them and were starting to compensate. If we wanted to take proper advantage of the Bitterfangs’ confusion and use it to end this ridiculous war, then I should’ve had the alliance ready to come now. I should’ve told them to follow me. There was a chance that they still could, but I couldn’t hold my breath. I’d gone on this mission on my own. I had to get myself out of this mess.

*Better get to work.* I yanked the branch from the Bitterfangs’ hand and knocked him out with it, and then skidded out of reach of two more, who were coming up behind me.

I was starting to get a little worried. I was a better fighter than them—that much as obvious—but that didn’t mean I was strong enough to take out every single Bitterfang on my own. No matter what, they’d eventually overwhelm me.

*How long am I going to be able to keep this up? I’m stronger, faster, and more skilled at this type of hand-to-hand combat, but I don’t have an endless supply of energy. I’m going to gas out at some point.*

The longer I had to keep fighting these Bitterfangs, the longer Cali would be at risk imprisoned in the palace. I’d already wasted enough time, and I had no interest in fighting Bitterfang after Bitterfang, only giving Malakai time to send even more of them at me in an endless stream.

I swung the branch at one of the bolder Bitterfangs, sending him reeling back into a second one, who was running over to help him. Swinging the branch, I drove them both back up against a rocky incline and then thrust the branch up and out, using it to choke them both into unconsciousness.

I watched the men drop to the ground and then looked around.

*Is that the last of them?*

I dropped the branch and took a moment to catch my breath.

*I’m tired right now, and that’s okay. I just fought a hell of a lot of Bitterfangs. But I can do this. I* haveto *do this. Cali’s life depends on it. She needs me, and I won’t rest until she’s safe in my arms.*

I started toward the palace again—just as I heard shouting rise up behind me. I paused. It was more Bitterfangs. Of course. I heard more noise up ahead, and then I spotted more Bitterfangs thundering in from the distance.

*Shit. I’m caught in the middle.*

The tree line came alive with droves of Bitterfangs, Hackberrys, and Northwinds. The remnants of the Ironwood pack appeared, too, and they all closed in, snarling as they encircled me.

They were all in human form, but that didn’t matter when there were so many of them. They’d overwhelm me in no time. I looked around for an out until I realized that I couldn’t run. I was going to have to fight them all—and I would probably die in the process.

I slowly turned around, wondering who was going to make the first move, and hoping that they wouldn’t all rush me at once. If they did that, I’d be dead in seconds.

*Is this it? Is this the end? Am I never going to see Cali again?*

Just as several of the Bitterfangs lunged, the sound of something whipping through the air caught my attention—along with that of every de-wolfed werewolf currently surrounding me. One of the Bitterfangs closest to me suddenly yelped and clutched at his neck, yanking at the arrow that had sprouted from it.

He collapsed to the ground, just as a battle cry rose up from the woods and I heard the sound of pounding footsteps and familiar howls.

The alliance had arrived.

**Episode 4360**

I was horrified. This was what Knox and Jesse had been forced to do—kill or be killed. I couldn’t believe it had come to this. Xavier was my *mate*, and now I had to fight him, or we’d both be killed? Things had just gone from bad to worse. My hatred for Malakai surged in my chest.

I rounded on the Bitterfang Alpha, my voice rising with anger. “We’re mates! How *dare* you?”

“Caliana,” he said, with an infuriating sort of patience. “I know you’re mates—that’s the entire point. Forcing you to face off with your mate will make the fight all the more challenging and interesting, don’t you think? I understand that all *due destini* mates must eventually make a choice or face certain death, and now I’m giving you that opportunity. You should be thanking me. You are so lucky to not only choose life but also choose death.”

I balled my hands into fists. “No. I won’t do it. How can you expect me to kill my own mate?”

But as soon as the words left my mouth, I remembered that Malakai was willing to kill his own daughter. He wouldn’t have even the smallest problem with forcing me to fight my mate. He didn’t care one bit about family or love—he’d made that clear on more than one occasion.

I glanced at Xavier, who was sagging against the table, barely able to stay on his feet. He was in such bad shape… They must have given him that drug, too, and who knew what else? How was I supposed to fight a man who couldn’t even stand? Not that I had any plans to fight him at all.

“Go fuck yourself!” I snapped at Malakai. “I won’t do it. You can’t make me. You’re sick, and I’m not playing into your games.”

“You *will* do it, or you’ll watch your beloved Xavier die before I kill you myself!” Malakai snarled. “And don’t test me, because I’m not one to bluff. You should know that by now.”

*You don’t have a choice here, Cali*, Xavier mind linked. *Pick up the knife. Just get it over with, so that you can leave this awful place.*

I stared at Xavier in shock. *No!* *I won’t do it. I’m not going to* touch *that knife, let alone use it on you! That’s insanity!*

*But you don’t have to worry, Cali. I’ll only pretend to fight you. That’s all I can manage, anyway. I’d never hurt you. I want you to have the best odds of getting out of here alive, and if I have to pretend to fight to satisfy Malakai’s perverted desires, then I will.*

*I don’t understand—*

*Just stab me while we pretend to fight, Cali. We’ll try to make it look as real as possible, but there’s no way I’m going to raise a hand against you.*

I gasped in horror. *Do you really expect me to* kill you? *Have you completely lost your mind?*

*I wasn’t planning on dying, Cali, no. But if my death is the only thing that will keep you alive, then it’s a done deal. Kill me.* He gestured at the blade. *Do it. Pick. It. Up.*

I couldn’t believe this was happening. We’d gone through so much together—good things and awful things—only to be thrust into this sadistic situation? We didn’t deserve this. Xavier deserved so much better than to fall prey to some sadistic Alpha’s whims.

I turned on Malakai, who’d been watching us closely with a sick, satisfied smile playing across his lips. Knowing that it probably wouldn’t work, I reached for my magic once again, longing to fucking *incinerate* Malakai, along with all the awful Bitterfangs who were staring at me and Xavier like we were some kind of sideshow.

*Come on, Cali. Your magic has to be inside you! It’s not gone. Find it and use it! Summon your sword and use it to kill Malakai! It’s your only hope. It’s* Xavier’s *only hope!*

But try as I might, I couldn’t summon so much as a spark. I still wasn’t strong enough. But there was still one more thing I could try.

Without giving myself time to think, I grabbed the silver dagger and charged at Malakai in a burst of fury—but I didn’t even get within a few feet of him.

Two Bitterfangs jumped in and grabbed me by the wrists, yanking me back and disarming me in the process.

Xavier snarled and moved to attack them, but it was pointless. One of the Bitterfangs hit him with a swift punch to the gut, and Xavier crumpled. My heart twisted. It physically hurt to see him like this. Was this why my heart had been hurting? Not because Xavier was dead, but because they’d been torturing him like they were now?

“If either of you tries anything like that again, you’ll both die—fuck the fight,” Malakai growled.

I knew he was serious. Fear sliced through me as the Bitterfangs lifted a gasping Xavier from the floor and pushed him toward me so that we were facing each other.

The dagger was heavy in my hand as Xavier staggered toward me. He didn’t mind link. Instead, he just smiled at me. There was a haunting, peaceful look in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Cali,” he said. “There’s no point in fighting this.” His eyes were brimming with tears. “You know what you have to do. You know what I *want* you to do.”

I watched him, my entire body trembling and my eyes stinging with hot tears. “I’d rather die than hurt you,” I whispered.

Even after everything we’d been through—the awful, harsh things he’d said to me, the breakup, the pain of him choosing Ava to be his Luna, all of it—I only wanted him to be safe and happy.

I couldn’t stomach the thought of losing him again. I’d thought he was dead, and then I’d found out he was alive, and now Malakai was ordering me to kill him—or for him to kill me. Never in a million years could I have imagined that *this* would be our ending.

Xavier took a step toward me, a look of longing on his face. “Do it,” he whispered.

The hand holding the dagger was shaking, hard. I felt like I was about to pass out.

“Wait,” Malakai said. “I want a fair fight.” He turned to Xavier. “Shift.”

Xavier kept his eyes locked with mine. *I know you want to tell me to stop, that we can’t do this, but we have no choice. No matter how painful this is, you have to survive. Do you understand me, Cali? Nothing else matters to me except that you are free to live!*

*No, Xavier, I won’t do it!*

*Listen to me, Cali. You have so much to live for—Greyson, your sister, your parents. You’ll be okay without me. You are strong, and you are loved.*

“I told you to shift!” Malakai yelled, his jaw tight with impatience.

I swallowed and looked up at Xavier, nodding as he stepped back. And then a confused look crossed his face. He held his hands up and looked at them, his eyebrows knitting together.

“Shift, I said!” Malakai screamed.

“I can’t!” Xavier burst out. “I’m trying, but I can’t.”

Malakai took a step toward him. “You can’t, or you won’t?” He ripped the dagger from my hand and grabbed me, pressing the blade against my neck. “Shift, or I’ll kill her right here and make you drink her blood.” Malakai dug the blade in deeper, and I cried out in pain. “Don’t make me do it, Xavier—believe me, I fucking will!”

“Stop!” Xavier shouted, lurching toward me until the Bitterfang guards stepped into his path, blocking him. “I can’t shift! I’m not making it up! I would if I could! I wouldn’t risk Cali’s life like this!”

Malakai’s gaze darted to his men. “Shift!”

The two Bitterfangs went silent, and then confused looks crossed their faces, too.

Malakai turned to another Bitterfang, posted in the corner of the room. “You! Shift, right now!”

A few seconds passed before the man’s bewildered voice echoed through the ballroom. “I can’t. I can’t shift!”

“What Fae magic is this?” Malakai hissed in my ear. He dug the knife into my neck, and I felt a trickle of blood.

“*Wait!*” Xavier screamed.

“I can’t use my magic!” I said. “Whatever this is, it isn’t me! Don’t you think I would’ve blasted your ass a long time ago if I could? I have nothing to do with this! And even if I *could* use my magic, I’m not capable of the kind of magic that keeps wolves from shifting!”

Malakai’s hold on me slackened, just a bit, and I felt him tense against my back. I was worried that he might slip and slice into my neck with the knife. I was getting ready to try once again to break free when screaming and shouting rose up from the depths of the palace.

Malakai shoved me at one of the guards, his head whipping back and forth as he strained to figure out where the shouting was coming from.

“What is that?” he demanded. “Someone tell me what that sound is!” He turned his attention to one of the guards. “Go! Find out what’s going on.”

“Right away, Malakai!” said the guard, but he didn’t have a chance to leave the ballroom.

The main doors burst open, and a frantic guard came rushing in. “Alpha, we’re under attack!”

**Episode 4361**

**Greyson**

Artemis stepped out of the woods, lowering her bow. I watched her reach back into her quiver without looking. She didn’t blindly fish around for arrows, like I would’ve had to. Every movement was smooth, precise, and effective.

I watched her nock another arow and pull the string taut, ready to shoot, and I honestly couldn’t believe my luck. The cavalry couldn’t have arrived at a better time.

Suddenly, I felt lighter—full of energy and purpose. My second wind had arrived. I surveyed the battlefield around me, pleased that our training appeared to have paid off. I even felt myself grin at the sight of Rishika screaming at the top of her lungs as she led a charge against my attackers. They’d followed me here, and I didn’t know if it was a good thing or bad. I’d been impulsive to go find Cali myself, and they’d all obviously put their trust in me to get us through this. What if they were wrong?

No. I couldn’t think like that, not with them here. I had to be strong. I had to be the Alpha they needed.

It wasn’t too late. We could still do this.

My confidence wavered when I caught sight of Elle, fighting back-to-back with Lucian, her teeth bared in a snarl. We were all without our wolves, which meant we were all fighting at a disadvantage. But if I was being honest, I didn’t think anyone was worse off than Elle. After all, she’d only *had* a human form for a short while. She had zero experience fighting as a human—but I told myself that she could handle it. That we’d trained her enough to give her a fighting chance. As a leader, sometimes that was all you could do.

The sire bond, however, had other ideas. The instinct to go to her, to protect her, to shield her from harm was almost overwhelming. But I had other responsibilities right now—fighting these wolves, making my way to Cali. I would have to trust Lucian to keep Elle safe.

Something heavy hit me in the back of the head, and I stumbled, struggling to regain my footing as the earth rocked beneath me. I felt blood flowing down my neck and tickling my shoulder blade. The base of my skull throbbed, sending waves of pain shooting down my spine and out toward my extremities.

I stumbled forward, the ground rushing up to meet me. I took a lurching step and threw my arms out, trying to avoid eating dirt. But before I could stand up all the way, a massive rock was flying toward my face.

I lunged to the right, about as coordinated as a drunk, and missed having my head bashed in by an *inch*.

Fuck. This.

I ran at the Hackberry who’d thrown the rock and tackled him to the ground, determined to make him regret being born. He jabbed his knee into my gut, knocking the air out of my lungs, but I didn’t care.

I smashed my forehead into his nose, enjoying the crunching sound it made. The Hackberry blinked frantically as his eyes filled with blood. While he was still disoriented, I managed to roll us over and pin him to the ground. He struggled underneath me, but it was too late—I’d put him in a sleeper hold, and I squeezed until he went limp in my arms.

*Nighty night, asshole.*

I pushed myself up from the ground, hoping that I was healing up faster than I probably was. But before I could really get a sense of how fucked I’d gotten, I saw Mace coming toward me.

He made a gruesome picture, drenched in blood, eyes flashing with deadly purpose as he headed my way. I found myself sincerely grateful that he was on our side. I wouldn’t have wanted to face him on the battlefield.

“Alliance packs are flanking the perimeter,” he told me, his voice hoarse from yelling commands. “Next, we’ll start forcing the Bitterfangs back toward the palace.”

“Speaking of…” I caught sight of a Bitterfang trying to get the drop on Mace while he had his back turned. “Duck.”

Mace dropped to the ground, and I hit his attacker with an uppercut to the jaw. He crumpled—a textbook knockout. But the guy hadn’t come alone. Mace and I squared up to fight our way through a trio of Bitterfangs out for blood.

The whole time, I had to force myself not to think about Cali. About whether she was safe in the palace. After all, it *was* currently under siege. What would the Bitterfangs do to her, now that they were being cornered?

The fist flying toward my teeth reminded me that I needed to keep my attention on the task at hand. I pulled back, lunging forward when my latest attacker’s punch went wide, grabbing him by the shirt, and hurling him at a nearby tree.

“Thanks, Greyson!” Rishika called out.

“Looks like you have this under control,” I shouted back. “I have to get to the palace.”

“Take out as many as you can on your way there,” Rishika urged me, bouncing up and down to keep her energy up. “We have to keep them on their heels.”

“Think I can manage that.”

“No mercy,” she reminded me, her eyes hard.

“Not gonna be a problem,” I assured her, searching the chaos for any sign of Big Mac and the other witches. Rishika was supposed to be keeping them safe, and I looked to her, wanting to know who she’d put in charge, but she just smirked at me knowingly.

“Ravi and Jacqueline volunteered to head up our witch division,” she told me before I could even ask. “I didn’t see a reason to say no.”

“Good.” I nodded, relieved. “That’s good.”

“Good luck.” Rishika clapped me on the back before throwing herself back into the fight.

I sprinted toward the palace, nearly slamming into Knox as he danced out of range of a Bitterfang who was swinging a branch at him.

“Samaras!” Knox roared. “Let’s get these fuckers!”

To say I felt pleased to see Knox fully committing to the fight was an understatement. I didn’t consider myself a particularly optimistic person, but seeing him pushing this hard made me hope that our alliance was stronger than I’d believed. And it would need to be, if we were going to win this thing.

Nearby, I heard the crunch of breaking bones and saw Ava dropping a Northwind man to the ground. Bright white bone was protruding from his shin.

I caught her eye, and she grinned at me like a skull, the glee not reaching her eyes.

“I want Malakai,” she reminded me, shouting so that I could hear her. “He’s mine!”

As much as I wanted to tell her that she’d have to take a number if she wanted to go after that asshole, I decided it was best not to answer her. After all, I knew where she was coming from, and what she’d lost. Her mate, her Alpha, her second chance with the man she’d truly loved.

“I have to get to the palace,” I told her instead, wiping the blood from a cut above my eyebrow before it could get in my eyes. “To Cali.”

Ava grabbed my shoulder and lurched forward. For a second, I was sure she was going to headbutt me—but instead, she sent her foot flying backward, into the chest of a Hackberry who’d been attempting to creep up on her from behind. She sent him sailing into a nearby tree, all without a backward glance.

“I’m coming with,” she told me.

I wasn’t about to argue. She was hungry for blood, and there was nothing I could do or say to stop her. All I could do was point her in the direction of people who needed killing.

And right now, Jay and Lola looked like they could use a hand. Ava was one step ahead of me, sprinting into the fray and dropping into a fighting crouch, shrieking at the top of her lungs and drawing the attention of everyone in the vicinity.

I saw more than one Bitterfang flinch at the inhuman sound she made—one borne of grief and loss and rage. I could smell the fear on them, and I couldn’t blame them for it. I wouldn’t have wanted to face her in a fight, either.

Someone new hurtled into the fight, moving so fast they were a blur. It was Mikah, and he was already sinking his fangs into an Ironwood’s carotid artery and drenching both their clothes in blood. I watched, fascinated, as Mikah ripped his opponent’s throat out with a jerk of his head. Without wasting a single movement, Mikah turned and found his next victim—a Northwind man that he and Gabriel tore in two.

It was romantic, in a gory kind of way.

Looking around at all the brutal fighting and killing—the senseless, preventable loss of life—made me think of Silas’s pack war.

This war had never been necessary. If Malakai had just let things be, we could’ve lived in peace. Fighters on both sides would’ve been spared violent ends.

But assholes like Malakai never knew how to turn down a fight.

“Greyson!” Lola hollered at me, kicking a Hackberry right into Jay’s waiting arms. “Get the fuck out of here! If something happens to Cali, I’ll tear your dick off.”

Since it looked like we were winning, and because she was speaking out of loyalty to Cali, I decided to let this one slide.

“Ava,” I shouted over my shoulder, knowing that we needed to keep going.

Ava dropped a guy she had in a sleeper hold, and he hit the ground with a loud thud. But before we could take off toward the palace, I felt the strangest sensation. It was like a giant fishhook had sunk into my chest and was tugging me backward.

“*Elle!*” Lucian screamed.

**Episode 4362**

I could hear Malakai’s men shouting in the hall, their feet pounding against the marble floor as they raced to prepare for the attack.

I felt Malakai’s grip on my arm slacken with surprise. I forced myself to stay put and wait for the perfect moment.

“I demand fucking answers!” Malakai roared, waving his dagger around. “What is going on out there?”

I met Xavier’s eye across the room. I didn’t have to mind link with him to know what he was thinking. This chaos was the perfect cover for us to escape. If we played our cards right, there was a chance that we’d actually get out of here alive.

“Don’t just stand there!” Malakai shouted at the guards, his words dripping with condescension. “Assemble the rest of the guards and *fight back*!”

The guards hustled out—all but the largest one, who stayed and kept a firm grip on Xavier.

Malakai turned toward me, stalking forward a few steps. His eyes burned with hatred. He wanted to hurt me, to destroy me. But he had other things to do first.

“Your sorcery can’t help you now,” he seethed. “We don’t need our wolves. We will win this war, because our fight is a righteous one.”

He pressed the blade against my neck once more, its sharp edge scraping down until the point rested in the hollow of my throat.

“STOP!” Xavier bellowed, wrestling with the man who was holding him back. “It doesn’t have to be like this, Malakai!”

He sounded strong, confident. But I knew him well enough to see how scared he was—scared for me, for our friends, for our family. But he still spoke with the confidence and command of an Alpha. Maybe that would be enough to sway Malakai, especially when things were looking dire.

“If you just surrender—”

“Surrender?” Malakai scoffed. “Never!”

The pressure of the dagger against my neck eased ever so slightly as Malakai had a good hard laugh at the idea of peace. Xavier nodded at me. My moment was here.

I grabbed Malakai by the wrist and shoved the hand holding the knife as far away as I could, then I twisted in the cage of his arms and kicked him in the solar plexus, relishing the expression that crossed his face as I knocked the wind out of him.

I danced backward, but Malakai recovered and lunged at me, managing to grab me by the elbow.

I twisted his grasp, trying desperately to break his hold, but he was too strong. He raised the dagger above his head, ready to bring it down on me. I felt my magic rise instinctively, felt it move through my arm and shock him. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to make him stagger backward in surprise.

The dagger slid out of his grasp and clattered to the ground.

In a flash, Xavier leaned forward as far as he could and then threw his head back hard, headbutting the guard holding his arms from behind and knocking him out cold. The guard slumped to the ground, his nose gushing blood. Then Xavier lunged forward and slammed into Malakai, knocking him to the ground. They grappled, but it wasn’t long before Malakai managed to get Xavier on his back—he was still so badly injured and had clearly depleted his surge of energy.

Without a thought, I leapt onto Malakai’s back, screaming as I clawed at him. I knew my powers were the only advantage we had, so I clenched my teeth and tried to summon them. I felt the crackle and grabbed the first flailing body part I found, zapping it hard.

I watched the spasm of pain go through Xavier when my power hit him. He met my eyes, confused and hurt.

“Shit,” I cried out, feeling worse than useless for making such a stupid mistake. “Sorry!”

Malakai took the chance and threw me off his back. I slammed into a nearby wall. As my cheek slid down the gorgeous silk wallpaper, I wished desperately for a break, a time-out. Just a few seconds to catch my breath.

“You fucking bitch.” Malakai was suddenly looming over me, holding the dagger.

*Shake off the pain, Cali*,I told myself. *This is why you’ve been training so hard—to learn how to get hit and keep on fighting.*

But I was backed up against the wall with nowhere to run. I looked around, panicked. There had to be something I could use to my advantage.

He raised the dagger above his head, and I felt a scream tear its way out of my mouth. So much for meeting a brave end.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Xavier roared.

Xavier stood behind him, breathing rapidly as he clung to the enormous chair leg he must have picked up in all the chaos. With a sickening *whack*,Malakai began to stumble, holding his head.

Xavier dropped the leg, rushing to me. He held out his free hand to me, and I lurched forward to take it. His grasp was familiar and sure as he pulled me to my feet.

The grimace on his face told me he was still weak. It must’ve taken almost everything he had to hit Malakai that hard.

“Thanks,” I murmured, craning my neck to look up at him.

“Guards!” Malakai shouted.

Immediately I heard movement in the hallway—guards were headed our way. The entire palace was descending into chaos, and the two of us were nowhere near capable of taking on all of the Bitterfangs.

Xavier was wounded and without his wolf, and my magic had been reduced to the equivalent of an off-brand Nerf gun you’d get in your Christmas stocking because the original was too expensive. We needed to find a way out before Malakai wasn’t dazed anymore and before his guards came.

I pulled Xavier to the portrait with the secret passage. It was likely the only place that the Bitterfang wolves weren’t going to be coming from, but they would probably be following not far behind. Xavier stumbled along behind me, his steps clumsy and slow. I wished I could urge him along, but I knew he was moving as fast as he could.

“I’m fine, Cali,” he ground out, as if he could hear my thoughts.

“I know,” I lied.

“Don’t worry about me,” Xavier insisted, picking up the pace ever so slightly as we walked down a narrow hallway. When the hallway forked, I took us down the left side.

Hopefully, we’d be able to move fast enough, but it didn’t seem likely. My only hope was that the alliance would show up and the Bitterfangs would all become so busy fighting them that they wouldn’t be able to bother coming after us anymore.

I looked back at Xavier. I could still feel the ghost of his lips on mine. Everything had felt so right when he’d kissed me in the dungeon—minus the whole “being in a dungeon” element of things. I didn’t know if it was magic or our mate bond or something else, but I’d just been overwhelmed by this sense of *rightness*. Like everything was finally how it was supposed to be.

Whatever had been keeping us apart—whether it was magic or something else—had ceased to matter. What I’d felt when his lips were on mine was real and honest and mutual. Xavier had kissed me like he used to—like I was the most precious thing in the universe.

And then he’d pulled away. I’d tried to ask him what the hell he was doing, and I’d really thought I was about to get an answer, but then we’d been yanked out of our cells and sentenced to a death match.

Talk about bad timing.

Suddenly Xavier stopped short behind me. I opened my mouth to ask him if he needed a break—that we couldn’t really afford—but he covered it with his hand. His other arm encircled my waist, and he pulled us both back into a recessed doorway.

My body slotted against his as easily as it had done when we used to share a bed together. The warm, firm shape of him behind me was so familiar. The delicious pressure of his arm around me, keeping me safe and still and close…

The longing I’d felt in the cell surged up inside me.

I’d missed this. Missed him. Had being held by him always felt this good, this electric, this right?

*Someone’s coming*, Xavier warned me through the mind link. *Try not to make a sound.*

I nodded, pressing my body back against his and staying as still as I could. All I felt was the tickle of his warm breath against the back of my neck. The press of his hand against my mouth. The tightness of his grip on my waist…

*Fuck*.

I bit back a groan.

Could he feel my heart hammering in my chest? If he did, he’d just assume that I was afraid, right? Caught up in the heat of battle?

He couldn’t possibly know that I was imagining what would happen if I turned around. If I threaded my fingers through his hair and pulled his lips down to mine—something I used to do as easily as breathing.

One of his legs was slotted between mine. I told myself there was no way he could feel the throbbing of my core, the way it ached for his touch. I swore to myself that it would go away any second.

Luckily, the rapidly approaching footsteps managed to put a damper on the mood. I held my breath and thought about being invisible as hard as I possibly could. If ever there was a time for another handy Fae ability to manifest itself, it was now.

Instead, the three Bitterfang wolves caught sight of us the moment they were in range. I saw their eyes light up with hunger as they charged our way.

I clenched my hands into fists, bracing myself for the attack.

But it never came.

Instead, I felt the ground give way underneath me, and then Xavier and I were falling.

**Episode 4363**

**Xavier**

The second I felt the ground start to give, I reached for her. It was instinct. Just as I’d been willing to die in a fight with the approaching guards only seconds before, now I knew I had to hold her. Had to protect her. Had to keep her safe. Even if I couldn’t love her the way I wanted to. Even if I could never kiss her again, or sleep next to her, or build a life with her, I could still save her.

Or I could die trying.

I held Cali tight as we fell, and fell, and fell. I looked down into the vast, black nothingness surrounding us. I couldn’t see the ground, but I pulled her on top of me nonetheless. That way, when the impact finally came, I’d bear the brunt of it. At this point, it would probably kill me, but I was willing to die to save her. If I’d survived the Bitterfang attack only so I could save her one last time, it would be worth it.

Her soft cheek pressed against my chest and, for a second, I was in bed. Her bed. It was the middle of the night, and I was watching Cali sleep, her lips parted, her face pressed against my chest, her breath tickling my neck. I hoped her dreams were sweet.

I blinked, and we were falling again. The light from above shrank into a tiny dot before disappearing entirely and shrouding us in complete darkness.

And then we landed. Not on the ground, but in warm water.

Cali was ripped from my arms on impact, and the air was knocked out of my lungs. I couldn’t swim right now. My body felt impossibly heavy. I knew I was moments from passing out, and far too weak to fight my way to the surface.

But then I felt arms close around my shoulders, firm and strong. Someone was pulling me through the water—hopefully upward. The air felt cool on my skin as we broke through the surface. I gasped for air, nearly choking on a mouthful of water. Soon, I felt something sturdy underneath me. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my vision enough to find—

*Cali*.

My heart swelled in my chest at the sight of her. She’d survived. We both had. She’d dragged me to this shallower part of the area all by herself. I longed to wrap her in my arms and cover her in kisses. To tell her about Adéluce’s curse, to find a way to make us into the mated pair we were always supposed to be…

But I knew it was a risk I couldn’t take. Just because we’d cheated death, that didn’t mean we were safe. We were still in enemy territory, and Malakai was still breathing. If only I’d been able to bash his skull in when he’d announced his little death match. But I’d been far too weak, not to mention terrified out of my mind.

And now we were lost, and I had no idea how we’d gotten here, or even why the floor had opened up in the first place. Fucking magic—it had to be. I could see why the Bitterfangs weren’t fans.

“Maybe Lucian had trap doors built into the place,” Cali offered, knowing what I was thinking, like always. “Or maybe they’re super old? Like secret passageways. Maybe by hiding in that doorway we triggered it, somehow.”

I nodded, less interested in how we’d gotten into the water than how we were going to get out. The water over here was below both our knees. Deep enough to lie down and be submerged, but at least we didn’t have to tread water where it was deeper farther out. I was still so weak, I honestly didn’t know how long I’d have lasted.

“Can you see anything?” Cali asked, the anxiety in her voice pulling at my heartstrings. I wished I could scoop her up in my arms and take her to safety. I knew that Cali was half-Fae, which meant she’d been born with one foot in the supernatural world, but in so many ways, I was the reason why she was here. The reason why she was hurting. I fucking hated feeling like I’d done this to her.

“Barely,” I replied, squinting into the darkness and only making out the faintest of shapes. “Maybe it’s because I don’t have access to my wolf, but it’s possible that it really is that dark down here. There’s virtually no light.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to feel our way around,” Cali said. “There has to be a way out of here, right?”

“Wherever ‘here’ is,” I muttered, reaching out and only finding more warm water.

At least it wasn’t cold. Cali could’ve gone hypothermic, and I wouldn’t have known what to do. The thought of holding her against me, her teeth chattering as she suffered, filled me with both horror and a guilty kind of desire. I kept my arm around her and felt my way forward with my free hand. I wasn’t willing to let her go. After all, we didn’t know what else could be down here with us.

We moved slowly, carefully. After a few steps, my fingertips bumped into cold tile.

“You feel that?” I asked, grabbing Cali’s hand and showing her what I’d found. “Tile. That means this place was constructed. Maybe it’s some kind of pool or fountain.”

“Well, Lucian never shuts up about how well equippedthis place is,” Cali said, and I could practically hear her eyes rolling. “I’m sure he’s told me how many water features there are,but I’m pretty sure I blacked it out.”

“Well, that’s just self-preservation,” I joked, unable to resist having a little bit of fun with Cali. That was the thing—even in the direst of situations, she could create light. Figuratively speaking. Literally, we were still in the dark—as was made painfully obvious to me when I tripped and almost ate shit when the ground disappeared from underneath my feet.

“There’s a step here,” I warned Cali through gritted teeth, feeling like an idiot. An Alpha werewolf, almost defeated by a step.

After a bit more clawing around, we realized that the water-filled structure was circular, with the occasional set of steps built into the edge, but it didn’t seem like they were really going anywhere. At least nowhere I could see at the moment.

“Stay here,” I told Cali, following the curve of the wall. “I’m gonna try to figure out how big this place is.”

I forced myself to let go of her hand, taking an uncertain step into the darkness.

“You still there?” I asked, hating the uncertainty.

“Yes,” Cali said. “Keep going. I promise to make a loud noise if something tries to kill me, okay?”

“Don’t even joke about that,” I grumbled, counting my steps as I made my way around the space, my eyes and ears straining for any sign of an enemy.

Instead, I found myself staring at Cali’s back, my eyes having adjusted a little bit to the darkness so I could at least see what was right in front of me. Her clothes were plastered to her skin, which left her as good as naked. The sweet scent of her hung in the air around us, and I longed to bury my face in her neck, to smell and taste her to my heart’s desire.

But we had more pressing things to deal with.

“I think the room’s about fifteen feet in diameter,” I told her, trying to keep my mind on the task at hand. “I couldn’t feel any doors or passageways. Maybe they’re hidden, like the one we entered through?”

“There has to be some way out of here. Parts of it are deep, but others are shallow,” Cali said, stepping toward me and eliminating the polite distance I’d tried to create between us. “Maybe you missed something. I’ll check it out, too.”

But she must have tripped over something, because suddenly she was falling into my arms and I was cradling her against my chest. A lump formed in my throat. Holding her but not having her, talking to her but not being able to tell her how I really felt… It was almost unbearable.

I wondered how long I’d be able to stand this. If the alternative was never seeing her again… I honestly didn’t know which would be better.

“Sorry,” Cali mumbled, getting her feet underneath her once more. “Tripped over a step or something. I just wish I could *see*.”

I heard her kick the water, frustrated.

“It’s okay,” I said, wishing I could press a kiss to the crown of her head. A little tenderness usually helped when Cali was frustrated. But I couldn’t be the one to give it. Not anymore.

“I think I should try using my magic,” Cali said. “The energy always lights up when I call it. Maybe it could act like a flashlight. Well, a flashlight that might zap you a little bit.”

“I’m game,” I told her, more than a little proud to see her problem solving like this. She’d come a long way from the scared, sheltered girl Colton had catfished.

I took her by the hand and led her to the center of the pool. If we only got one shot at this, it would be best to position ourselves to see as much as possible.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” I said. “Just stand back-to-back with me. We’ll see everything that way.”

She nodded, and we moved together. Her back was hot against mine. The water was swishing around us. She inhaled deeply.

And then there was a crackle.

For a second, her magic lit up the circular chamber. The green ceramic walls glittered in the moist air, and across the chamber, I spotted a line in the tile. And maybe it was wishful thinking, but it sure as hell looked like a doorway to me.

**Episode 4364**

“It really looked like a door?” I asked hopefully, turning around and wishing I could see it for myself. But we’d been plunged into darkness again.

My shoulders slumped as another wave of exhaustion hit me. I must’ve been riding high on adrenaline for the past hour or so, because this was unmistakably a crash. As helpful as my magic was, I wished it didn’t always take so much out of me.

If I could just conjure the light one more time, we’d be able to see for sure if there was a way out of here. But it probably wouldn’t help Xavier to have to lug around my unconscious body—especially when he wasn’t doing so well himself.

I heard him splash through the water, heading my way.

“I remember where it was.” Xavier sounded confident, maybe he could tell I needed some reassurance. “I’m gonna try to open it.”

He brushed past me, and despite the warm water surrounding us, I felt goosebumps rising on my skin. I bit my lip to keep myself from shuddering at his touch.

I heard Xavier straining to widen the crack of the doorway.

“Shit.”

Taking this as a sign that he needed help, I found a space beside him and started to push as well. Even though I could feel the fear writhing in my stomach like a bunch of snakes, threatening to crawl up my throat. I tried to push it down, but the fall, the darkness, the unfamiliar area… It was too much.

We pushed for I had no idea how long. Being in the dark was so disorienting, I completely lost track of the time.

“You’re sure there’s a door?” I asked.

Xavier took my hand and guided it along the tiles, showing me the groove. We kept pushing.

“I’m not strong enough,” Xavier groaned, smacking his head against the wall in self-flagellation.

“Cut the brooding lone wolf act,” I snapped, giving him some tough love, even though my heart was aching for him. “It’s a cliché. Now *push*.”

And with the next shove, the tiniest trickle of light spilled into the chamber. To me, it might as well have been a floodlight.

“Come on!” I urged, and we pushed until we had the door open an inch. It wouldn’t open any farther, but the light that poured into the room was such a relief that it still felt like a victory to me.

Now that I could see the place, I realized it was gorgeous. The tiles were all different shades of blue and green, mimicking the glittering ocean on a sunny day. But since I wasn’t here to *ooh* and *aah* over the craftsmanship, I turned to check in with Xavier—only to find him staring right at me.

He looked down immediately, but I’d caught him.

I opened my mouth, not even sure what I was going to say. Because what *could* I say? What did I want him to say in return?

Xavier turned back to the door, pushing fruitlessly. As distractions went, trying to find a way out was a pretty good one. But we both knew we weren’t going anywhere just yet.

I reached out to him, gently resting my hand on his shoulder. I still couldn’t believe he was real. Just a few hours ago, I’d been mourning him, and now he was here and real and… touchable.

“Maybe we should take a break,” I suggested. “You shouldn’t waste your strength.”

He turned to look at me—or, more accurately, to look at my hand on his shoulder. For a moment, I was worried I’d overstepped. Now that he had his own Luna, was I not supposed to comfort him when we were in life-threatening situations?

But then he met my eyes. He looked desperate, scared, vulnerable. I blinked back tears at the sight.

“We have to get out of here,” he insisted.

“I know.” I nodded, trying to let him know that I’d heard him. “But you have to conserve your strength. Think about it—it’s okay to rest right now. I don’t think we’re in any danger. The Bitterfangs clearly can’t get in here, or they would’ve followed us. Maybe if we let you heal a bit, we’ll be able to get the door open.”

“Malakai won’t give up,” Xavier argued, heaving his shoulder into the door.

It still didn’t budge.

“I’m not saying he will,” I replied, trying to stay patient. “I’m just saying that I think we’re safe for a bit. There’s no way the Bitterfangs know this place well enough to find us right away. We have a little time.”

I looked around the room. The light had illuminated a few steps nearby. If I could get Xavier to sit down, maybe he’d actually be able to rest.

“Shit,” Xavier muttered before lurching toward the opening and pressing his ear to the crack.

“What is it?” I asked, every muscle in my body tensing at the idea of having to fight in this dark, waterlogged space.

“Can you hear that?” he asked, his gaze turning inward as he focused on whatever it was that he was hearing.

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about, but then I closed my eyes and tried to let my senses stretch. And then I caught it—a low rumble. What the hell could that be?

Xavier’s hand closed around my wrist.

“Something’s coming,” he whispered.

And with that, he pulled me away from the door.

“Something?” I asked, annoyed by the squeakiness in my voice. At what point would I finally manage to be consistently cool under pressure? How many near-death experiences did a girl need to have in order to be able to put on a brave face?

Water suddenly poured through the crevice, flooding the pool. Xavier shoved at the door, trying to close the opening we’d created, but the water just kept coming.

“We’re not going to die down here,” Xavier promised me, returning to his search of the tiled walls.

I looked up at the ceiling, searching the darkness for the hole we’d fallen through. “Well, we know the door we fell through opens. But even if we found it again, how would we reach it?”

“Maybe if we can get higher up, you could then climb on my shoulders?” Xavier suggested, following my gaze.

“But what about you?” I asked.

Xavier’s lack of answer told me everything I needed to know.

“You are fucking crazy if you think I’d leave you behind!” I shouted at him. “I just got you back!”

“If it’s the only way—”

“It’s not!” I yelled, resisting the urge to stamp my foot.

“It’s worth a try!” he snapped, before taking a deep breath to compose himself. “There’s going to be a way out of here one way or another. If we can get you to some kind of exit, then you could go find a rope or something to lower down to me.”

The water had risen above my knees now. Time was running out.

“Fine,” I conceded.

Xavier crouched down, and I crawled onto his shoulders. The feeling of him being between my thighs again was comforting. Not in a dirty way—it just reminded me of all the times I’d ridden on his back when we were traveling. How I’d tangle my fingers in his fur or cross my arms around his neck while the woods flew by.

But this was different.

He stood up too fast, nearly launching me off him. He gripped my thighs, and my hands found the wall as we both struggled to maintain our balance. I looked down and caught a glimpse of his hand wrapped around my thigh, and, admittedly, the memories that flashed through my mind were pretty dirty.

*Cali, the plan!* I screamed at myself.

But I didn’t feel very in control of my thoughts as the water kept rising. Xavier tried to push me up, but he lost his footing, and we both fell. Next thing I knew, I was in his arms, and the water was up to his waist.

“Cali—” He started to say something but stopped, apparently losing his resolve.

“Are you serious?” I screeched, officially at the end of my rope. “We could die down here. If you have something to tell me, please just say it!”

Xavier opened his mouth, but the words didn’t come. Because apparently, even staring down death wasn’t enough to get him to actually talk about his feelings. I felt a sinking sensation, like my heart was dropping into my stomach.

And then Xavier’s hands wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me close. My lips parted instinctively.

He pressed his damp forehead to mine. But then he froze again.

“Xavier,” I breathed against his lips. “I love you. You know that. I know there are a million reasons why I shouldn’t, but I can’t stop. I won’t. Even if you’ve given up, I just don’t know how to.”

And even though he couldn’t say it, I *knew*. He loved me right back. But why couldn’t he just *tell* me? Was it Ava? His pack? His messed-up relationship with Greyson? But how could any of that possibly matter when we were about to die?

He grabbed me by the back of the neck and crashed his lips into mine. I could taste the love on him, feel it in his touch. The arm he had around my waist was crushing me, pushing the air from my lungs, but I didn’t care. I kissed him back just as hard, pouring everything into the kiss. All my anger and longing and frustration and guilt.

I kissed him like it was the last thing I’d ever do.

I hooked my ankles at the small of his back. I could feel him hot and hard against me as he kissed the breath out of my lungs. His hands gripped my thighs, keeping me in tight against him. I couldn’t breathe as we kissed and the water continued to rise. Despite our dire situation, I found myself wondering if there was time for more.

And then something smacked me in the side of the head.

A rope?

We both looked up. My jaw dropped when I saw Honora, high up on the ceiling, leaning through a new opening that had light spilling through it.

“Hurry up, before you drown!” she shouted.

**Episode 4365**

**Greyson**

I whipped around, searching for the spot where I’d last seen Lucian and Elle. I caught sight of Lucian almost immediately. His mouth was open in a feral scream as he threw a body against a tree and took off running toward a cluster of Bitterfangs gathered around Elle.

I felt the tug of the sire bond pulling me, but Ava grabbed me before I could even take a step. I turned to see her hand curled around my bicep, her nails digging in.

“Lucian can take care of Elle,” she hissed at me. “Palace is that way.”

I didn’t move a muscle, paralyzed by indecision. Emotions rioted in my chest. Fear for Elle. The desperate urge to hold Cali in my arms, to make sure she was whole and safe. And then there was the more bloodthirsty part of me, the one that wanted to disembowel Malakai as slowly and painfully as possible.

But, as always, Cali won out. I couldn’t leave her in the palace for one second longer than was absolutely necessary. I’d already tried to put everyone else first, and it hadn’t worked. I knew what I had to do.

I stole one more glance behind me and watched Lucian, Armin, and a few more Vanguards charge against the Bitterfangs. Their movements were swift, precise, and deadly. I took some solace in the fact that Elle had a strong team defending her. That would have to be enough.

But as I turned toward Ava and the palace, I quickly discovered that out of sight was not out of mind.

“Greyson,” Ava said warningly, like she could read my mind.

I didn’t know if it was the sire bond, my desire to be a good Alpha, or the obnoxious white knight complex I’d developed over the years, but I couldn’t just turn my back on Elle. Not when she was in danger. Not when I’d vowed to protect her.

“Rishika,” I yelled, knowing there was no time for pleasantries. “See if you can pull Elle out of there.”

Rishika gave me a curt nod before taking off toward the skirmish, her head down and her shoulders back. Ready for a fight.

“Greyson.” Ava tugged on my arm again, not even attempting to mask how pissed she was at me for delaying her. “Let’s go.”

I allowed myself one last glance behind me. I told myself one last time that the Bitterfangs were no match for Rishika and Lucian.

Ava and I ran in silence, easily settling into a pace that worked for both of us. Something about that ease felt strange to me. We’d never been close, but something had clearly changed. Maybe the shared experience of losing Xavier was enough to take away some of the distance that had always existed between us.

Ava had said we could help each other. That didn’t necessarily mean I could forgive her for the things she’d done to Cali, or to Xavier and Colton’s mom, but I was willing to work with her in order to save Cali.

But it didn’t mean I had to like it.

We slowed down once we reached the entrance to the tunnel.

“What do you think?” I asked, looking around to make sure we hadn’t missed any guards. “Take the tunnel or head directly to the palace?”

Each option had advantages and disadvantages. If we took the tunnel, we’d probably be able to sneak in and have the element of surprise on our side. On the other hand, it was also the most dangerous route if something bad happened—there was only one way in and out.

If we tried a different path, we’d have more room to maneuver. But I had to assume we’d be easily spotted by Malakai’s—

*Pain*.

Sharp and quick, like a bug bite.

I looked down reflexively and was shocked to see an arrow sticking out of my side. The tip jutted out just above my hip.

I stumbled. Whether it was out of pain or shock I couldn’t tell, but I swayed on my feet, feeling dizzy and light-headed.

“Does that look like silver to you?” I asked Ava, pointing at the bloodstained arrowhead protruding from my abdomen.

“Fuck.” Ava shoved me behind her and made a beeline for the Bitterfang who was holding a crossbow and peering out from behind a nearby tree. I watched him scramble to nock another arrow—but he wasn’t fast enough.

Ava wrapped her arms around his middle and took him to the ground.

Before I could help her, I was tackled by another enemy, and then we were rolling around on the ground, pummeling each other. Finally, we stopped rolling, and I was lucky enough to end up on top.

I let myself glance at Ava for a second, and I saw her choking her opponent out with his own bowstring.

*Guess she doesn’t need any help*, I thought to myself, just as my guy managed to get a hand free.

I tried to dodge him, but he popped me right in the mouth. I toppled onto my injured side and saw stars.

*Wait for your moment*,I told myself and went still. And then, right when the asshole was in my face, checking to see if I was knocked out or not, I spat blood in his face. Before I could even try to capitalize, there was a loud crack as his neck snapped.

I gaped up at Ava. She looked particularly proud of herself for saving my ass.

“You’re welcome,” she said pertly.

I pushed the guy off me. Fuck, he was heavy.

“Stay down,” Ava ordered, pressing her palm to my chest to keep me still. She tore the bottom of my shirt off to get a better look at my wound. I listened to the sound of my own ragged breathing as she inspected the broken arrow.

“If it’s silver, just go on without me,” I told her, wincing when she prodded at the arrowhead. “Make sure Cali’s safe, okay? That’s all I ask.”

Ava scoffed. “Don’t be so dramatic.” She spared me a glance as she gripped the arrowhead in her fingers. “Brace yourself—this is probably gonna hurt a fuckton.”

And then she pulled it through. The pain, the tugging, and the wet sliding sound the arrow made as she yanked it out of me made me want to scream. Fuck, I’d never get used to this kind of shit. But I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists and waited for the agony to pass.

“Gnarly.” Ava waved the arrow in front of my face, clearly deriving a bit of joy from my disgusted expression. “I suggest you stop spending time as a bullseye.”

The arrowhead was barbed, designed to rip and tear the flesh of anyone unlucky enough to find themselves at the wrong end of it. Lucky fucking me.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I grumbled, pushing myself up onto my elbows so I could take a look at what she was doing. Ava wasn’t particularly famous for her field medic ability, but I wasn’t in a position to be choosy.

“Well, luckily for you, it isn’t silver,” Ava mused, tossing the arrow aside. “But it did some damage.”

I could already feel my flesh trying to knit itself back together, but it was slower going than usual. That had to be the wolf suppressing spell, bogging things down. It hadn’t taken everything—we were still stronger than any human, and able to heal faster—but my healing certainly wasn’t happening at the level I was used to.

I hoped everyone was taking that into account and fighting defensively.

I clenched my jaw, bracing myself for the pain of getting off the ground. No sense in delaying the (agonizing) inevitable. I pushed up and immediately fell back on my ass, my vision actually whiting out for a second from the pain of trying to move.

“Woah there,” Ava said, grabbing me under the armpits and hoisting me to my feet with a grunt. “Good thing you’re an Alpha—a regular wolf would be out of commission with a wound like that. You healing?”

“Slowly,” I replied, trying and failing to keep the pain out of my voice.

I looked down at Ava’s hands, which she still had on either side of my waist. I looked up at her face, confused, only to catch her staring at her hands as well.

We both took an awkward step back, creating a very weird amount of distance. The heat of battle could only force so much camaraderie.

“Let’s keep going,” I said, trying to break the tension. I gestured to the tunnel, and Ava nodded, ducking her head down before heading in.

“Uh, wait.” I reached out to touch her before thinking better of it. “Thank you. For helping me. And for not running off to do this without me.”

“Sure, whatever.” Ava shrugged it off, but I saw the corners of her mouth turn up, ever so slightly. Maybe this was what it looked like when Ava softened. It wasn’t like I’d ever seen her good side before.

We headed into the tunnel side by side. As my eyes adjusted to the lack of light, it occurred to me that I might’ve underestimated Ava. I’d probably never trust her completely, but in some ways, she’d proven herself as someone you’d benefit from having on your side.

We continued on at a brisk pace, and I tried to ignore the pain, but it was still wearing on me and slowing me down a bit. I knew I’d heal soon enough, though, and hopefully I wouldn’t be a burden for much longer. I didn’t want to go into the lion’s den a liability.

“Is it getting darker?” Ava asked suddenly.

I squinted, straining to see up ahead of us, and realized that I could indeed see even less than I could before.

“Yeah, it definitely is. What—” I was cut off when we both came to a sudden halt. We hadn’t seen it until it was right in front of us, but we were facing a huge pile of rocks and dirt. I couldn’t see around it.

I swore. “This must’ve been a part of the palace that collapsed during the Bitterfang takeover.”

“Shit,” Ava replied.

I stepped forward to inspect the left side of the pile, seeing if we could make our way around it, while Ava did the same on the right. We both stepped back at the same time, clearly reaching the same conclusion.

We couldn’t go any farther. We were going to have to turn back.

**Episode 4366**

**Xavier**

I watched the rope dangling above us, a very literal lifeline. But something about it just didn’t feel right to me.

Cali reached for the rope, and I could practically feel the optimism emanating from her.

“Wait,” I called up, squeezing one of her thighs to draw her attention and trying not to notice how soft her skin felt. “We can’t trust her.”

“It’s not like we have another option,” Cali pointed out. “It’s better than drowning, right?”

The water level was up to my chest. Soon enough, I wouldn’t be able to hold Cali up and breathe at the same time. But was that a valid reason to trust the Bitterfang Luna?

I remembered what Lucian and I had overheard: Honora and Malakai arguing, her seemingly not condoning the way he was running things. I’d almost died so that Lucian could return to the packs and tell them. I’d been *hoping* we could exploit Honora as a secret weapon against Malakai, but I still didn’t feel like I had enough evidence to fully trust that she’d go against her Alpha when it came down to it. For all I knew, he’d been convincing her of his vision, and she’d had a change of heart.

“If you don’t climb now,” Honora shouted over the rushing water, “you may never get a chance!”

“How do I know I can trust you?” I demanded, not appreciating her attempt to force my hand.

“Because you’ll die if you don’t,” she replied, her expression unreadable.

Cali grabbed hold of the rope, looking down at me with pleading eyes.

“Honora doesn’t agree with Malakai,” she told me, keeping her voice as low as possible. “I think we can trust her. As much as we can trust anyone.”

“I just don’t know if it’s enough,” I said. The water was inching toward my shoulders. *Fuck*, we didn’t have time to spare. I couldn’t shake the worry that this might’ve been a death-or-death decision, but I had to go with the option that gave us more time.

*Hopefully I won’t regret this.*

Resolved, I told Cali, “Get on my back. I’ll carry you up.”

“What?” she said. “Xavier, no! You’re still healing.”

“Cali—”

“I’m *not* letting you hurt yourself trying to help me. Not happening.”

I suppressed a groan. There was the stubborn Cali I loved. “Fine,” I conceded, “but I’m going first.”

I didn’t say it out loud as I started my climb, but I was glad that at least this way, I could be the first to reach the top. If Honora had any surprises for us, I’d be the first to be exposed to them.

I pulled myself up, resisting the urge to cry out in pain. It felt like I’d broken every single bone in my body. Like I’d hurt parts of me I hadn’t even known existed.

Once I was about halfway up, I looked down to make sure Cali was behind me. She grabbed at the rope, but her hands must’ve been wet, because she lost her grip and fell back into the water.

I let go of the rope immediately, dropping back into the water. Cali burst to the surface. The water was up to her chin now, and she was coughing and spitting, but she looked okay.

“Are you hurt?” I drew her to me, checking her for cuts or bruises.

“I’m okay,” she said, clearly struggling to stay upright as the water churned around us. “Just slipped. Let’s go.”

I hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her close. Whether she liked it or not, I was carrying her up.

“Xavier—” she started, but I cut her off with a look. “Fine,” she agreed, wrapping her arms around my neck and clinging to me without any further argument.

The second her chest pressed against my back, all my pain melted away. All I could feel was her clinging to me, relying on me, trusting me. The rightness of it washed everything else away. This was how it was supposed to be.

Once I was sure she was secure, I pulled us up. Slowly but surely, we made our way toward the opening. Honora beckoned us forward impatiently.

“Hurry,” she urged, glancing over her shoulder. I hoped she was trying to ensure that we were alone, as opposed to checking in with unseen backup. But that was the next problem. Right now, I had to focus on getting us to safety.

Once we’d almost reached the top, Honora stretched out her hand. I extended one hand up to hers, which then allowed me to grip the edge of the opening. I pulled up with all my might—I had to get us out of here. With Honora’s and my combined effort, Cali and I made it through the opening, and we collapsed on the ground together.

“Hurry!” Honora whispered frantically as we scrambled to our feet. “Follow me.” She turned on her heel and took off, not giving us a chance to catch our breath.

We made it to a hallway before I placed a hand on Cali’s shoulder to stop her. “Cali, hold on. There could be Bitterfangs behind literally any corner. I still say we can’t trust her.”

Almost as soon as I uttered the words, I heard voices and footsteps around the corner.

I grabbed Honora by the throat and shoved her against the wall. My vision hazed over with rage as I tried to think of a strategy to get us out of here. Maybe I could take their Luna hostage, force them to let Cali and me go in exchange for her safety. But if Honora was really wavering in her loyalty, maybe Malakai wouldn’t care enough to save her.

“If you set us up, you’ll be the first to die,” I snarled in her face, satisfied to see her eyes widen in fear. At least I was making an impression.

“Quiet,” Cali hissed, shoving the pair of us into a nearby room and shutting the door carefully behind us.

Honora glared at me, but I didn’t give a fuck. I would do whatever I needed to do to keep Cali safe. I wasn’t about to trust just anyone. Not after everything I’d been through.

I even opened my mouth to tell Honora as much, but then Cali shot me a glare. Her message was clear: *Shut the hell up.*

I strained to listen for the Bitterfang troops we’d heard out in the hall. They must not have caught sight of us, because their steps were fading as they headed to some other part of the palace.

“We should go,” I told Cali.

“What about Honora?” she asked icily, raising a brow.

“We don’t need her,” I said with a scoff, wondering why she was being so naïve. I appreciated Cali’s kindness, but war wasn’t the time for it. “Thanks for the rope, okay? But you understand we can’t trust you, right? Why don’t you just let us handle our escape from here on out?”

I took Cali’s hand and led her to the door.

“You’ll never make it without me.” Honora spoke softly, but I heard every word.

“And why the hell should we trust you?” I asked, rounding on her, just about done with this fucking conversation. “You let your husband—your mate—try to kill your daughter. If that’s the kind of loyalty you show to your own child, why the hell should we expect you to be loyal to us?”

I watched horror flicker across Honora’s face and knew I’d struck a nerve. For a second, I even felt a bit guilty for hitting below the belt. But this was about Cali’s safety, and I couldn’t afford to play nice. Besides, I was only telling the truth.

I knew exactly what it was like to have a father who was willing to sacrifice his own children in exchange for power. If Honora’s lust for power was enough to turn her against her own child, then she was cut from the exact same cloth as Silas.

“I understand your opinion of me,” Honora said stiffly, blinking rapidly, like she was about to cry. “But you’re wrong. Why would I have bothered to help you escape the water chamber if I intended to turn you over to Malakai?”

*Probably because he gets his jollies from torturing people*, I mind linked to Cali. *And he’d hate to miss out on flaying us alive. Who would know that better than his partner in crime?*

“And as for Julia,” Honora continued, her voice wavering as she said her daughter’s name, “I love her.”

I laughed bitterly. I’d seen my dad pull that kind of shit before. A well-placed declaration of affection was never what it appeared to be. It was always just strategy.

“Well, you have a horrible way of showing it,” I told her through gritted teeth, longing to just get the fuck out of here. “Come on, Cali.”

“You’re in the heart of the palace,” Honora pointed out. “And the place is crawling with members of my pack, along with Northwinds, Ironwoods, and Hackberrys. Do you really think you have a chance of getting out of here without my help?”

“But why help us now?” Cali spoke up. “When we talked in the dungeon, you refused to go against your husband’s twisted desires. What’s changed?”

Honora looked at Cali. “I thought about what you said. About keeping Julia safe.” Her eyes flashed to me. “I won’t be party to you harming my husband. But I can help you escape. Both of you. But I have one condition.”

**Episode 4367**

**Ava**

I stared at the collapsed tunnel before me. And yes, part of me did want to haul back and punch the collection of rock and soil that was preventing me from charging into the Vanguard palace and avenging my mate’s death. But I wasn’t going to wallow about it. And I definitely wasn’t going to waste time on an enemy that couldn’t fight back.

If we hadn’t been separated from our wolves, we probably could’ve made it through the rubble. But without claws and supernatural size and strength, it would likely take forever—if we managed to clear it at all. Plus, who knew how far the rubble stretched? The rest of the tunnel could’ve been destroyed.

I turned on my heel and hurried back toward the entrance. Because as much as it killed me to have to move backward, it was better than standing still.

“Any ideas on how to get into the palace undetected?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Run fast?” Greyson suggested, jogging to catch up to me.

I led us back the way we’d come, going over everything I knew about the palace, hoping to unearth some hidden memory of a secret entrance. But every time I pushed myself to remember Lucian’s long monologues about “The Estate,” all I could think of was Xavier. Xavier scoffing at him. Xavier rolling his eyes while Lucian droned on. Xavier mind linking me so we could chat about literally anything else…

Luckily, a flicker of movement at the end of the tunnel caught my eye. *Bitterfang*. The woods were absolutely crawling with enemies who needed to be avoided and/or destroyed. And I was ready for the task.

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Chaos awaited us outside the tunnel. The two armies were meeting on the front lines of the battlefield and tearing each other apart, to the point where it was almost hard to tell who was who.

I glanced at Greyson, keeping my voice low. “Seems like it might be a good time to sneak into the palace—as far as distractions go, that’s a pretty big one.”

“I don’t disagree,” Greyson replied with a nod. “Let’s try to find somewhere a little less open than the front door, though. Maybe we can sneak in through a window or something to make sure we aren’t noticed.”

And with that, we started to skirt the perimeter of the palace. I tried my best to move quickly; to focus on the task at hand and not let my mind rest in any one spot for too long. I was running on pure adrenaline. It felt like if I stopped for even a second, the pain I felt over Xavier’s loss would swallow me whole. And what use would I be if I fell to pieces? After all, I was the only one prioritizing Xavier in all this. And honestly, I was doing it because I hoped that if our roles had been reversed, he’d have done the same thing for me.

I knew that things between me and my Alpha hadn’t been perfect, but Xavier never would’ve let my death go unavenged. If Malakai had killed me, he wouldn’t have stopped until he’d ripped off the bastard’s head. So I was going to focus on honoring that fact. Everything else could wait.

When I spotted the second-floor terrace, I knew it was as good a way in as we were ever going to find. I scaled the ivy trellis easily, and—based on the relative speed and minimal wincing he did when he followed me—by the time Greyson reached the top, he was mostly healed.

He smashed a window with his elbow, and I kicked the rest of the glass out of the frame so we could duck inside.

We must’ve entered one of the palace’s many bedrooms—although it was a little tough to tell, given how messy this one was. Whoever was squatting here—and it was clear from the scent that it was a werewolf—was a fucking slob.

I poked my head out the door.

“Coast looks clear,” I whispered.

“We’ll have to work our way down to the dungeons,” Greyson told me as he pulled on some clothes. “Cali’s probably being held—”

I grabbed Greyson’s hand and pulled him against the wall, cutting him off.

“Wha—”

I pressed a finger to my lips. Out in the hall, someone was walking right toward us. For a few agonizing seconds, the steps got closer and closer.

Greyson and I pressed ourselves flat against the wall as a Bitterfang walked into the bedroom and made a beeline for his dresser, clearly looking for something.

I stepped forward, knowing it was best to attack when we still had the element of surprise on our side.

“Looking for something special?” I asked casually.

The Bitterfang gaped at me, looking at me up and down. Based on the glint in his eye and the slackening of his jaw, he liked what he saw. Men could always be counted on to be easily distractible.

I took a step forward, keeping my gaze lusty. Perhaps the guy was stupid enough to think he’d stumbled into one of his wildest fantasies. But my feminine wiles must not have been enough to bewitch him, because a second later, I saw his gaze move from my chest to a spot somewhere over my shoulder. When he finally spotted Greyson, he cocked his head.

“Who the hell are y—”

Before he could even finish his sentence, Greyson was across the room and slamming the guy into the dresser. He knocked his head against it once, twice, three times, and then he was out. The guy fell to the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Let’s get out of here.” Greyson beckoned me to follow him out of the bedroom.

As we made our way down the hall in search of a way down to the dungeon, I had to admit (if only to myself) that Greyson had moves. He lacked Xavier’s technique, but the ferocity was definitely there.

We found a staircase, and I watched Greyson run down them steps two at a time. It was obvious that his main concern was Cali, but I was keeping an eye out for Malakai. If we found him first, Cali would have to wait. I wasn’t about to throw away a chance to taste his blood.

As I stretched out my senses, I caught a whiff of something familiar. Something confusing.

Xavier?

My eyes stung with tears. His scent brought back too many memories—happy, sad, angry, and worst of all, *hopeful*. My stupid body seemed to think that if I could smell him—or something that smelled *like* him—he had to be just around the corner, waiting with his arms open wide, ready to pick me up and spin me around like he used to when we were kids and we’d been apart a little too long.

But that was just wishful thinking. Right?

“Greyson,” I murmured, holding a hand up to stop him. “Can you smell anything weird?”

Greyson’s brow furrowed as he pulled in a deep breath. I knew the second he picked up Xavier’s scent. His lips parted in surprise, and his eyes widened, unmistakably hopeful. Apparently, I wasn’t the only idiot here.

“It can’t be.” He looked as flummoxed as I felt.

“Maybe it’s because we’re without our wolves?” I suggested, trying to make sense of it. “Maybe our ability to tell scents apart is diminished somehow, because of the spell?”

Or, even worse, what if Malakai had brought Xavier’s body here after his minions had killed him? My stomach churned at the thought of them carrying his limp body across the threshold of this gaudy place. I knew Xavier was dead. That nothing worse could happen to him. But the thought of his body here, surrounded by enemies and strangers… It broke my heart.

What if Malakai had desecrated his corpse?

I clapped a hand over my mouth, not sure if I was trying to hold back vomit or a scream. I wished harder than anything that Malakai would magically appear before me so I could tear him limb from limb and destroy each and every piece of him until there was nothing left.

Greyson dropped a hand on my shoulder. He didn’t need to mind link with me to know what I was thinking. My face must’ve said it all.

“Keep it together,” he murmured—not a command, but encouragement. Less like something a leader might’ve said, and more like the kind of hopeful support a friend would’ve offered. I felt something in me soften—but I couldn’t be soft here.

*Probably just trying to make sure you don’t both get yourselves killed*,I told myself. Believing that Greyson was acting selfishly helped me keep emotion out of this. Well, emotions other than rage.

So I took a deep breath and told myself it was all in my head. Xavier was dead, and I was here to get even.

But by the time we made it to the bottom of the stairs, I was picking up multiple scents. Xavier, Malakai, Honora, Cali—Cali’s perfume-y scent, I could’ve done without. The girl smelled like Bath and fucking Body Works. I tried to focus on Malakai’s scent instead. It filled me with a clarifying kind of anger. The kind that burned so bright in my chest, it felt like it had to be visible from space.

How would Greyson react if I just followed it, completely abandoning the search for the Redwood Luna in favor of revenge? It was probably better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

“I can smell Cali,” Greyson said, keeping his voice low. “Is it possible that they’d be keeping her somewhere other than the dungeon?”

I grimaced. The dungeon had seemed like a great place to start. But would it be a waste of time to search down there when we were picking up her scent in the palace above?

“Honestly,” I said, not having it in me to lie or push my own agenda, “if she’s still alive, she could be literally anywhere.”

**Episode 4368**

**Greyson**

If someone had told me a week ago that I’d end up storming the Vanguard palace with Ava and that *I* would be the one struggling to keep it together, I never would’ve believed them.

But the second I’d picked up Cali’s scent, my heart had started hammering against my ribs like it wanted to be let out. It took all the self-control I had not to just take off blindly, checking behind every door until she was in my arms, abandoning strategy, reason, and all of our carefully laid plans.

But all I had to do to keep it all in perspective was look over at Ava. Her cold determination and focus was oddly grounding for me. The weight of her presence, of our shared loss, reminded me that we weren’t just here to rescue Cali.

We were here to avenge my brother. And if we’d learned anything from Xavier’s death, it was that the Bitterfangs should never be underestimated. We had to be careful. We had to make all our decisions based on strategy and logic. There was no room for error, here.

No matter how difficult it was, we couldn’t listen to our hearts—because doing that would mean turning our backs on everything we’d done to get here. Abandoning the mission at this stage would mean throwing away all the sacrifices we’d made, Xavier’s included. We couldn’t afford to fall short of our goal when we were so, so close to taking these assholes out.

So, just like I could see Ava doing beside me, I pushed it all down. I told myself that I’d be allowed to feel all the pain and the longing and desperation once Cali was safe. Once we got out of here, I’d be able to stop thinking and just let instinct and desire take over. But until then, I had to be smart, and I had to curb the impulse to act before thinking. For everyone’s sakes.

We reached a sleek marble hallway, checking in both directions to make sure the place was clear of guards. The décor was part museum, part hunting lounge. The walls were decorated with portraits, animal heads, and even a few antique weapons. I felt like I probably shouldn’t breathe on any of it.

“I fucking hate this place,” I growled under my breath. “It’s too big. And it all looks the fucking same. It’s nearly impossible to remember where I’ve been before and which ways to turn. And I’ve spent more time in this godforsaken place than I care to remember.”

I couldn’t believe it, but I was actually wishing I’d brought Lucian. What a trio we would’ve made. Still, Lucian’s inability to shut up about the history of this place would likely have made sneaking in impossible, so it was probably for the best that it was just Ava and me.

“We’re still only at ground level,” I said, thinking out loud. “We have to find the stairwell that goes to the dungeons. If they took Cali there first, then we can follow her scent trail from there to wherever she is now.”

“You think?” Ava snapped at me, before stalking off in the direction my instincts were telling me not to choose. So much for our budding partnership.

“Ava,” I said with a sigh, trying to hold onto what little patience I had. “Can we please try this way first?”

Ava grimaced as she joined me, and we began opening doors. We found bedrooms, powder rooms, and rooms with no clear purpose at all—but so far, no staircase.

And then we hit the end of the hall, and there it was.

“Ladies first?” I asked, gesturing with a flourish.

Ava rolled her eyes and stepped forward. But before we could both disappear down the staircase, I heard a voice cry out behind us.

“There, look!”

Shit.

Three of Malakai’s guards barreled down the hall. Rather than wait for them to arrive, I ran right at them and clocked the middle guy in the nose as hard as I could. He crumpled to his knees, wailing in pain.

Ava and I squared off against the leftovers. Mine immediately feinted one way and then ran up the wall next to me, planting his hand on my shoulder and swinging around until I was giving him a piggyback ride. But I’d never given a piggyback ride to a person who insisted on punching me repeatedly in the kidneys, so that was new. I flailed around for a second, trying to unseat my attacker. My eyes flitted over to Ava—her opponent was about twice her size, but she was dancing around him.

*At least she’s okay*,I told myself, before clenching my teeth and running backward as fast as I could, ramming into the wall behind me. The guy on my back growled in my ear and tightened his hold on me, but I refused to relent. I slammed him into the wall over and over and over again until I smelled blood and felt him go limp.

I turned to check on Ava, and my heart lurched. The huge guy she’d taken on had her pinned to the wall. I saw her face turning purple as she struggled to breathe, but he’d wrapped his hands around her throat and was crushing her windpipe.

Someone yanked at my ankle and took me to the ground. The first guy, the one with the broken nose, leered at me, blood streaming down his mangled face. We grappled, rolling and cussing and grunting at each other as we fought. I saw Ava’s feet leave the ground, her legs kicking at the air.

I had to get to her.

I planted my feet on the ground and pushed my hips into the air, throwing my opponent off me, then I pushed myself to my feet and kicked him in the stomach until he stopped moving. By the time I could check on her again, Ava’s eyes were nearly crossed, and her arm was outstretched like she was reaching for something…

And then, quick as lightning, she managed to get a grip on an ornately gilded, bejeweled dagger hanging on the wall beside her. And before any of us could move a muscle, she plunged the blade into her attacker’s chest.

She dropped to the floor along with him, no longer pinned to the wall. She coughed and heaved and clutched at her throat.

“Nice work,” I said breathlessly, kneeling down beside her. After a few moments, I gently helped her to her feet.

“Shit,” she managed to choke out between heaving breaths, one hand still wrapped protectively around her throat.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she rasped. “Let’s keep going.”

And with that, she reached down and tore her fancy new dagger from the chest of the Bitterfang she’d managed to kill without a bit of help from me.

“Ladies first,” she quipped, taking off for the staircase.

Not needing to be told twice, I rushed after her.

When we reached the bottom of the staircase, I placed a hand on Ava’s shoulder, encouraging her to pause. That last fight had been way too much of a near miss. This time, I wanted to make sure we had the lay of the land.

Besides the slowly purpling bruises around her neck, Ava looked back to normal. Her recovery time was impressive as hell. Either that, or she was taking the pain like a champ.

“My brother was right to choose you as his Luna,” I told her.

I saw her eyes widen ever so slightly in surprise before she schooled her expression back into that of a hardened warrior on a mission. I knew she had to be repressing the hell out of everything that was going on as much as I was, so I hoped I hadn’t put my foot in it by bringing up Xavier.

But then she gave me the ghost of a smile and curt a nod.

“He was a smart Alpha,” she replied, before adding, “Let’s go find your Luna.”

It was weird, working alongside Ava to save Cali. There had been times when just getting the two of them in the same room together had been impossible. But look at them now.

Once we made it to the dungeon, we ran down the aisles, checking the cells for Cali.

“Fucking hell,” Ava muttered as we found yet another row of cells. “How many prisoners do they need to be able to hold at any one time?”

“Fuck if I know,” I said, hitting another dead end and turning back.

We hit a fork in the road, and I nearly shouted with frustration. This place was a fucking maze, and I didn’t have time to go through it methodically. I wasn’t catching her scent like I’d hoped to; it was weak upstairs, and down here in the dank, dirty dungeon, it was even less pronounced. Maybe our scenting ability *was* being stifled by the de-wolf spell. All I knew was that every second I wasted was another moment Cali was in danger. I had to get to her.

“Want to split up?” Ava asked.

I shook my head. “We’ve already saved each other’s asses—no reason to lose that advantage by going solo.”

Ava’s jaw worked silently, and I knew she was staying quiet because she disagreed. I just hoped she wasn’t about to bail on me.

“Come on.” Ava led us down a long, dark passage. Then we froze.

I heard footsteps around the corner at the same time that I smelled her—Cali. Just as I’d hoped, the scent was strong. But it was accompanied by another—Honora. I wasn’t sure who it was when they rounded the corner.

Ava let out a battle cry and charged. I watched her tackle Honora to the ground and raise her bloody dagger in the air. I lunged after her, but before I could reach out to stop her from cleaving the Bitterfang Luna’s head in two, another hand caught Ava’s wrist.

“Cali?” I asked, stunned. “*Xavier?*”

**Episode 4369**

I must have looked like an idiot, just standing there gaping at them. I blinked, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Not only were Greyson and Ava *here*, but Xavier had just stopped Ava from killing Honora.

I wondered if my body’s shock quota was just full. Maybe finding out that Xavier was still alive had maxed me out, and I’d just be ridiculously shocked by every new thing I came across for the rest of my life. Maybe nothing would ever seem normal again.

But one thing was for sure—if it weren’t for Xavier, the Bitterfang Luna would’ve died, just now. And, judging by the horrified look on her face, Honora knew it.

But Honora and I weren’t the only ones staring at someone in openmouthed awe. Ava, still clutching her dagger so tightly that her knuckles were white, looked like she’d just died and gone to heaven. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and her lower lip quivered like she was seconds away from literally weeping with joy.

“You’re… alive?” she managed to get out, her voice raspy.

Xavier took the dagger and offered Ava his other arm—the one that had, up until now, been wrapped around my waist—to help her to her feet. I shivered, my body immediately missing his heat. Ava took his hand, and he helped her up with so much care, it made my stomach hurt.

When we’d heard her battle cry, Xavier had held me close, shielding me with his body. But now that his Luna was here, he was completely focused on her. It made sense. But why did it feel so *wrong*?

Ava threw her arms around Xavier’s neck, carving out a space between Xavier and me like I wasn’t even there. She sighed, pulling back to give him a gentle kiss. I watched as Xavier threaded his fingers into her hair, cradling the back of her head as he kissed her back.

*I wonder if she can taste my lip balm*, I thought bitterly to myself as I watched them. Even though I knew it was wrong of me, I wished Ava were gone.

But then I felt strong arms pulling me in, and suddenly, I was pressed against Greyson’s broad chest. His arms tightened around me, and a feeling of safety and security washed over me. I felt him press a kiss to the crown of my head, and a surge of pleasure zinged through me.

Apparently unsatisfied with just the one kiss, Greyson peppered them across my shoulders, my cheeks, my neck, until I was laughing softly.

“Are you all right, love?” Greyson asked, pulling back so he could get a better look at me. “You’re not hurt?”

But before I could answer him, I spotted the torn hem of his shirt. I saw the dried blood and the edge of a still-healing wound. My chest tightened up at the sight of it.

“Just a flesh wound,” Greyson assured me with a grin. “Not like I’m back from the dead or anything…”

Greyson clapped his brother on the back. Xavier pulled back from Ava, and before he could say anything, Greyson pulled him into a tight hug. As the boys embraced, my heart began to soar. I considered pinching myself to make sure this wasn’t just a dream I was having in the dungeons.

But then I caught a glimpse of Ava and started wondering if it was really a nightmare.

“Come on, dude,” Xavier mumbled, clearly pleased with the reception. “You’re making us both look soft.”

“Terribly sorry to break up this family reunion,” Honora interjected, not sounding sorry at all. “But if you recall, you’re in the bowels of a palace currently controlled by several packs that want you dead. Some of you for the second time this week.”

“And what are you?” Ava demanded, rounding on her. “A hostage?”

“She’s helping us,” I told her, using my most authoritative Luna voice. “Remember what Lucian said? Honora sees things differently than Malakai. And she’s going to help us escape.”

“She’s in his fucking pack!” Ava screeched at me. “She’s his *Luna*. Don’t tell me you’re actually stupid enough to trust her.”

*I don’t know, you were stupid enough to think Xavier wanted you back when he was still in love with me*,I thought viciously, in the safety of my own mind. I didn’t say this out loud, because I enjoyed having all my limbs attached to my body. I snuck a quick glance at Greyson, paranoid that he could hear my thoughts.

“Ava,” Xavier started. “I’m not exactly thrilled about it either. But Honora *has* helped us so far, and none of us know how the Bitterfangs operate, what kinds of orders they’re given or where they’re stationed in the palace. I’m not asking you to trust her, but will you trust me?”

He clearly had the magic touch, because Ava actually *smiled.*

“Maybe you’re right,” she mumbled dreamily.

“If you’d like to make it to the tunnels before Malakai’s men find you, we need to hurry,” Honora told me, her voice low and urgent.

“You’re heading for the tunnels?” Ava asked dubiously.

Honora pinched the bridge of her nose, clearly irritated. “Don’t tell me you’re taking issue with the way I’m helping you escape.”

“About that,” Greyson said. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the tunnel is blocked. We were there earlier—it’s collapsed, about halfway through.”

Honora’s face fell. The fire that had been present in her eyes since she’d saved Xavier and me dimmed a little. I felt a gnawing worry start to eat away at whatever confidence I had left.

“It’s not the end of the world.” Xavier’s voice was reassuring. “This is a big place. There have to be a million ways to get out of here.”

“There are,” Honora conceded. “But most of them are heavily guarded by Malakai’s men.”

“You seem really broken up about it,” Ava said mockingly.

“Ava!” I snapped, unable to hold my tongue any longer. She was seconds away from breaking the very fragile truce I’d barely managed to cobble together. For a Luna, she wasn’t exactly great at diplomacy. Hadn’t she learned that sometimes being a leader meant having to work with people you didn’t like? I was working with her, wasn’t I?

“We might be able to make it to one of the rear exits undetected,” Honora said. “Most of the guards will have gone out to fight, so it’s our best chance. Follow me.”

We did, trailing behind her as she headed for the stairs.

“There’s a hallway that leads past the kitchen all the way to the back of the house,” Honora said, leading us up the winding staircase. “It’s likely our best bet to get you out of here.”

After a few minutes of tense silence—most of which Ava and I spent glaring at each other—we made it to the kitchen.

“This is as far as I can take you.” Shockingly enough, Honora squeezed my hand in farewell. “I’ve already been gone from Malakai’s side for too long. None of us can afford for him to get too suspicious.”

Suspicious of his own mate?

“Wait.” I held her hand in both of mine. “Don’t go back to him. Come with us. See your daughter again. We’ll protect you both from Malakai.”

The face Ava made told me that we were not unanimous on this, but I didn’t care. It was the right thing to do, and I was doing it.

Honora’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “I love my daughter, but Malakai is my husband. My mate. I appreciate your offer, but he needs me.”

“Enough of this shit,” Ava grumbled, clearly unmoved by Honora’s statement. She raised her dagger, the jeweled hilt glittered in the half-light of the hallway, and I felt something in my stomach drop. “We should take her hostage in case the Bitterfangs try to stop us.”

“But she helped us!” I cried, unable to believe that Ava could be so cold.

“Ava, leave it,” Xavier commanded her. “We can make it the rest of the way on our own.”

“And if she’s lying?” Ava demanded. “If there’s a full fucking battalion waiting for us at the back door?”

“Then we won’t be able to protect Julia and fulfill our end of the deal with Honora,” I answered. Ava opened her mouth to berate me for making a deal with our enemies, but I cut her off. “Yes, we made a deal.” I rolled my eyes. “And I intend to hold up my end of it.”

Ava looked Honora up and down, clearly trying to take her measure. Having been on the other side of Ava’s judgmental stare more times than I could count, I knew that Honora’s shoes weren’t currently a pleasant place to be. But if she was worried about the outcome of Ava’s decision, she didn’t show it.

Finally, Ava shrugged, lowering her weapon. “Okay.”

I gaped at her. I’d expected *way* more resistance. After all, she was one of the stubbornest people I knew, which was really saying something. Why would she suddenly change her mind? Unless she’d come up with some other plan…

Rather than accuse her of anything, I tried to keep my mouth shut and let Honora go back to Malakai in peace.

“You’ll keep your promise?” she asked solemnly.

“Of course.”

“Tell Julia…” She hesitated. “Tell her that I miss her. Terribly. And that I’ll never stop thinking of her.”

And with that, she was gone.

I felt Xavier’s hand at the small of my back, and I relaxed into his touch as he led us to the door. We all stared at it for a moment, readying ourselves.

“You go right, I go left,” Greyson said to Xavier, who nodded. “Ava, you go down the middle.”

“No.”

Ava had stopped a few steps ago. Her eyes kept flitting back the way we’d come.

“What the hell?” Xavier asked her, clearly confused and frustrated.

“Look.” Ava spoke only to Xavier, her expression desperate. “I came here to kill Malakai, and if I follow Honora, she’s going to lead me right to him.”

**Episode 4370**

**Xavier**

When Ava said she was planning to chase Honora down, I was already reaching for the doorknob—that was how ready I was to walk out of the palace and preferably never come back. But that was before I’d learned that my mate was dead set on sprinting back into danger.

My first impulse was to get within grabbing distance of her, and I indulged it. I felt Cali’s eyes on me as I lurched toward Ava. I pictured her behind me with the same look she’d gotten when she’d seen me reunite with Ava. Like she’d missed a step. Like she was hurt in a way she hadn’t even thought to anticipate.

And I hated that I’d hurt her. I felt overwhelmed by all the emotions that were wrestling for dominance inside me. The self-loathing over my treatment of Cali, the concern for Ava, the fear from how close I’d come to dying. It was taking everything I had to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

I let myself look at Ava. Her dark hair was escaping the low ponytail she’d made at the base of her neck and hanging in tendrils around her face—untamed, messy, imperfect. And it wasn’t until this exact moment that I realized just how much I’d been missing her.

To most people, Ava’s bared teeth, clenched fists, and steely expression would’ve come across as bloodthirsty and impulsive, but I could see the desperation underneath. She’d thought I was dead, and in response, she’d chosen to fight her ass off to get revenge on our enemies and make sure our pack came out of the war okay.

But it hadn’t been without cost. I could see the exhaustion on her face—the sharp-eyed gaze that only came when you were running on adrenaline and not thinking past your own survival and the survival of the people you were fighting for. I tried not to let my gaze linger on the bloodstains on her clothes, or the red and purple marks around her neck.

But as I put my hands on her shoulders, it was impossible not to compare her to Cali. To see her face in my mind’s eye once again. To think about how soft her skin had felt when I’d kissed her in the pool. How the wet fabric of her shirt had clung to her skin. The way she’d felt, pressed up against me, trembling with fear and desire.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of the girl I’d met months ago. The one I’d been unable to resist playing cat and mouse with. I’d never seen a girl look cuter when she blushed.

I forced myself to stop going down that road. I reminded myself that I couldn’t make the feelings go away, and that this situation was just hard. There was no way to make all three of us—four, if you included Greyson, which didn’t exactly feel optional at this point—happy.  Especially not with Adéluce still watching, threatening Cali’s life.

“What are you doing?” I asked Ava, forcing myself to return to the present.

“It’s obvious.” Ava held up her dagger, as if I might’ve missed it. “Malakai needs to die.”

“And you know I’m with you on that,” I conceded, using my most reasonable voice. “But maybe now isn’t the time?”

“But Honora can take me right to him,” Ava argued. “We might not get another chance like this.”

She was alight with energy—practically dancing on the balls of her feet with how eager she was to charge back into the thick of it. It was like she was itching to hear the starting pistol and take the fuck off. It was almost a little infectious.

“But you already got another chance tonight,” I reminded her. “With me. I’m alive. We’re both alive, and we both can fight another day. That hasn’t always been the case for us. Isn’t that enough?”

I heard Cali gasp ever so slightly, and couldn’t stop myself from glancing at her. I saw my own guilt reflected in her expression. Having feelings for more than one person had a way of tearing you apart. I hadn’t really understood that before, when she’d tried to explain it to me.

Maybe it was just one of those things you had to feel for yourself to truly understand.

Cali averted her gaze, reaching out for my brother’s hand. I felt my heart sink just a bit, and I forced myself to look back at Ava.

Ava, who hadn’t missed that look. Who didn’t even look angry about it, just resigned—like she was used to coming second place. In an instant, I’d managed to make things worse for both Ava and Cali. God, they’d probably both be better off without me.

“Ava.” I paused, knowing there was so much for me to say, and not nearly enough time to say everything she deserved to hear from me. But she was the one I owed. The one who didn’t deserve my disloyalty.

So I resolved to be the Alpha she deserved. Even if it was just for the rest of the night. Because she needed me by her side the most—I was the only one who could keep her from getting herself killed.

“I hate to interrupt,” Greyson said—if he hated interrupting that much, why didn’t he just shut up? “But we should get moving, either way.”

“I’m not leaving,” Ava insisted.

I sighed. I knew better than to keep fighting her when she was like this.

“Then neither am I,” I relented, stepping back so that we were all in a circle, looking at each other warily.

“You haven’t even healed all the way,” Cali pointed out. The concern in her voice had me itching to console her, too. “At least go see Torin first. You don’t want to fight Malakai at anything less than your full strength.”

Shit. She was right. I was better than before, but still far from fully healed.

“I agree with Cali,” Greyson said, and I couldn’t even resent him for it. “If you go see Torin and get back to one hundred percent, we might actually stand a chance at taking Malakai down.”

Ava didn’t say anything, but her frown spoke volumes. I knew she didn’t want to slow down. I reached for her hand and waited for her to meet my eyes.

“I know you well enough to know that the last thing you want to do is turn around when we’re this close,” I told her, stroking my thumb over the back of her hand. “But I’m the one Malakai actually killed, okay? Or almost killed.”

Maybe it was cheap to use my near-death incident as a way to save my Luna’s life—especially since I’d spent what I’d thought were my last moments hallucinating Cali and telling her how much I loved her—but if it saved Ava, it would be worth it.

“I thought I lost you,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Good thing you found me,” I told her, leaning in and pressing my lips to hers and trying to ignore the sound of Cali stepping away. But she had Greyson. I had to take care of my partner, now. I pulled away and stood shoulder to shoulder with my mate, facing the group. “I promise you, Malakai is going to die.”

I looked over, expecting to see Ava grinning at me. But instead, she still had that same sadness on her face. That same resignation. She was just so sure that I was going to let her down again. So used to it.

“Today,” I finished, refusing to disappoint her once more. “He has to die today. I know better than to make a promise to you all that I can’t be sure I can keep. But let’s try. Together.”

My brother grinned at me, his arm slung around Cali’s waist. He looked down at her, and she nodded at him. And even though I knew it was hard for her to see me with Ava, I could tell she was feeling hopeful.

“But for now, let’s get the fuck out of here,” Greyson said.

But before we could get out the door, Greyson hesitated again, turning to me.

“You’re *sure* we can trust Honora?” he asked.

Honestly, I didn’t know.

I knew Cali trusted her, mostly because she wasn’t as cynical and jaded as I was. I knew Cali’s optimism could come across as naïveté—I’d convinced myself plenty of times that she was too trusting for her own good—but where would I be now if Cali hadn’t believed there was goodness inside me, despite the way I’d treated her when we’d first met? Why *couldn’t* there be good in Honora? Even if she was mated to a homicidal asshole like Malakai.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, trying my best to be honest. “But once we step outside, we’ll find out.”

“Fair enough,” Greyson said, before turning to lead us outside. I got into position behind him, making sure that I was covering Ava and Cali.

Greyson flung the door open, revealing nothing but what looked like a straight shot to the woods. If we could make it that far, we’d be able to get to Torin. We stood there in silence, listening. I could hear the clash of some metal on metal in the distance. Seemed like Lucian’s weapons collection had been raided.

“Sounds like the alliance is bringing the fight to the palace.” Greyson glanced over his shoulder to smile at us, looking more than a little proud.

“Lucian will be thrilled,” I joked.

And with that, we crept toward the woods. There wasn’t much in the way of cover—just a few trees and boulders—but we took our time and tried to move only when we were sure the coast was clear.

I tried to be thankful that Cali and Ava were walking side by side in silence rather than fighting. Speaking of…

I turned my gaze on my brother. “When are you gonna admit it, man?”

**Episode 4371**

**Greyson**

“When are you going to admit it?” Xavier asked.

I side-eyed him. “Admit what?”

He gave me a cocky grin—the kind that probably should’ve earned him a punch. “How much you missed me.”

I forced myself not to wince. Xavier was trying to make light of the situation, but it had been a nightmare. I *had* fucking missed him, but I knew there was huge possibility that if our roles had been reversed, and *I’d* been presumed dead, Xavier wouldn’t really have cared. I could easily imagine him feeling relieved if I died, not grief-stricken.

And if that wasn’t fucked up, I didn’t know what was.

“Let’s not get carried away,” I said, shaking my head.

He snorted. “You hugged me.”

“You’re my brother,” I said, walking deeper into the woods. “That’s never going to change.”

“You seem pretty upset about the fact that you give a shit,” Xavier said, sounding amused.

*It’s probably because I doubt that you’d give one in return*, I thought, the idea already settling firmly into my brain .

“Whatever,” I said. I needed to change the subject. “So, how bad was it in there?”

“It got worse when I realized I couldn’t shift,” he said. “I guess the witches figured out the wolf-suppressing spell?”

“Yeah.” I shot him a glance. His expression was serious now. He looked back, in Cali’s direction.

“It was worse for Cali,” Xavier said. “I did what I could to protect her, but my options were limited without my wolf.”

I sensed that there was a lot more to that story, but Xavier wasn’t going to elaborate, and I sure as hell wasn’t about to pressure him into talking about his feelings. Better to discuss the whole incident with Cali later.

“Thanks for protecting Cali,” I said.

I’d spoken sincerely, but Xavier’s face twisted with anger. “You should never question my ability to do that, Greyson.”

It was funny that he had the balls to say that. His reactions to Cali had been extremely erratic lately—and often close to hostile.

I was about to tell him just that when Ava stormed over and grabbed him by the shoulder. “You’re still limping,” she said sharply.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “I’m fine.”

She scowled. “You’re still healing, Xavier.”

I tuned them out and slowed my pace to fall back beside Cali. Her eyes were downcast, and there was a streak of blood on her cheek.

“How are you feeling?” I asked quietly, taking her hand. “Xavier told me things got pretty bad back there.”

 She looked up, her grip on my hand tightening the moment our eyes met. “If anything, it made me even more determined to defeat Malakai. He’s a sadistic, evil asshole, and he needs to pay for what he’s done.”

The steely determination in her gaze was startling. I’d seen her like this before, but there was something more to it this time.

“Cali…” I slowed to a halt. “What happened before you and Xavier escaped?”

She shook her head and kept walking. I followed, deciding not to press the issue right now. She didn’t seem harmed—at least not physically—which gave me some comfort. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t worried sick.

“You need to head back to the pack house.” My voice was hoarse, but I couldn’t change that. I couldn’t act like this was any other day, any other moment. “You need to regain your strength and leave this to—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Cali said sharply, coming to a sudden stop. She didn’t let go of my hand, but she moved in front of me, blocking my path. “I’m going to fight alongside my pack. That’s where I’m meant to be. What I’m meant to do. Do you understand, Greyson?”

I took in her expression. I knew that look. I knew *her*. She wasn’t going to budge on this, and, despite everything, I loved her for it. The surge of pride I felt for my mate had me fighting the urge to grab her and kiss her, right here and now. How could I argue against her joining the battle when she’d be doing exactly what a Luna—what a pack mate—was supposed to do?

“I can see the wheels turning in your head.” Cali narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you going to try and stop me from staying?”

I shook my head, and we started walking again.

I could feel her gaze burn holes at the side of my face. “I *will* fight you, Greyson.”

I shot her a look, one eyebrow raised.

She huffed. “Fine, I won’t *really* fight you. But I will absolutely use my sword to threaten you in a very menacing way.”

I snorted. “What if you accidentally hurt me? I’m lucky I’m alive after that time you threw me out the window.”

She shoved me lightly. “Stop that!”

“Only if you promise that you won’t take any unnecessary risks during the fight,” I said.

“Would you coming to rescue me count as an unnecessary risk?” Cali asked pointedly.

I cleared my throat. “No, that’s different. Your life was in danger. That was very much a necessary risk.”

She squinted at me. “But the alliance followed you. Are you going to try to argue that raiding the palace was in the pack’s best interest?”

Her words gave me pause. By going to the palace, I *had* put Cali’s safety over the pack’s. And if things had taken a different turn, if we’d lost pack members in my absence, I would’ve failed as an Alpha. But I also knew that I simply couldn’t have left Cali in Malakai’s hands—and that pack wouldn’t have let me do it, either. We were there for each other, and that was that.

“I would’ve done the same thing for any other Redwood,” I said. “Leave no man behind and all that.”

Cali went quiet, but I could tell that she wasn’t buying my attempt at justification. Obviously, I would’ve done my best to save any abducted pack member. But when Malakai had taken Cali, he’d crossed yet another line, and if she’d gotten hurt… Well. I didn’t want to think about what I would’ve done then. I didn’t want to think about my anger, and how it was still brewing and boiling under the surface.

Cali suddenly stopped walking.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

She moved closer, sliding her hand up my chest. “Thank you for never leaving me behind,” she whispered.

My throat tightened at the sight of her vulnerability. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close, breathing in her scent. I wanted to memorize her in my arms like this, even just for a moment. We were making it through this, but there was still a lot left to come in this war with Malakai. I took in another deep breath, kissing the top of her head.

*Always*, I mind linked.

“Are you two done canoodling?” Ava demanded. “Malakai’s not going to kill himself, although we can always dream.”

I pulled away from Cali, turning toward Ava. She had her arms crossed over her chest.

“What?” she said defensively, registering my expression. “We can’t keep aimlessly wandering through the woods, Greyson.”

“We’re not aimlessly wandering,” I said. “The alliance was advancing on the palace. We should be able to find them if we circle back around.”

Cali nodded, taking that in. Then after a moment she said, “What about Honora?”

“What about her?” I asked.

“If it weren’t for her, we’d still be trapped in the palace,” Cali retorted. “We owe her—”

“Nothing,” Xavier said gruffly. He took a few steps closer, glancing between Cali and me. “We owe Honora nothing.”

“She helped us,” Cali said. Her jaw was set.

I made sure to keep my voice even. “She might’ve helped us at the last moment, but she also chose her husband over her own daughter, Cali. She hates the *due destini*. She’s just as much a part of the Bitterfang pack as Malakai.”

Ava shrugged. “We should just kill all the Bitterfangs and get this over with. As long as the witch’s wolf spell keeps going, we’ll have the upper hand. They can’t fight for shit in human form.”

“Sounds good to me,” Xavier said.

Cali fell silent, her gaze flickering from Xavier to me. Her hopeful expression made something twist in my chest.

“If we can spare Honora, we’ll do it,” I told her, trying to find the middle ground. “But you need to remember that we can’t trust her, and I won’t make any guarantees. Few promises can withstand the uncertainties of war. This is a kill-or-be-killed situation.”

Cali swallowed roughly, pressing her lips together. “Maybe we should…”

“What?”

“Maybe we should let Julia decide.”

I didn’t have the time to answer.

I heard a low growl, a few feet to my left.

I grabbed Cali and pulled her behind me, twisting to face the group of Bitterfangs that were charging toward us. They shifted into wolves mid-stride.

What the *hell*?

**Episode 4372**

*Wait… HOW can the Bitterfangs be shifting right now?*

Greyson had pulled me back, and was standing in front of me protectively. Xavier and Ava stood side by side, but his body was angled slightly in front of hers. The sight of them like that—him almost shielding her with his body, like he’d give his life for her… It had my heart aching. So much had happened, between us, between them…

The so-recent memory of him kissing me in that deathtrap underneath the Vanguard palace scorched through my head, demanding to be acknowledged. There was no room or time for me to dwell on my longing right now, though. Not when we were—for the trillionth time—about to be attacked by werewolves.

*But again, HOW are the Bitterfang in wolf form? The spell was supposed to last much longer than this!*

Dread washed over me. Did this mean that something had happened to the witches?

“If you can summon that sword, love, now might be a good time,” Greyson said.

He sounded unbothered, like he was talking about an otherwise sunny day being tainted by a cloud. The man acted like he’d seen it all—in a past life, he must’ve been an ER doctor or a mother to fifteen kids.

“Does that mean that you and Xavier can shift as—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Ava shifted with a roar. Xavier followed, both of them ready for battle in moments. Greyson only partially shifted, busy assessing the enemy group.

This was really fucking happening, and I couldn’t rely on my mates to save me. I was the one who’d insisted on staying to fight. I needed to pull this off, to help the pack. Going back to the house while everyone else stayed back to risk their lives was not an option.

I was many things, but a coward wasn’t one of them.

My whole body vibrated with adrenaline and determination, and I ignored the fear. The Bitterfangs were imminent, and I took a deep breath and stared down at my hand. My fingers tingled as I strained to call my magic.

The effects of whatever drug Malakai had used on me still lingered, and the anger I felt toward him burned. When my sword appeared, it felt more unwieldy than it ever had before. I was going to have to be careful not to hurt anyone on our side. But at least I’d managed to summon it.

At that moment, the Bitterfangs reached us, and Greyson shifted with a roar.

A second later, one of the Bitterfang wolves crashed right into Greyson, and he used the momentum to flip it over and onto its back. Moments later, he was on top of the wolf, ripping into it with his claws. At the same time, I spotted another wolf, preparing to attack Greyson from behind. I stepped toward it, raising my sword.

The wolf growled at my weapon, but just as I was to strike, my sword flickered once. Then again. And AGAIN.

And then it fizzled out, and I was suddenly completely unarmed.

*Oh, fuck NO!*

The wolf let out a sound that reminded me of a throaty, sick laugh. Before I knew it, I was being slammed to the ground. I rolled just as the wolf’s ferocious jaws opened up above my face. I scrambled to my feet only to be pushed down again, its jaws snapping at me. Without thinking, I blasted it back with my magic. But it turned back on me in an instant, lunging for my throat.

If I didn’t stop it, I didn’t stand a chance.

My body knew it as well, and instinct kicked in. A shield formed around me, covering my face as the wolf fought to plow forward and rip into my neck.

*GET THE HELL OFF ME!* I screamed inside my head. I screamed on the outside as well, abruptly realizing how truly fucked I was. Even if the Bitterfangs had still been trapped in their human forms, I would’ve been helpless without my magic. I held onto the shield and tried to summon a blast, but I couldn’t manage anything more powerful than a mild shock. Shit shit shit, this wasn’t good at all.

If anything, this only made the wolf angrier.

The sounds of fighting echoed all around me. I knew that my mates didn’t need me bothering them right now, but I seriously needed their help. I was about to mind link with Greyson and Xavier when suddenly the growling wolf was shoved away from me.

By Ava.

*What the—*

I sat up, panting, and watched as Ava pinned my attacker to the ground and ripped into it, spewing blood and carnage everywhere. Our eyes locked for a second, both of us breathing hard. Ava had just saved my life, and I was never going to forget it.

*I doubt she’ll let me forget it, either…*

Another growl startled me, and I ducked when a second wolf lunged for my throat. When it missed me, it pounced at Ava instead, knocking her back. The wolf was almost twice her size, and she yelped when he slammed into her.

“HEY, ASSHOLE!” I screamed, grabbing a sturdy-looking branch. “Pick on someone your own size!”

Adair had told me to always go for the eyes and ears first, so I swung the branch right into the Bitterfang wolf’s left eye. It stumbled backward in shock and fell right into Xavier, who actually *was* the same size as the Bitterfang wolf.

Xavier lunged, his fury obvious. I didn’t allow myself to wonder if he’d gotten mad because the wolf had attacked Ava, or because it had threatened me. It could’ve been both, actually—but that wasn’t comforting. And it still was *not* the time to linger on my feelings about everything that had happened between Xavier and me, back at the palace. But the sight of Xavier and Ava together felt like an oozing wound that I wasn’t supposed to acknowledge.

Ava glanced at Xavier, then at the bloody branch I’d used to potentially make the wolf’s eye explode. Finally, she looked at my face. I stared back at her, shaking and hyperventilating. She gave me a nod, and that was all. I figured that was the biggest expression of gratitude I was going to get from her, and that was fine.

I’d long accepted that any truce between the two of us could only ever be tentative.

*At least I already paid her back for saving my life.*

A roar broke my staring match with Ava, and we both turned to see Greyson clawing through the stomach of the last of the Bitterfang standing. When the wolf’s lifeless body dropped to the ground, he immediately shifted and turned to me.

“Cali!”

He rushed over, cupping my face. There were streaks of blood and dirt all over him, but he was focused on me. “Are you okay?”

I didn’t know if I was *okay*, but I was *alive*. And that had to count for something, at least. I’d been able to hold my own in the fight. I looked at Greyson, worry crossing his face, and I nodded, wincing slightly when my back twinged with pain.

“I’m still here,” I said, fighting to smile.

Greyson frowned, clearly not happy about my attempt to make light of the situation. What else could I do? It wasn’t like I was thrilled I’d almost become werewolf chow either.

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier demanded. “Why can we all shift? Wasn’t that supposed to not be the point?”

Both Greyson and I turned toward him. He and Ava had shifted back to human, too. Thankfully, they only had minor, already healing wounds.

“Cali’s right,” Greyson said. “Something must’ve happened to the witches.”

I saw the worry in his eyes—one of those witches was his mother’s fiancée.

“Or maybe not,” I said quickly, fighting to make things feel slightly less fucking horrifying. “It could’ve happened for a million reasons. Maybe it was just a temporary glitch.” I looked around at the werewolves. “Can you still shift?”

Ava partially shifted her hand. “Yes.”

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled.

Greyson’s jaw clenched, his grip on my hand tightening. If Greyson was stressed, what did that mean for the rest of us? I had to keep supporting him, and at least now, thanks to my training, I could. I could stand beside him in a war, as an equal fighter for the Redwood pack.

“Fuck,” Xavier cursed. “That was a Bitterfang. It was a call to arms.”

I looked between the two Alphas. “The spell was supposed to be the ace up our sleeve. The one thing that would help us combat the Bitterfang army’s numbers. Right?”

“Right,” Greyson said. He swallowed, glancing at Xavier and Ava.

“So where does that leave us now?” I asked.

Greyson’s expression was grim. “If the spell really has been broken, then we may have lost our advantage.”

**Episode 4373**

“We don’t need the de-wolf spell to defeat the Bitterfangs,” Xavier said. “We’ve defeated far more dangerous enemies—Silas, Letifer, the revenants, Seluna. Malakai is just another werewolf.”

He looked at me as he said the words, and I had to tell myself to ignore the way my heart started pounding. Could Greyson hear it right now? Could Ava? Did they know what it meant, or would they write it off as stress over everything that had just gone down?

*Shit.*

“There are so many of them, though,” I said, breaking my eye contact with Xavier. I looked between Greyson and Ava. “The Bitterfang pack is even bigger than the Vanguard, and we used to think that Lucian’s army was massive.”

“I agree with Xavier. Numbers don’t matter if you have the better technique,” Ava said. She gestured at the dead Bitterfangs at our feet. “We’ve shown we can take them out, we just need to keep being smart about it. Then it’ll be easy.”

I almost choked at her words. *Easy?*

I wasn’t a werewolf, and that sore spot suddenly flared back to life, throbbing as I took in the fighters before me. Ava, Greyson, Xavier—all three of them could hold their own in battle. But in this moment, with Malakai’s drug dimming my strength, I felt like a liability. My magic was flickering, unreliable, and I hadn’t felt so self-conscious in a long time.

*I did manage to help Ava, though*, I reminded myself. *At least there’s that.*

I wasn’t sure how much of that had been luck, though. And since Greyson hadn’t lost his shit over my lack of magic, I was pretty sure he hadn’t realized just how helpless I was right now. But did that mean I should leave? I still knew some fighting techniques now, and I’d fought in some battles way before I even knew I had magic. What would it say if I retreated? It just didn’t seem like a real option for me. I’d die in battle before I ran back to hide at the pack house.

“… no matter what, the Bitterfangs outnumber us,” Greyson was telling Xavier and Ava as I tuned back in. “Fighting without our wolves was awkward, but we were better at it than the Bitterfangs. We still might be able to defeat them, but it’ll be much harder than we anticipated.”

I definitely would’ve stood a better chance against them if they’d stayed human.

“We have to figure out why the spell was broken,” I told Greyson. “We need to find Big Mac and see if the witches are okay.”

Greyson nodded.

“Who’s supposed to be protecting them?” Xavier asked.

“Ravi and Jaqueline,” Greyson said.

Ava hummed thoughtfully. “Ravi is a good fighter, and Jacqueline is sneaky. They could likely hold their own.”

“Yeah, and for how long?” I asked. “They’re *two* people.”

My thoughts were running a mile a minute, and all the scenarios I was coming up with were catastrophic. *It’s not my fault we’re in catastrophic situations literally all the time!*

“Do you think they were attacked?” I asked. “That someone got hurt? Oh my god, do you think they’ve been captured and tortured and—”

“Love,” Greyson interrupted, squeezing my shoulder. “*Breathe*.”

I breathed, just because he’d asked me to. Because if I didn’t, I was going to run through way too many gruesome scenarios. What good would that do? For me, for them, for anyone?

Xavier made a weird sound in his throat. When I glanced at him, I saw that his gaze was fixed on Greyson’s hand on my shoulder.

By some miracle, Ava didn’t notice his reaction.

“One thing’s for sure,” she told me, her eyebrows raised. “We’re not going to find out what happened if we keep standing around here.”

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A few minutes later, I was clinging to Greyson’s back as he raced through the trees in wolf form. He was running in a wide arc around the palace, toward the spot where he assumed the alliance had ended up. Xavier and Ava were running alongside us.

*I just need to stay on Greyson’s back…*

I’d told Greyson to run as fast as he could, which might’ve been the latest addition to the string of mistakes I’d been making lately. But I could sense everyone’s urgency, and I was also worried about the pack and my sister. I needed to make sure everyone was okay. What if the spell had failed because something had happened to Big Mac?

My heart was beating so hard that my chest ached. As we got closer to the battlefield, I heard the sounds of howling and shouting. We burst out of a thicket of trees a moment later, and Greyson immediately slowed down.

I couldn’t believe it, but the sight of Lucian grandiosely addressing a group of Vanguard wolves actually made me feel relief. There were no Bitterfangs in sight. The alliance was gathered on the palace’s grounds, the palace itself still quite a ways away. Lucian was speaking loudly, an unharmed Elle by his side.

*At least I know she’s okay! One down… And the rest of the Redwood pack to go.*

“… are we to fall on our own swords?” Lucian bellowed, starting to pace in front of his soldiers.

“No, sir!” they yelled as one.

“Hah! That’s what I thought!” Lucian paused in front of them. “The Vanguards shall never be defeated! We will retake our home!”

The Vanguards cheered all at once before the sound faded to a collective gasp. Xavier had moved ahead, Ava a few steps behind him, and Greyson and me bringing up the rear. The crowd was focused on Xavier, all the alliance wolves in the vicinity surging forward to get a better look at him.

“It’s him!” someone said.

“He’s alive!”

“Xavier Evers!”

Lucian ran over to us once Xavier, Greyson, and Ava had shifted back to human. “Xavier! You’re *alive*?”

Xavier snorted. “Can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Lucian stared at Xavier with wide eyes.

“Is Lucian about to cry?” Greyson whispered to me. I felt the unexpected urge to laugh at his disgusted expression.

“Glad to have you back,” Lucian said gruffly. He pulled Xavier in for an awkward hug that lasted a couple of seconds before Xavier broke it off. Lucian patted his arm. “Truth be told, I would’ve hated to be the last person you saw before you died. It’s too great a responsibility for my sensitive soul, you see.”

“I’m sure you’d have survived,” Greyson deadpanned.

Lucian raised his eyebrows at him. “Don’t be jealous, Greyson. Despite our differences and how frequently I feel the urge to kill you, you are still my favorite Evers. My greatest friend, even.”

Before Greyson could process *that* little gem, the Samaras swarmed us, Marissa, Geraint, Donovan, and Knox leading the way.

To my surprise, Knox turned to the rest of the Samaras and shouted, “Our rightful Alpha has returned!”

Their cheers were loud enough to make my ears hurt, and I stepped aside as they surrounded Xavier and Ava. The sight hammered home what I’d already known—Xavier wasn’t a Redwood anymore. His arm was around Ava right now, not me. But hope was a tricky thing, and as much as I tried to push it away, it always came back.

And now that we’d survived Malakai’s ordeal together, my hope was more powerful than ever. The moments Xavier and I had shared, the kisses—that kind of passion and connection couldn’t be faked. We were still mates, and no matter how hard he tried to push me away, our bond couldn’t be erased. There was always *something* between us.

*But what? How can I allow myself to fall back into this vortex yet again?*

I’d told Xavier I still loved him, and he hadn’t said it back.

*Round and round and round we go…*

I pushed those thoughts away, ignoring the way they made my head hurt. Mace, Duke, and Porter had arrived, and they were conferring with Greyson.

“How long has it been since the spell wore off?” Greyson was asking.

“An hour or so,” Mace said. “But the Vanguards’ numbers helped to keep the Bitterfangs busy.”

“Where are the witches?” Duke asked, turning to Porter. “Can you mind link with Rowena and find out what happened?”

“I’m trying, but there’s been no response,” Porter said, his expression grim. “We went to check their last known location, but they weren’t there.”

“Have Jacqueline and Ravi reported back?” Greyson asked.

Thinking of the worst gripped me again. I didn’t want to lose anyone, but was that just a foolish hope? Before anyone could answer, there was a commotion behind me. I turned to see Big Mac, Rowena, Dani, and Kira pushing through the crowd. They were followed by Mrs. Smith, Ravi, and Jacqueline.

*They’re okay*, I thought, exhaling in relief.

The moment they arrived, Greyson stepped forward. The first question he asked was, “Is everyone okay?” The second was, “What the fuck happened to the spell?”

**Episode 4374**

**Xavier**

I still wasn’t convinced that using the wolf-suppression spell was the best way to fight. It felt unnatural, and wasteful, like using a race car to go grocery shopping. All that horsepower wasted. Same thing went for the witches—they could’ve been fighting out there with us. Instead, we’d been keeping them holed up somewhere, trying to keep that spell going.

The only positive was that they’d been far enough from the battle to stay safe. I was glad Kira was okay.

“I thought you were…” Kira paused, swallowing audibly. She’d rushed over to me just moments ago, her eyes wide with shock. It was like she couldn’t bear to finish her sentence, and that realization made my stomach feel funny. She gave a damn about me, and it felt good. No matter what, we were friends.

“I decided to stick around,” I told her with a faux-casual shrug. “The alliance still needs me.”

Kira nodded. Was she tearing up? Yeah, I wasn’t about to dwell on that…

I turned my attention to Big Mac, who was talking at Greyson a mile a minute. She was the only one who had any noticeable injuries. She’d already scolded Mrs. Smith twice for fussing over her and trying to apply a bandage to her arm.

“Sabine, I’m fine!” She huffed, before back turning to Greyson. “Anyway, the point is that even with Dani’s amplification power, we couldn’t keep going.”

Kira spoke up. “It ended up being a very draining spell. Not practical as a long-term solution.”

“And either way, we’d need to be closer to the target in order for the spell to be continuously effective,” Big Mac added.

“You were already close enough to get hurt,” Mrs. Smith grumbled, tightening Big Mac’s bandage.

I gestured at Big Mac’s injury. “What happened here, exactly?”

“A couple of Ironwoods attacked,” Jacqueline said in her usual bored tone. “Mrs. Smith, Ravi, and I fought them off, but Big Mac got caught in the crossfire.”

Greyson shook his head. “Shit, I’m sorry. That shouldn’t have happened.” He looked at the witch. “Were you bitten?”

Big Mac waved him off. “No, it was nothing. Practically just a scratch. We had it under control.”

Greyson looked at Kira. “If you tried again, how long would you be able to hold the spell?”

Kira shook her head. “There’s no telling, exactly.”

“We’ll cast it again,” Big Mac said. “But my advice is to just kill the bastard already.”

Her comment drew laughter and cheers from the wolves in the vicinity. They were mostly Samaras, but I spotted a few Redwoods pushing through the crowd, making a beeline for me—Jay and Lola, followed by Gabe and Mikah.

Gabe reached me first, his expression uncharacteristically—suspiciously—serious. He got all up in my face, and then…

The motherfucker *slapped* me.

“Hey!” I barked, rubbing my cheek. “What the fuck was that for?”

Gabe smirked. “Just making sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

I punched him in the arm. “You’re supposed to pinch yourself, dipshit, not slap *me*.”

Gabe chuckled, throwing his arm over my shoulders and squeezing me sideways, patting the cheek he’d just slapped. “I couldn’t resist.”

I glared at Mikah. “Get your man off me before I punch him.”

Mikah did as he was told—looking as stoic as ever—while Gabe winked at me. “You know you love me, asshole.”

I snorted at his words, shaking my head. My eyes shifted to the person standing behind him, and suddenly I was face-to-face with Jay. His expression was impassive. He said nothing, just pulled me into a hug. A real one—not the fake shit Lucian had given me earlier.

I hugged him back, and even though I’d never admit it out loud, my throat suddenly felt tight. I fucking missed Jay. I wished he’d agree to join the Samaras, but I knew that now was not the time for a recruitment pitch. He’d rejected me once before, and I had no reason to believe that anything had changed since then.

Besides, he and Lola were a package deal.

She stood next to Jay, eyeing me coolly. “If you’d actually died like that, it would’ve really fucking sucked. Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

She walked off without another word, clearly still angry with me. But I knew she cared, otherwise she wouldn’t have said anything. I’d done a lot to hurt my friends, yet they still gave a damn about me. That meant a lot. More than I knew how to express, even if I’d been allowed to talk about my departure from the Redwood pack.

I wasn’t allowed to say much, these days.

I glanced over at Cali as she hugged Artemis.

I couldn’t believe she’d told me she still loved me, back in the palace. It felt like a dream. How was I supposed to go on after that, acting like it meant nothing? If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that I’d need a fucking lifetime to recover from the few precious moments Cali and I spent together in that pool.

The words burned at the tip of my tongue.

*I love you too, Cali.*

*I love you more than you could ever imagine.*

I said none of it, though. At least this way, Adéluce wouldn’t be able to accuse me of anything and punish Cali for my disobedience. But I was still painfully aware of the fact that I *had* kissed Cali, earlier—twice—and I’d wanted to do a lot more than kiss her. Adéluce hadn’t retaliated yet, but her silence was only making the gnawing anxiety in the pit of my stomach more powerful. All I could do was wait and see what happened next. As fucking enraging as it was, Adéluce held all the cards, here.

“You’ve been able to heal since the spell broke,” Ava told me. Her words cut through my thoughts, and I turned to look at her. She was inspecting my arms and legs, looking pleased. “Finally.”

I gave her a look. “You really need to stop fussing over me.”

Ava rolled her eyes, but I could see the fondness seeping through her veneer of annoyance. She cared—and I couldn’t deny the fact that I cared about her as well. I took her hand and pulled her aside, a little farther away from prying eyes. I didn’t want Cali to see this.

I was fucking split in half, here—Cali and Ava, Ava and Cali. I couldn’t escape, and Adéluce was a constant threat, hanging over all our heads.

“The Samaras really rallied around you, just now,” Ava said. “Everybody’s glad to have you back.”

I eyed Knox as he spoke excitedly with Perrie. “Even Knox seems… fine.”

Ava smiled. “I know. They’ve accepted you, Xavier. Truly.”

Ava was right, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride. The only pack member who didn’t seem delighted about my return was Blaine, but I would take what I could get with him. He was lucky I hadn’t killed him yet, all things considered.

“I’m glad to be back,” I told Ava. I wasn’t lying.

Her bright expression dimmed, suddenly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The pack needed you when you were gone,” she whispered. “But I needed you even more. I felt lost without you. When I thought you were dead…”

Her eyes glistened, and she hugged me tight. Her bare breasts were pressed against my chest, her arms looped around my torso, her breath brushing against my neck. It all made my wolf rumble contentedly. I couldn’t deny the connection between us.

“Thank you for not giving up on me,” I murmured in her ear, taking in her scent. She pulled away so she could stare at me. Her eyes were still watery. I kept talking. “I know that you went to the palace to get revenge for my death, Ava.”

She offered me a little smile that made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. “I’m a werewolf, Xavier,” she said. “We thrive on vengeance.”

I pulled her in for another hug, swallowing past the lump in my throat, and I felt like someone’s eyes were on me. When I looked up, though, Cali wasn’t staring at me. She was stroking Greyson’s cheek, pushing his hair back tenderly.

My wolf growled at the sight, even though I had Ava in my arms.

Everything was such a fucking mess.

I wondered if Cali and I would ever get the chance to talk about what had happened between us in that pool. Did I even goddamn *want* to talk about it when Adéluce would no doubt be listening to every word? Where did we go from here?

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Greyson’s plan was for the Samaras to take the lead and attack the palace head-on. Fine by me. It didn’t seem like a good idea to have the witches try to cast something so soon after, but hey, I wasn’t in charge.

Gabe was excited, cracking his knuckles. “Let’s do this!”

“Hold your horses. I need to scope out the area, first,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes but stayed put.

Moving stealthily, I crept ahead, leaving the pack behind. I paused at the main gates, hiding behind some bushes. There were Bitterfangs everywhere—no surprises there. Even if I didn’t like not being able to shift, I hoped that Greyson was right, and we’d be able to outfight the Bitterfangs as humans and end this shit.

I was about to head back to the Samaras when I heard a noise behind me and spun around.

Andrew of the Hackberry pack stepped out from behind a tree and sneered at me.

“Xavier Evers,” he said, starting to shift. “You thought you could escape, but this is the end of the line.”

**Episode 4375**

“The Redwoods will attack from the east,” Greyson was saying. He’d used a stick to sketch an outline of the palace in the dirt, and now he was poking at it to explain his plan as he separated us into groups.

He knew which way was east and which way was west. As someone who got lost even with a GPS, I found that hot. I was having such a nice time watching Greyson do his thing that for a minute or two, I’d forgotten that I’d told Xavier I still loved him and he hadn’t said it back.

But then I met Greyson’s gaze, and my bubble popped. The groups had rushed off to their assigned locations, and it was just him and me left now.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Have you been listening, love?”

I said the first thing that came to mind. “No, but do go on.”

Greyson looked like he wanted to laugh. Or bang his head against a tree. In the end, he just said, “I was saying that I want you to stick with me and be ready to use your magic.”

Right.

*How do I tell Greyson that I almost died when we fought the Bitterfangs earlier? Like, in a way that doesn’t freak him out?*

“About that…” I paused.

He frowned. “What?”

Greyson listened quietly as I explained that Malakai had drugged me, and I was still having trouble with my magic.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?” he finally asked.

“Because I knew you’d tell me to go back to the pack house. *Again*,” I said pointedly.

He stayed quiet for a moment, taking in my face. It felt like I could sense Greyson’s every emotion—his worry, his aggravation, his fear. The way his fingers twitched made me feel like he had half a mind to grab me, throw me over his shoulder, and lock me up somewhere Malakai would never find me.

I loved him for it—I loved him for loving me—but there had to be another way.

Thankfully, he chose the path that wouldn’t make me furious.

“Let’s go ask the witches if there’s anything they can do to help,” he said, taking my hand.

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“That’s not how magic works—we can’t fix Cali while we’re trying to cast the wolf spell,” Big Mac said bluntly. She turned to me. “We’ve got bigger problems right now, Cali. You should go back to the pack house and stop making a fuss.”

I gasped. “I’m not leaving. I know how to fight now, better than ever before. Plus, I’ve already got some of my magic back—”

“Enough for you to reliably defend yourself?” Greyson asked. “Be honest with me.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but then Torin appeared behind Big Mac. “Maybe I can try to heal her from the drug’s effects—it’s worth trying, at least.”

Greyson took a step back from me, nodding at Torin. “Go ahead.”

I mentally crossed all my fingers and toes as Torin grabbed my hand and closed his eyes. I felt a tingling sensation that turned into pins and needles, rippling through my body. It wasn’t painful—just uncomfortable—and it only lasted for a moment.

And then Torin stepped away.

“Go ahead, try to use your magic,” he told me.

I could feel Greyson eyeing me as I stared at my hands. My heart was pounding—what if Torin’s magic hadn’t worked? This was a drug, not a wound. And even though I needed to be here, I knew that I’d only be a liability if I tried to fight without my magic.

*Here goes nothing…*

I called for my sword, and, to my surprise, it appeared immediately. I swung it back and forth experimentally, and it didn’t even flicker. Torin smiled at me, and I felt relief exploding inside me.

“It works! Thanks so much, Torin!” I turned to Greyson. “We’re good!”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

His expression was still troubled, and I wanted to reach out and use my fingers to smooth out the crease between his brows. I did just that a moment later, staring up at him as I said, “Let’s go finish this.”

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Five minutes later, we were on the move. The Redwoods were all in human form, and I could tell that we were all a little nervous. But it was kind of nice to feel like we were all on equal footing, for once—I was maybe even a step or two above the werewolves, seeing as I had my magic back.

“So you’re sure you’re one hundred percent okay?” Artemis asked me again. She glanced at Greyson, who was a couple of feet ahead of us.

“I’m fine. Look!” I summoned my shield, along with my sword.

“Impressive,” Artemis said. “Don’t do that again until you need to, though. Summoning magic can be draining—don’t waste it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I already knew that.”

She rolled her eyes right back at me. “Whatever you say, smartass.”

“I’m not a smartass! You’re—”

“Excuse me for interrupting your sisterly bickering,” Adair hissed, “but we’re approaching the palace.”

Both Artemis and I shut up. What seemed like seconds later, we were taking cover outside the Vanguard estate. The Redwoods were all watching their Alpha, and the tension in the air was almost palpable.

Greyson looked around at us and spoke in a whisper. “We’ll attack as soon as the wolf-suppression spell is cast and the Bitterfangs are forced to shift back to human.” He looked over his shoulder. Bitterfangs were patrolling the palace’s eastern entrance, all in wolf form.

I looked at our pack. Adair’s expression was ten times grimmer than Greyson’s, so at least I knew where *he* stood. Artemis already had an arrow nocked. Lola looked like she was ready to eat wolf for lunch. The rest of the pack, a few feet behind us, seemed to be in a similar kind of mood. I appreciated the vigor, actually.

*We can do this. We can win.*

“Big Mac and the other witches are secure, but they need more time to cast the spell,” Ravi said quietly, appearing at Greyson’s side.

“Okay,” Greyson said. “Sit tight and—”

A growl sent a chill down my back.

I turned to see a Bitterfang wolf several paces behind us.

A second later, he howled, alerting the rest of them. In the blink of an eye, the wolves near the palace gate were racing toward us. Artemis’s arrow landed neatly in the eye socket of the one who’d tattled, and he collapsed.

My heart pounding, I flexed my hands, and my sword and shield materialized. My first instinct was to stay put, to wait for the Bitterfangs to come to me, but then I saw two of them making a beeline for Greyson. They were both in wolf form, and Greyson was still human.

*Oh no you fucking DON’T!*

I’d already gone through the agony of losing a mate to this war, and I wasn’t about to experience that again. Xavier was alive and healed, but that didn’t change what had happened, and how it had made me feel.

I glared at the approaching Bitterfangs.

*Keep your filthy paws off my mates!*

I darted out in front of Greyson before the wolves could reach him. Despite the chaos around us, I heard his sharp inhale, and I wondered if he was as surprised as I was by my sudden desire to fight, to draw blood. I didn’t want to simply defend, anymore—no, I wanted to *attack*.

Something inside me had changed. First I’d thought Xavier had died, and then Malakai had tried to force me to kill him. I’d seen what I was feeling in Ava—the ravenous, insatiable need for revenge. I’d never thought *I* could feel that way, but the kill-or-be-killed reality of the situation had really started to sink in.

*Is this the person I’m becoming?*

I screamed as I swung my sword at the werewolf who reached me first. Blood sprayed my face like it always did when I used my sword, but this time, the key difference was that I didn’t feel any pity for the wolf that collapsed at my feet.

Only disgust and anger.

So, *so* much anger.

*Is this the person I’ve become?*

 “Keep doing what you’re doing, Cali!” Adair shouted.

He was right beside me, slashing at another Bitterfang with his whip. More blood and fur flew, but I didn’t stay put to watch or allow myself to linger on the idea that what we were doing could justifiably have been called a massacre.

I jumped over the wolf I’d just killed, keeping my shield up. I warded off another growling wolf, and—

*What the* hell*?*

The wolf tumbled to the ground before shifting back to human, already unconscious, thanks to the blow from my shield. All around me, the battle raged on. My pulse hammered in my ears when the wolves’ yelps of pain turned into human screams.

*The witches’ spell*, I thought, realization dawning. *It’s back on!*

With a roar, another Bitterfang barreled toward me, still in the process of shifting back to human, his eyes glowing yellow. Rage rose up inside me, and the wolf stumbled and fell as his legs shifted underneath him. I was about to plunge the sword into his chest when, suddenly, his eyes turned brown.

A *human* brown.

I froze.

He was no longer a wolf.

He was on his knees in front of me, and I had my sword raised, ready to deal the killing blow.

*Can I really kill a human?*

**Episode 4376**

**Xavier**

I tried to shift so I could take on Andrew—but I couldn’t. Fuck. The spell must’ve started. At least I’d expected this to happen again. Andrew, on the other hand, looked momentarily confused and then aggravated. He seemed to be stuck in a partial shift, and he was looking down at his clawed hands like he was trying to will them into working.

I scoffed, stepping forward. “You can’t hide behind your wolf now, asshole.”

Andrew glared at me, his face melting back into human form just as two more Hackberrys joined him. They had matching mocking grins on their faces, just begging to be punched. This was going to be a three-against-one fight, but I’d dealt with much worse as a mercenary.

*Where are you?* Ava’s voice echoed through my head.

My first thought was to ask her to come help me, but I didn’t like the idea of her fighting as a human against these men, all of whom were twice her size. She was a fierce fighter, that was for sure, and she’d shown she was good at fighting this way, but… I didn’t want to put her in danger when I could handle these sons of bitches on my own.

*I’ll be there in a minute*, I told her.

Her huff echoed through my mind as Andrew stepped forward. He opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it.

“First, you were hiding behind your wolf.” I glanced at the soldiers standing behind him. “Now, you’re hiding behind your little friends. Sad, really.”

Andrew growled—it definitely didn’t have the same effect as it would’ve had, coming from his wolf. His hands were fisted at his sides. “I don’t know what magic bullshit you’re using to stop us from shifting, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll kill you with my bare hands!”

I stayed back, crossing my arms. “Give it your best shot. You won’t be the first or the last to make that mistake.” I glanced at his friends again. “At least you were smart enough to bring backup.”

Andrew snarled, turning to glare at the other two Hackberrys. “Stay out of this! It’s between me and the Samara Alpha.”

The Hackberrys glared at me but nodded their agreement before Andrew turned to me again.

“Better?” he snapped, his voice deep and guttural, like he was trying to intimidate me.

“Bring it on, big guy,” I said mockingly.

With an enraged scream, Andrew charged at me—exactly like I knew he would. I braced myself, waiting till the last second before shifting my weight and ducking, simultaneously punching Andrew in the jaw with a sharp left hook.

Pain throbbed through my hand, but I’d fought through much worse. This was child’s play—and the satisfaction I felt when Andrew stumbled back in shock and pain made everything worth it. He snarled again before lunging forward.

I used the exact same move over and over again—duck and punch—hoping to tire him out, make him lose steam. He was big and strong, but he wasn’t a skilled fighter. When he finally managed to shove me to the ground, I knew I had to get on top before he crushed me with his weight. I managed it easily—I was faster than him, more agile, and this wasn’t my first rodeo.

I slammed him back down onto the ground, my knees on either side of his torso. He fought to tug my hands away from his throat. I wanted to get an arm around his neck—to snap it and put a quick end to this. The other two Hackberrys had been cheering on Andrew, but they were quiet, now.

I wondered what they’d do when I killed their Alpha right in front of them.

Probably turn tail and run.

“It’s over,” I hissed, shifting my grip to both sides of Andrew’s jaw. I’d be able to snap his neck this way, too. It would probably be easier. “Malakai’s next, and then this fucking farce is going to be—”

Two sets of hands grabbed at my shoulders, pulling me back. The other two Hackberrys had joined the fight. So much for Andrew making it one-on-one. But if this was how he wanted to play it, so be it.

I elbowed one Hackberry in the stomach and threw the other over my shoulder, kicking him in the face when he hit the ground. The sound of human bones breaking had never been so fucking satisfying.

I turned to charge at Andrew again, but before I could, two more Hackberrys grabbed me, and a third punched me in the stomach. My breath caught, but I still laughed.

“Six against one?” I spat. “This is what your Alpha stands for?”

Andrew growled, stomping over. He shoved the Hackberry who’d hit me in the stomach away and glared at me with real hatred in his eyes. “This is what happens to brand-new Alphas who talk shit!”

He punched me in the face, in the stomach, in the chest, using me like a punching bag, cussing me out at the same time.

I absorbed blow after blow till my vision blurred and my ears were ringing.

When I spat out a mouthful of blood, it was right into his face.

“Get the fuck away from my Alpha!” Ava’s enraged shout cut through the sound of the Hackberrys’ jeering, and they all tensed.

Blood dripped down my forehead and into my eyes, obscuring my vision. But I could just make out Ava as she attacked Andrew, jumping on his shoulders and raking her nails over his face. She went right for his eyes, clawing at them, and Andrew screamed.

The two Hackberrys who were holding me down were suddenly hesitant, their grip on me loosening as they watched Ava ripping into their Alpha—and that was enough for me to break free. I punched the smaller man in the gut, driving him into a tree, then did a reverse spin kick that sent the other one stumbling backward.

The other two Hackberrys from earlier had recovered enough to charge at me again, but I fought my way through them, determined to get to Ava. She was still clinging to Andrew’s back, still drawing blood with the kind of unrelenting menace that deserved an award. I wished I could sit back and pick up some popcorn, just enjoy the spectacle of Andrew screaming and Ava tearing into his face like a wildcat. There was something deeply primitive and pleasurable about seeing my mate go all Luna on this idiot.

But I couldn’t risk Andrew turning the tables on Ava—she was so much smaller than him that his arm was thicker than her thigh. The last thing I wanted was to see that arm wrapped around Ava’s throat. If he managed to push her off and onto the ground, there’d be nothing to keep him from stomping on her like a rabid beast.

The last Hackberry standing between me and Ava glared at me. He was swaying on his feet, panting hard. Cuts and bruises from my fists had formed all over him. The son of a bitch was in the mood for a chat. Too bad I wasn’t the friendly sort.

“You and your brother will never—”

I slammed my fist into his mouth before he could finish his sentence. There was a satisfying crunching sound, then the guy fell to the ground, and I looked around to make sure that all the extra Hackberrys were down.

“It’s over, Andrew!” I snarled.

He was flailing like a wounded animal, Ava still on his back. Her human nails looked like claws, and her face was full of rage and determination as she just kept going for it. No matter how hard Andrew fought to peel her off of him, she wouldn’t budge.

He was wailing, and she screamed at him. “I’m not gonna stop until you get on your fucking knees, you little bitch!”

I had to work hard to keep myself from laughing.

Refocusing, I charged forward, ready to pull Ava off him and get this over with. But then Ava bit into his neck, with human teeth that still managed to look razor-sharp. He let out a cry of pain and thrashed backward into a tree.

Then there was a cracking sound that made my stomach drop.

Ava’s eyes widened, her mouth falling open into an “O.” Her arms went limp around Andrew’s neck, a gasp rushing out of her.

“Ava!” I shouted, running over as a weeping, trembling Andrew threw himself away from her. He dropped to the ground, crawling away on his hands and knees. He kept screaming that all he could see was blood, that that bitch had blinded him, that the Samaras would pay for what they’d done.

Ava hadn’t fallen with him.

She looked down at herself, her eyes still wide, her mouth still open.

She was hanging off the ground, dangling in the air, impaled on a tree branch.

**Episode 4377**

The man trembled as he stared up at me. My sword was still raised, ready to fall.

*Is this who I’ve become?*

“Please, Redwood Luna,” he begged. “Don’t—”

*SNAP!*

The sound was loud and sharp, like lightning. I didn’t even have the time to blink before the man was yanked back by an energy whip and slammed to the ground. I gasped when Adair stepped over the lifeless Bitterfang. His face was like ice. His magic whip crackled, then faded away.

“He was a man,” I choked out. “He—”

“He was about to stab you in the gut,” Adair snapped, kicking at the Bitterfang’s hand. Sure enough, a knife lay inches away from his fingers.

I felt sick to my stomach.

“It shouldn’t matter if your enemy is wolf or man,” Adair said. “Either one will try to kill you. At the end of the day, they are still your enemy. Do you understand, Cali?”

My voice sounded hoarse. “I don’t know if I can—”

“If you hesitate in a situation like that, it could mean your death.” Adair sounded matter-of-fact and relentless, like I’d always known him to be.

I glanced at the dead man. His lifeless eyes were still open. It looked like he was staring at me.

*He’s dead because of me…*

No. He was dead because he was a Bitterfang. But even though I knew that was the truth, my stomach still twisted, and I looked away from the body.

“Cali…” Adair put a hand on my shoulder. His tone was softer now. “I’ve seen you fight. Don’t let your feelings negate all that you’ve become.”

My eyes felt scratchy. “What is it that I’ve become? A killer?”

It felt like my pulse slowed as I waited for Adair’s response. But it didn’t come. Instead, he lunged forward and—

*SNAP!*

The lunging Bitterfang crashed to the ground, and Adair’s whip flared. Another man was dead, and Adair had been the one to do it. But his answer to my question said otherwise.

“I’m not a killer,” he told me. “*You’re* not a killer. You’re a fighter who knows it’s kill or be killed.”

With that, he charged forward. He took on two Bitterfangs at once, covering for me as I let his words sink in. I absolutely could’ve been killed, just now. Adair was right about that. I’d been distracted because my attacker had started to look more human than monster.

*But… Where do I go from here?*

“Cali!” Artemis’s voice cut through my thoughts. She grabbed my arms, shaking me roughly. “What the hell are you doing? Fight, dammit!”

I snapped out of it and nodded, pushing Artemis away. She grabbed another arrow and shot it at a Bitterfang who’d been running toward us. I summoned my shield.

Seconds later, I used it to knock a Bitterfang away from Lola, and she kicked him so hard in the face that he went flying backward. She kept on kicking, clearly furious, her menace reminding me of the hunger I’d felt only a few moments earlier.

I’d wanted to make Malakai and the Bitterfangs pay for what they’d done to Xavier and me. I needed to get back to that mindset. I needed to use that rage to propel myself forward, without any hesitation or fear over the parts of myself that I’d lost. I needed to remind myself that I wasn’t losing myself right now. I was saving myself.

I was saving my pack, the people I loved.

My magic was a weapon, and right now, using it was the right thing to do—even if it meant going down a road I’d never walked before. It was scary and fucked-up, but recalling the pain of losing Xavier because of the Bitterfangs rekindled my rage.

It also made me want to check on Greyson.

*Where is he? If anyone’s touched a hair on his head, I swear to—*

I spotted him a few yards away, fighting a Bitterfang. Before I could remind myself that Greyson could handle this, that Greyson was the Alpha, that he used to get paid to fight people, I darted forward to help him.

The moment Greyson shoved the guy back, I summoned a blast of magic that sent the Bitterfang flying back twenty feet. Greyson turned to me, panting. A half-smile formed on his mouth, and that small, beautiful thing in the middle of all this ugliness suddenly made me want to cry.

“Nice catch, love,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Greyson!” Rishika shouted from behind me, and he turned toward her. He grabbed and kissed the side of my head before rushing off, shouting, “I trust you. Keep going, just like that!”

And so I did.

I blasted a man away from Jay, and Jay snapped his neck.

I slammed my shield into a man’s head and knocked him out, only for Sage to push a knife through his throat.

I didn’t kill, but I helped the others to kill, because the Bitterfangs would kill us without hesitation.

Eventually, though, I realized that simply helping wasn’t going to be enough.

Suddenly hyperventilating, I looked around for Greyson. A wild, disturbing thought entered my head. If I was going to kill a person, a real person—if I was going to be forced into it—I wanted it to happen while I was protecting Greyson.

I wanted to make it worthwhile.

But the truth was, the Bitterfangs were still werewolves trying to kill me. They might’ve been in their human form, but that wasn’t going to stop them. As wolves they wouldn’t hesitate to kill me, and as humans they wouldn’t hesitate either.

I needed to protect the man I loved no matter what.

But I didn’t get a chance to do any of that, because at that moment, someone grabbed me from behind, yanking me backward and throwing me to the ground.

A Bitterfang man with wild, red-rimmed blue eyes raised a sharp blade over my chest. His teeth were bared, his breathing heavy. A guttural, animal sound vibrated through him.

“It’s over, bitch!” he snarled.

I summoned my shield again, knocking him off me. It didn’t even seem to faze him, though. He recovered immediately and lunged forward, his knife raised as he screamed, “Every single Redwood will die today!”

This time, I summoned my sword.

My magic moved before I made the decision, as if it knew what it was meant to do. The man’s wide eyes became impossibly wider when he looked down between us—staring at the glowing sword that had just sprung to life, surging through his chest in the process.

The man dropped his knife before falling to the ground with a thud.

I scrambled backward in shock, my sword blinking away.

*Shit. That was too close.*

I turned away just as another man, bigger than the last one, threw himself on top of me, pinning me to the ground. And then his hands were around my neck.

I couldn’t breathe.

*I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe. This is…*

This was who I’d become—a writhing body on the ground, unable to reach for my magic as the pain and lack of oxygen overwhelmed me, lessened me, turned me into nothing. To the killer hovering above me, I was nothing.

I choked, fighting for air, spots clouding my vision. My ears rang with his laughter, his monstrous face fading away as my vision blurred, until it almost looked like…

*A halo.*

A purple halo grew around his head.

It started there and spread; a strange, otherworldly glow that slowly engulfed the man’s body. His grip on my neck loosened. Suddenly, I could breathe, I could hear, I could see again. But that meant I could experience the sickening sound of tearing flesh and breaking bone, the stench of blood, the sight of my attacker flailing and falling to the side, shaking uncontrollably as he fell apart at the seams like a broken doll, and then—

And then he exploded.

He exploded into a shredded, bloodied pulp.

Red everywhere.

I screamed.

I retched and gagged, scrambling to get away from him, to get the fuck away, to get all that fucking *red* off me. And then I was sobbing, but I wasn’t alone.

Torin was with me.

He was crying, too.

“Cali, I’m here! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

At the sight of Torin’s tears, his sorrow, all the blood on him, I remembered. I remembered how Torin could not only heal, but he could reverse heal—he could use his magic to open wounds, even those from long ago. I remembered how much he hated it when he was forced to use his magic that way. I feared for him now, and I wondered if he’d hate himself for it.

For the person he had become.

“I’m so sorry,” Torin whispered, hugging me tight.

I’d stopped crying. I was alive.

“That man wanted to kill me.” My throat hurt when I spoke. “But you saved me. Like last time.”

Torin still had more tears to shed. I wiped his wet cheeks.

“Thank you, Torin,” I said.

He whispered, “I can’t lose another friend to war.”

I thought of Astrid, and my eyes burned.

“Torin!” Xavier came running up, his expression horrified. Ava was on his back, bloodied and groaning. “Help!”

Torin stood up, just as yet another Bitterfang appeared and charged toward us. He was in wolf form.

*The spell! It’s stopped working again!*

I raised my hands, ready to summon my shield, ready to protect Torin—and myself as well. But I was shaking. My hands, palms, forearms—every bare inch of skin I could see was covered in blood.

*This is who I’ve become.*

My magic was frozen.

“No!” Torin shouted.

Before I realized what was happening, he’d thrown himself in front of me. The wolf roared, bucking Torin away, sending him flying. It was like my friend suddenly had no weight to him, no substance. When he slammed into a tree, it didn’t even shudder.

“Get away from him!” I screamed, and my magic burned hot once more. I blasted the wolf away before he could take a single step. “Torin!”

Torin was lying on the ground, immobile. I ran to him, dropping to my knees. I begged him to hear me, calling his name again and again.

But Torin didn’t move.

His eyes didn’t open.

Underneath his head, a pool of blood blossomed out across the dirt.

Red everywhere.

**Episode 4378**

**Greyson**

Snapping a man’s neck was easy. Sad, but true. Sad, but I’d done it many times today. I did it again when yet another Bitterfang tried to block my path to Cali. I needed to see her, right now. I’d heard her scream Torin’s name only seconds ago. The memory of the sound sent chills down my spine.

It hadn’t been an ordinary scream.

I fought my way through the chaos, telling myself that Cali would be fine. She had her magic. I had seen her use it when she’d blasted that Bitterfang away from me. She’d seemed in control, in charge. Powerful and determined. From the very beginning, even before the battle had started, she’d been determined to do this.

To stay and fight.

Repeatedly, she’d told me that I couldn’t send her home, that this was what she wanted. Fighting this enemy was her right as my mate, as a future Luna, as a pack member. How could I possibly have denied her?

When I found Cali, she was frantic, covered in blood, kneeling next to Torin, who was sprawled on the ground. His forehead was bleeding. Xavier was there as well, finishing off a Bitterfang who was flickering back and forth between his human and wolf forms. Xavier killed him with a knife.

Ava lay on the ground nearby, bleeding heavily from her middle.

“Help!” Cali shouted. She was gripping Torin’s hand, tears running down her cheeks.

Fucking hell.

“What happened?” I demanded, dropping to my knees next to her.

“He saved me. Torin always saves me, and I…” Cali didn’t sound like herself. Her voice was different. The look in her eyes was different as well. “He saved me, and I couldn’t save him.”

There was a pool of blood spreading out from the back of Torin’s head.

“Is he dead?” Cali whispered.

I checked Torin’s pulse. “No, but his pulse is weak.”

Cali had stopped crying, but somehow, that felt worse.

“What the fuck is happening?” Xavier demanded. “Ava needs help, where is—” He stopped talking when he spotted Torin. His gaze hardened. “Who did this?”

I grabbed Cali’s bloody, tattered jacket from the ground, tore off a strip of fabric, and tied it around Torin’s head.

Xavier glared at me. “What are you—”

“I’m trying to contain the bleeding,” I interrupted. I tore off a second strip, then I threw the remains of Cali’s jacket at Xavier. “Wrap some of that around Ava’s wound. Apply pressure, try to stop the bleeding.”

Xavier looked both enraged and horrified. “That’s not gonna fucking cut it, Greyson! There’s a goddamn hole running right through her stomach!”

“I’m fine,” Ava said with a moan. “I’ll heal.”

“No, you’re *not*,” Xavier snapped. “The de-wolf spell is still going. Your healing isn’t working properly.”

“The spell’s glitching,” Ava said through clenched teeth. “I’ll be fine if I can just—”

“We have to fucking do something,” Xavier said, seething. And even though he’d told me that applying pressure to stop the bleeding wouldn’t work, he dropped on his knees next to Ava and did exactly that. I tied the second torn piece of fabric around Torin’s head, and he groaned, his eyelids fluttering. He was still alive—but for how much longer?

I knew that casualties were a part of war, but this wasn’t supposed to happen.

Not to Torin.

Just… Not Torin.

“We need to save him,” Cali whispered.

“Kira might be able to help,” Xavier said.

“Kira’s given everything she has to the de-wolf spell,” I said. “They were already drained doing it the first time, and I don’t know if we should spend any excess energy on healing him. It could throw the plan off again.”

I hadn’t thought before I’d spoken, and the sound Cali made told me that that had been a mistake. Her devastated expression made me feel like my heart had been tied into a knot.

“We have to try,” she choked out. “He’s saved me so many times. He’s helped all of us so many times. If something happens to him, Greyson, I think I’m going to—”

“Nothing’s going to happen to him,” I lied, because I couldn’t bear to mention the alternative. Not when I could feel that something had broken inside Cali.

Keeping my damn mouth shut, I scooped Torin into my arms and stood. Cali had one hand on my arm, the other on Torin’s shoulder. She wasn’t talking, and somehow that made everything a million times worse.

I needed Rishika.

I didn’t have to shout for her. As if she just *knew*, she appeared moments after I thought of her. Three men were lying on the ground behind her.

“What’s going on?” she asked, panting. Her eyes widened when she saw Torin. “Is he going to be okay?”

I wasn’t going to tell another lie. “Keep the fight going and cover our trail so the Bitterfangs can’t follow,” I said. “I’m taking Torin and Ava to Kira.”

Rishika nodded. I thought she’d walk off without another word, but then she gripped my shoulder.

“Please save him,” she whispered.

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“I tried the mate lick on Ava’s wounds, but it didn’t do much,” Xavier said, breaking the silence as we moved quickly through the woods. The witches’ hiding place wasn’t too far away.

“Nothing werewolf-related is working properly right now, Xavier,” I told my brother.

Torin’s eyes had opened and closed four times so far.

Cali—*my* Cali, who could easily ramble for hours on end—hadn’t said a word.

“I’ll be fine,” Ava said with a cough.

“Stop saying you’ll be fine, or I’ll tell Kira to fucking test that theory and not treat you,” Xavier said sharply.

Ava huffed. “Xavier, you won’t—”

“Both of you, stop talking,” I said. “Right now.”

I didn’t shout. I expected Xavier to mouth off, like always, but he didn’t.

Whatever they’d heard in my voice made them shut the fuck up.

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“Shit, what happened to her?” Jacqueline’s eyes widened when she saw Ava. Then they got even wider when she saw Torin. “What happened to *him*?”

I moved past her. The witches were a few feet away, sitting in a circle, their eyes closed, their faces tense with concentration. My mother rushed over, her breath catching when she spotted Torin.

“How can I help?” she asked.

“We need Kira,” I said.

“Big Mac told me not to let them be disturbed,” Ravi said, looking anxious.

“This is an exception,” I said, gently setting Torin on the ground. Cali knelt down next to him. She still hadn’t said a word.

I walked over and tapped on Kira’s shoulder. Her eyes flew open in surprise, and she opened her mouth to speak, but then I pointed over my shoulder. When she saw Torin and Ava, she leapt up and rushed over to them.

Cali’s voice was small and wounded when she finally broke her silence. “Can you do anything to help?”

“We won’t be able to maintain the de-wolf spell for much longer without Kira!” Big Mac snarled from behind us.

“I’m hoping this won’t take long,” I told her.

I watched as Kira untied the fabric from around Torin’s head. She examined his wound, and Cali held her breath. There was sweat dripping down my forehead.

“If you can fix him up,” Xavier told Kira, “he’ll be able to help Ava, and that way you won’t be fully drained.”

Ava huffed. “I told you—”

“And I told you to shut up,” Xavier snapped.

“You two aren’t making this any easier!” Big Mac snapped.

“Leave them both here,” Kira told us. “I’ll take care of them.”

“I’m staying until Ava’s healed,” Xavier said.

Ava scoffed. “There’s nothing you can do except get in Kira’s way. You should go. The Samaras need their Alpha.”

Xavier eyed her, then Cali. His expression was unreadable. He turned to me. “If anything happens, let me know.”

The moment he was gone, Cali exhaled. I knew, though, that I was going to have to get out there myself soon enough. I was in charge of this battle, but my pull to Cali and wanting to protect her was so strong.

“So Torin’s going to be okay?” she asked Kira quietly.

Kira nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you,” Cali whispered.

A tear slid down her cheek.

\*\*\*

I took Cali to a nearby pond. Neither of us spoke while I sat her down on a rock, pulled off her sweater, dipped a sleeve in the water, and used it to wipe the blood off of her face and hands. It wasn’t her blood, but that was the only silver lining here. The air was cold—the water as well—but Cali didn’t complain. I helped her put on a clean sweater that the witches had provided. The entire time, Cali said nothing.

She wouldn’t look at me, and that made me want to pick her up and run, just so nothing could ever hurt her again. She deserved to live in safety. She deserved to be happy. She deserved…

She deserved more than this.

I lifted her chin and met her gaze. The scared look in her eyes made my throat tighten. “I know that you just went through something awful. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you.”

She pulled in a deep breath, cupping my hand where it rested on her cheek. Her voice was barely audible. “I didn’t…” She swallowed. “I hadn’t considered what it would be like, fighting this way.”

I felt a sort of stabbing sensation in my chest, and I could only recognize the emotion as failure. I’d failed to prepare Cali. To protect her. To help her. I hadn’t done enough, so how could I call myself her mate? Her Alpha?

How could I have let this happen?

“We should go,” she whispered, making a move to stand. “The battle isn’t going to wait for us. We have to go back and—”

I pulled her into a tight hug. I took in her scent, tainted as it was with blood and death. I wanted to say that I was sorry, that I felt horrible. But then *she* tried to comfort *me.*

“I’ll be fine,” Cali whispered. “I always bounce back, don’t I?”

I didn’t want to let her go back. I didn’t think I could. I was about to tell her just that when I felt a sudden pull. Like there was a rope attached to the back of my neck, and someone had tugged on it.

A second later, a scream ripped through my head.

Elle was screaming.

Suddenly, the rope yanked me forward. My head emptied, and I broke into a run.

Cali grabbed my hand, running right behind me. “Greyson! What is it?”

“It’s Elle. She’s in danger!”

**Episode 4379**

Greyson took off running immediately. I fought to keep up with him, but even when he slowed down for me, it was impossible.

“What’s happening?” I asked, panting. “Was that—”

“Elle,” Greyson rasped, pointing ahead. “She’s in danger. Something’s happening, I don’t know what. We have to find her.”

My blood ran cold.

“Go, go, go! Save Elle, I’ll catch up!” I waved him off, urging him to move forward.

He hesitated for a moment, his expression pained.

“Greyson, go! We can’t let anyone else get hurt!” I shouted.

He nodded, taking off. He was so fast that he vanished from my direct line of sight in moments. There was no way I would’ve managed to keep up with that pace. I still ran after him, though, fighting to ignore the aches all over my body.

My throat, my back, and my shoulders hurt. My breaths felt labored and shaky. Between the fighting, the magic use, and the fact that Torin was fighting for his life, I was running on empty.

*Kira’s going to help Torin, and he’ll be fine*.

*He’s not going to die because of me*.

*Everything will be fine*.

At least, that was what I was telling myself.

I was *lying* to myself, because it was the only way I’d be able to keep going.

I stopped running for a moment to catch my breath, looking around. I’d lost Greyson, but I could hear Elle’s screams up ahead. I hoped Greyson had reached her. I started running again. Elle wasn’t shouting anymore, so I hoped I was still moving in the right direction. If only I was able to track and see like a werewolf.

Then I came into a clearing. Greyson had found Elle, and up ahead I saw who was attacking her: Ethaniel. Shit. This was not good.

I was certain that Ethaniel’s issue with Elle was personal and had little to do with the Bitterfangs’ pack war. He hated her because she’d killed Helix, robbing the Northwind pack of justice.

*Werewolves see murder as justice*, I thought. Once again, my mind was flooded with red. *Don’t think about it, Cali. Don’t think about the blood. Just* don’t*.*

“*Greyson!*” Elle screamed—and now I knew which way to go.

When I burst through the final thicket of trees, I found all three of them in a small clearing. Ethaniel had his arm wrapped around Elle’s throat in a chokehold. Greyson was standing a few feet away from them, his body rigid as he glared daggers at the other Alpha.

I ducked, every instinct telling me to stay hidden until the moment was right.

“Let her go, Ethaniel,” Greyson said, his voice a low growl.

Given the way Greyson was standing and speaking, I could tell that he was desperate to shift and attack. The spell was doing what it was supposed to do, but that didn’t mean it was unfailingly helpful.

*Especially since Elle isn’t used to fighting in human form…*

 I could see it now as she struggled to free herself from Ethaniel’s grip. She was out of her element, and, for the first time since I’d met her, I could see a trace of fear in her eyes. My stomach dropped, but my determination was renewed.

*Nobody else is going to get hurt*, I reminded myself. *Not on my watch.*

Part of the reason why we’d settled on this particular plan was that fighting as humans would give all the Fae an advantage. *I* had an advantage. I had the ability to be useful. I wasn’t a liability, or a burden, or a killer.

I was a *fighter*.

*Remember what Adair said.*

As Ethaniel and Greyson argued, I moved closer. I made sure to stay hidden and quiet—until I made the mistake of stepping on a dry twig. The crack was shockingly loud, and Ethaniel’s hard gaze flicked from Greyson to me, and his mouth twisted into a sneer.

“Well, well, *well*. If it isn’t the little Fae. What a sad excuse for a Luna.”

Greyson’s tone was so cold, it sent chills down my spine. “I’m going to kill you today, Ethaniel.”

Ethaniel laughed, but it sounded forced. He looked between Greyson and me again, then he tightened his grip on Elle. “Both of you, back the fuck off.”

Elle’s eyes were wide, and the sight of her fear only fueled my determination. If I got a little closer, I might be able to blast Ethaniel without hurting her. I got ready to advance, but I didn’t get the chance to cover any ground.

“Take one more step, and I’ll snap her neck!” Ethaniel snarled, spitting out the words.

I froze. Elle whimpered as Ethaniel tightened his chokehold.

I’d never seen her like this.

“If you don’t let go of Elle right now,” Greyson said in a low voice, “I will not only kill you, but I’ll also make sure the entire Northwind pack pays for your mistake.”

Ethaniel snarled, tightening his grip even further. Elle started choking, and I winced, fear and fury coursing through me. She fought to dig her nails into Ethaniel’s forearms, but he didn’t even flinch.

“Are you so sure of yourself that you’re willing to risk Elle’s life, Greyson?” Ethaniel hissed.

This couldn’t continue.

*Distract him*, I told Greyson silently. *Distract him so I can get closer and hit him with my magic.*

Greyson’s jaw twitched. *If he hurts you—*

*We have to save Elle, Greyson*, I said. *We have to!*

He pulled in a sharp breath.

And then he began.

“You’ve lost a dozen pack members since this war started, Ethaniel,” he said. “More than any other pack in the Bitterfang alliance.”

“Shut up,” Ethaniel snarled, glancing between Greyson and me. “You! Fae! Stop moving!”

I waited for him to look at Greyson again before I slid closer.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Greyson went on. “You want to avenge a pack member’s death, but the way you go about it ends up killing a dozen more people who trusted you to keep them safe—”

“Shut the fuck up, or I’ll snap her neck right here and—”

Ethaniel didn’t get a chance to say or do anything else. He’d turned his back on me in his careless anger, and I’d summoned my sword.

*You’re a fighter, Cali*, Adair had said.

*Just* fight*.*

I threw the sword. It sliced through the air like an arrow, ripping through Ethaniel’s leg. He screamed in pain, his grip on Elle loosening. That was all she needed to break free and turn on him with a shout.

“You filthy bitches, I’m gonna crush you both!” Ethaniel hissed, knocking Elle back into me with a snarl.

I wrapped my arms around her protectively, pulling her back. I readied my magic to defend us both as Ethaniel charged at us, screaming expletives.

*That’s another thing about fighting in human form*, I thought as Elle heaved and clung to me. *You can hear the werewolves speak.*

Greyson, though, did *not* speak.

As Ethaniel advanced on Elle and me, Greyson darted toward Ethaniel. Not a single word came out of his mouth as he gripped Ethaniel by the back of the neck and yanked him backward like he was nothing but a limp body. He slammed Ethaniel to the ground, pinning the Northwind Alpha down. His eyes were filled with one thing, and one thing only.

*Rage*.

Greyson’s rage was so jarring in its silence that it took my breath away.

Elle didn’t feel the same way, though. She left my arms, moving forward to shout, “I told you my Alpha would kill you if you touched me! *I told you!*”

She was speaking to Ethaniel, who fought to fight back, who choked when Greyson started punching, who was bleeding more with every blow. It was like the sound of Elle’s voice had spurred Greyson on. A low growl escaped his throat as he kept punching, and Elle kept cheering him on, until Ethaniel’s arms fell limply to the side. His eyes were closed.

But Greyson just kept on hitting him, his fists turning red.

“Greyson,” I rasped.

Red everywhere.

“Greyson!” I shouted, moving forward. “He’s not moving! He’s dead!”

Greyson didn’t listen.

His fists were like automated weapons, flying and landing over and over, the scent of blood so potent it made me feel sick.

Elle wasn’t urging him on anymore.

“Greyson, stop! It’s over!” I touched his arm, but he shook me off.

He didn’t stop.

His face and chest were covered in splatters of blood.

*Greyson.*

Greyson was supposed to be the kind one. Greyson was supposed to be the reliable one, the one who put everyone else’s needs above his own, the one who tried his best to be the best. Greyson was supposed to be calm, cool, and collected. But he was also…

*This*.

I’d seen him angry during battle, but he’d been in wolf form. Not human.

Greyson was human, yet somehow his rage still meant carnage.

My ears were ringing, and I was screaming.

“GREYSON!” I grabbed him by the shoulders. “Enough, Greyson!”

I yanked him back, and he looked at me. Finally. His eyes widened, as if he’d just noticed me for the first time. Their grey color was oddly cloudy, like he’d been in a trance. He looked at me like I was an anchor, and he was fighting to ground himself back in reality.

He looked lost.

“Where did you go?” I whispered to him, shaking.

Elle whimpered. Greyson turned to her. Elle stood there, panting, shaking in the same way that Greyson was shaking. Their eyes locked, and they stared at each other. Their expressions—that lost confused look… They were identical. One and the same.

*Oh my god…*

Greyson had been gone, not fully there. Even replaying it in my mind was terrifying. That hadn’t been Greyson wanting to help out a pack mate because he was the Alpha…

No, it was because of the sire bond.

**Episode 4380**

**Xavier**

I made it back to the battlefield and immediately spotted a large group of Samaras fighting a gang of Bitterfangs and Northwinds. Knox used a knife to slice through someone’s stomach a moment before he spotted me.

Shoving the body to the ground, he rushed up to me. “How’s Ava?”

The kid looked genuinely concerned, and I appreciated that. After all the shit he’d pulled, it was good to know that he really did care about Ava.

“She’s in good hands,” I said. “She should heal up and be back in no time.”

That was what I told the kid, but in reality, I was more worried than confident. I couldn’t let Knox in on the severity of Ava’s injury, though. The last thing I needed was a frazzled Knox out on the battlefield, wondering if Ava would survive. It was bad enough that I felt that way.

I had to remind myself that Kira knew what she was doing. She’d said she’d do her best with Ava and Torin. But what if her best wasn’t enough? What the fuck would happen then? No—I couldn’t think that way right now.

Come to think of it, Torin was a healer, which meant he shouldn’t even be *allowed* to die. So he just wouldn’t.

As for Ava, she was strong. She was stubborn as well, and she’d come back to life once already. If nothing else, she’d probably stay alive just to kill Malakai, and that was the kind of attitude I could get behind. Everything would be fine, and Ava would pull through.

She had to.

“I should go check on her.” Knox looked over my shoulder, at the forest trail I’d taken to reach the battlefield. “I think she’d feel better if she knew that we want her to be okay.”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing we can do to help her right now. We’re needed here.”

Knox frowned and was opening his mouth to argue when a piercing scream cut him off. I knew that voice. We both whirled toward the sound, and I saw Marissa, Josephine, and Geraint fighting a group of Bitterfangs and Ironwoods.

“Told you we’re needed here,” I told Knox as we both started running.

Moments later, Knox punched the Bitterfang who was going after Geraint, and I slammed into the Ironwood who was fighting Josephine. She took in huge gulps of air, nodding her thanks. She looked frightened, her eyes wide. Like Ava’s eyes had been when that branch had punched right through her.

My interaction with Josephine lasted for just a couple of seconds, but it was enough to stir my anger. This war had put my Luna on the line, had locked Cali and me up in cages, had almost fucking *killed me*. My rage flared, only heightening as thoughts and memories flooded my brain.

Ava dangling from that tree, a gruesome hole ripped into her middle.

Cali crying in the dungeon, thinking I was dead.

Malakai asking me to kill Cali for his own amusement.

When I punched the Ironwood I’d thrown to the ground, he stayed down, knocked out cold. With a growl, I saw Knox ripping a Bitterfang away from Marissa and made a move to join them when a sneering Ironwood planted himself in front of me. He was at least seven feet tall, with a scar across his face.

“The brand-new Alpha of the Samara pack,” he said, his smile a grimace. “I thought you were dead.” He raised a machete. “I’ll be sure to make it stick, this time.”

I rolled my eyes at the dramatics, but when the Ironwood lunged at me, I realized that I had to be careful. The machete was massive, and the branch I grabbed to fend off his assault was immediately sliced in half.

As I kept dodging the Ironwood’s attacks, I shot glances at the rest of my pack—just to make sure nobody had been gravely injured. It was all part of being Alpha, and even though I was new to it, the responsibility felt good. I spotted Knox getting flipped onto his back by a larger Bitterfang, who pounced on him and punched him in the face.

“Looks like the little shrimp who used to call himself an Alpha is having a hard time,” the Ironwood I was fighting said mockingly.

“Hey!” I barked. “Only *I* get to call Knox a shrimp!”

The man laughed, but the sound cut out when I shot forward and kicked him in the chest, sending him crashing to the ground. I grabbed the machete as he lay there, dazed. At the same time, I looked over just in time to see Marissa slamming into the Bitterfang who’d pinned Knox, knocking him away. With a war cry, she climbed onto the man’s shoulders, wrapping her legs around his neck and squeezing, choking him out.

Damn. I’d thought I’d have to intervene, there, but Marissa was holding her own. The Bitterfang flailed helplessly and then dropped to his knees before losing consciousness. I was about to tell Marissa she’d done a good job when the Ironwood asshole shot to his feet.

Before he could open his mouth to say whatever shit, I hit him with a roundhouse kick and then slashed his throat with the machete. He crumpled, lifeless, and I turned to check on Knox and Marissa.

“Thanks for your help,” he was telling her.

He offered a hand to help her up, but she glared at him and shoved him away. I had half a mind to call her out as she stomped away, but then I decided that that particular talk would be more appropriate *after* the battle was over. I knew that Marissa was still angry at Knox for what had happened with Jesse. I’d have to explain to her that I’d gone through the same horror with Cali.

All because Malakai had wanted to fucking torture us.

That sadist needed to be destroyed.

And when I killed him, it would feel like victory.

I scanned the area and realized the Samaras were gaining ground, moving toward the palace. I wanted to get behind those walls first, to get to Malakai before anyone else could reach him. We just had to keep our momentum going.

“Samaras!” I roared. “Keep pushing! We’ll be inside the palace in no time!”

And then I’d paint the walls with Malakai’s blood.

The truth was, I’d underestimated Malakai. I’d thought that dealing with Silas had made me immune to any other dictator-like werewolf. Malakai had always seemed like a Silas knockoff—unimportant and essentially weak—but his cruelty had repeatedly proven otherwise.

The image of Cali’s tearful face as he’d ordered her to kill me invaded my head, followed by the image of Ava impaled on that tree.

And all this because Malakai had decided to start a war in the name of his fucked-up ideas. Or maybe it was simply because he wanted the Samara, Redwood, and Vanguard territories for himself—because I didn’t believe for one second that that man wasn’t after power. He might’ve started this war in Julia’s name, but I’d seen him try to kill her.

Silas had tried to kill us, too.

I was going to bite Malakai’s head off and parade it around his imprisoned army.

I opened my mouth, ready to call for more of the Samaras to advance toward the castle, when I heard a familiar voice shouting my name.

“Xavier!”

I turned to see Ava, and the relief I felt clouded my need for revenge. For a moment, all I could be was *glad*—so ridiculously glad that she was able to run after what she’d been through. But then, when she reached me, I saw the panicked look on her face.

“What’s—”

“Malakai found the witches!” she rasped, grabbing both my shoulders. “We need your help!”

The witches. Torin, who was with them, lying there, waiting to be healed.

Nobody was going to fucking touch any of them. Not on my watch.

“Knox, Marissa, Geraint!” I barked, naming the people closest to me. “Follow me!”

We ran toward the witches’ hideout, Ava close by my side. She moved without a hitch.

*You seem okay*, I mind linked.

*I’m good*, she said. *Kira helped*.

*What about Torin?* I asked.

Ava’s voice sounded shaky inside my head. *Kira’s trying to wake him up, but it’s not really working.*

I had more questions, but they’d have to wait. We arrived at where the witches were supposed to be hiding and ground to a halt. Their hiding spot was no longer hidden. Ravi and Jaqueline were facing off against Malakai and a small group of Bitterfangs. Ravi was fighting three at once, Jaqueline two. The witches—even Big Mac—looked shaken as they fought to hold on to each other’s hands and keep the spell going.

My fury exploded when I realized that Malakai was holding a bloodied, barely conscious Porter.

“I’m done playing games!” Malakai snarled, lifting a knife to Porter’s throat. Rowena screamed. “If you don’t end the spell, I’ll kill him!”

**Episode 4381**

**Xavier**

“Please!” Rowena screamed. “Please don’t! Don’t kill him! Porter! Oh god, Porter!”

It was obvious that she was struggling with the spell. Her face was pale, and she was trembling from head to toe. She was clearly freaking out, but she was also trying not to lose control of the spell that was keeping us all human. I knew I needed to handle this situation with Porter right now, before Rowena broke and endangered us all.

Malakai wasn’t too far away from me, but would I be able to lunge forward and get my hands around his throat before he could use that knife to slit Porter’s? I wanted to believe that I could, but I didn’t know for sure.

“Don’t do anything!” Porter was bellowing. “No one move! I can handle this. Rowena! Listen to me, baby! Stay focused. I’m going to be fine!”

Malakai let out an ugly laugh. “This is what you cowards get for relying on magic. Look how easy it was for me to slip in and grab one of your own! Child’s play!”

I glanced around. I could see the restless tension rolling off the Bitterfangs who were grouped around Malakai, their eyes darting around, their stances crouched and ready to lunge. That included a guy standing nearest to him, who I recognized from the summit. Edgar or something. He was looking pretty chummy with Malakai, which meant he had to go.

The group of Bitterfangs were practically dancing on the balls of their feet, itching to fight. Well, I’d take care of Edgar the same way I’d taken care of Titus in my Adéluce hallucination. Quickly and brutally. Then I’d kill Titus for real, too.

But… Why hadn’t they attacked us yet? What were they waiting for? What was *Malakai* waiting for? I didn’t like this.

Malakai looked at me with undisguised hatred in his eyes. “We’re so close, now. I want you to see it!”

“See what?” I demanded, feeling edgy as hell. I needed him to make a move already.

“The moment of your failure,” he snarled. He turned to his own soldiers. “Look at them! Take them in! Remember this! This is why we don’t trust *anyone* except our own! Now ATTACK!”

The word ripped through the bitter winter air, and the Bitterfangs didn’t need to be told twice. They rushed forward. They were in their human forms, but they still snarled, like wolves baring their teeth.

Next to me, Ava tensed. She was ready.

“Go!” I roared. “Aggressive defense! Protect the witches!”

And with that, I lunged forward. I only had one target in my sights—I was going for Malakai.

A Bitterfang lunged into my path, but I threw a punch, and his head snapped back, then he crumpled to the ground. I didn’t know how long he was going to stay down, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was getting to Malakai.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Bitterfang after Bitterfang fall to the ground. They clearly still weren’t used to fighting as humans, and the evidence of that fact filled me with bitter satisfaction. The witches’ spell was doing exactly what it needed to do, leveling the playing field with the army-like Bitterfang pack.

The air around me was filled with grunts and groans and screams, and when a sharp cry rose up somewhere behind me, I almost stopped.

Had that been Ava’s voice?

My heart beat hard, but then a moment later I heard her give a triumphant yell, and I breathed again.

I shot a quick glance over my shoulder and saw that she’d just taken down a huge Bitterfang guy. Standing beside her were Ravi, Jacqueline, and Mrs. Smith.

Jacqueline was glaring down at the guy, her fangs still bared, and even as I watched, she pivoted and lunged for another Bitterfang. She actually seemed to be enjoying herself. It was a strange thing to think, but Jacqueline was a strange girl, so that tracked.

I turned back and refocused on Malakai. I’d almost reached him when Porter saw me coming and grabbed for Malakai’s hand. He got a good grip on it, and they both struggled with the knife, grappling for control.

Sprinting even faster, I shot toward them, and as I drew close, my stomach dropped. The knife Malakai was holding to Porter’s throat was no ordinary knife—I’d seen it before. It was the same silver-bladed knife he’d tried to make Cali use on me. If Porter ended up getting cut with that thing, the effects would be potentially catastrophic. But maybe the wolf-suppression spell would dampen any silver poisoning, at least a little.

I approached Malakai and Porter. They were in a deadlock for the knife. If the momentum suddenly switched to Malakai, he would be able to cut Porter in a second. Porter’s muscles strained as he pushed it away from him. I had to get Porter out of this. I glanced quickly at Rowena. She was the wildcard among the witches. Her husband was in danger, but we needed her to stay focused on the spell. We could very easily lose the delicate balance we had going, and it could end up not being in Porter’s favor if that happened.

I needed to be careful with my next move for that exact reason.

“Let him go,” I growled.

Malakai only laughed. “Why would I? We’re just getting started.”

*Fuck*, I hated this guy.

“I won’t tell you again,” I called. “Let him go.”

“Why don’t you show me what you think you’re capable of?” Malakai said.

Well, if he wanted to play it that way.

I charged forward, and when I was close enough, I lunged forward. My fist was already pulled back, ready to strike. I only hoped I’d be able to move faster than Malakai.

And I was rewarded for my daring move when I felt the bones of Malakai’s cheek shattering beneath my knuckles as my fist connected with his face. My hand stung with the impact and pain ricocheted up my arm, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle.

Malakai stumbled back a step, allowing Porter to yank himself free. Malakai dropped the knife. Porter immediately turned, and together, we attacked. Malakai clearly hadn’t been prepared for this, but it took him only a fraction of a second to react. Porter was a good fighter, and together we easily could’ve taken down nearly anyone else, but Malakai was strong enough to hold his own.

Distantly, I clocked the sounds of the battle raging around me. I was focused on Malakai, but I was aware that the others were fighting, too. I needed to take care of Malakai so I could get back to protecting the people I cared about.

“Xavier!” Porter called breathlessly. “You go left, I’ll go right. He won’t be able to defend himself against both of us at once—he’ll have to choose.”

I nodded and moved into position. The wind was fierce, but I barely felt it. All my focus was on Malakai. Porter and I moved simultaneously. I dropped my head and attacked, delivering two powerful punches to Malakai’s kidneys. I knew that had to hurt, at least.

I heard him groan in pain, then Ava’s voice echoed through my head.

*You’ve got him, Xavier! Don’t stop! This is our chance! Kill him! Kill him now!*

I didn’t need any more encouragement. I reached up, and my hand was nearly at his throat when he turned toward Porter. Then I heard a loud squelching sound, followed by Porter’s pained cry as he collapsed.

“Porter!” Rowena’s scream ripped through the chaos. It was a cry of agony. Immediately, she started to move toward her husband from across the battlefield. Fuck, no, she couldn’t do that. Not right now. Not when we were so close. I waved my arms around to try to stop her. We needed her to do the spell!

“No!” I shouted. “Rowena! Stop! Go back! Don’t break the spell!”

But it was too late. The Bitterfangs must’ve been constantly trying to shift, because when Rowena ran for Porter, they all seemed to manage it simultaneously.

I’d never been so freaked out to see werewolves transforming in my life.

*Fuck*. This was bad. This was really, really bad.

I looked back at Malakai and saw that he was in his wolf form—and somehow, he was smiling at me.

“Fuck.”

“GET BACK HERE, ROWENA, DAMMIT!” Big Mac screamed. “THE SPELL’S COLLAPSING! WE CAN’T HOLD IT! GET BACK!”

But Rowena wasn’t listening—not to Big Mac, not to me. She was standing over Porter, her hands up and her eyes closed. She was whispering something—a spell, maybe. But whatever it was, it was extremely fucking effective. As I watched, she stopped whispering, her eyes flew open, and a huge blast of magic shot from her hands. It hit Malakai like a freight train, and he went flying backward.

Everyone on the battlefield seemed to freeze, just for an instant—and in that moment, Big Mac looked around, her usual scowl on her face.

“Okay, then,” she snarled. “Time for plan B.”

**Episode 4382**

Greyson stood in front of me, still as a statue. He still hadn’t said a word to me, but he was breathing hard, and blood dripped from his still-clenched fists. Ethaniel lay on the ground at his feet. He was crumpled and barely recognizable, but I was relieved to see that he was still breathing.

Objectively, I knew that Greyson had killed before, but this just felt different. I’d never seen him like that before—caught up in a rage that seemed so uncontrollable.

I reached out—hesitantly—to put my hand on his arm. Every muscle was pulled tight, and I’d barely brushed him with my fingertips before he flinched away from me.

But that must’ve shifted something in his head, because he seemed to come back to himself. He blinked, and his grey eyes were suddenly recognizable again.

“Greyson? Are you okay?” I asked softly.

He blinked again, then looked down at his hands. “I’m—I’m not sure,” he said, sounding dazed.

Before I could ask him what the hell *that* meant, I heard something behind me and spun around. A wolf leapt out of the woods and sprinted toward us, and—heart hammering—I tried to summon my sword.

My mind was spinning. What the hell was going on? What was I seeing? What was a *wolf* doing here? What had happened to the spell? This wasn’t supposed to be happening. None of it.

But then Elle rushed toward the wolf, and after a stunned moment, I realized I recognized it. It was Lucian. Elle threw her arms around him, and he shifted back to human, hugging her back.

“What the hell is going on?” Greyson asked Lucian, finally sounding like himself again. “What happened to the spell? Is something going on with the witches?”

Lucian didn’t even look up at him. His face was buried in Elle’s hair. “My forest rose, I felt your distress. I’m sorry I wasn’t here in time. Are you all right?” He pulled back to look at her, gently touching her face and running his hands down her arms, checking for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

“No, no,” Elle murmured, shaking her head as she looked at her mate. There were tears in her eyes. “No, I’m fine. I’m not hurt.”

The moment was so intimate, I turned away. It felt strange to intrude on such a private moment between mates, and I wanted to give them as much space as the situation would allow. There’d been a time when I couldn’t tell what Lucian’s intentions were with Elle, but he was definitely showing genuine concern here. And she was letting him. I wasn’t going to get in between that.

But Greyson didn’t appear to be feeling sentimental, and he stepped toward them. “Lucian! You need to tell me what’s going on! What’s happened to the spell? What did you see?” he asked. “Why can you shift? What’s going on?”

Lucian finally looked at Greyson, as if he’d only just noticed him. “Oh, yes, the shifting. I—I don’t know,” he said, looking bemused. “I have no idea what happened or what changed. I was suddenly able to shift, and that was when I felt that Elle was in danger, so I followed her scent, and it led me here.”

Behind me, I heard a howl and felt my whole body stiffen with fear. I swallowed. “I think the spell must be broken. Everyone must be able to shift again.”

Greyson’s frown deepened. “That’s not good news. We were just starting to make some actual progress. We were pushing the Bitterfangs back toward the palace. This is shit timing.”

“We need to make sure that everyone’s okay,” I reminded him.

“What?” he asked, looking distracted.

“If the spell was broken, something might’ve happened to the witches.” A shiver of fear coursed through me as I considered the possibilities. And Greyson’s mother was with that group.

Greyson looked at me, and I knew that his thoughts had gone down the same path as mine. He took a deep breath, and I could see that he was working hard to keep himself together.

“Greyson?” I said slowly. “What do you want to do?”

He clenched and unclenched his fists a couple of times. The blood on his hands was starting to dry. “We need to move.”

“Where to?” I pressed. “What are you thinking?”

“We need to head back toward the witches, and we need to be ready for whatever we might find when we get there.” He looked at Lucian and Elle, then met my eyes again. “We need to be ready to fight.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

I was scared—of course I was scared—but I was ready to get back to the fight. I was worried about my friends. How was Torin? He’d been unconscious when I’d left—was he still? Was he okay?

Lucian and Elle shifted, and the sound of their cracking bones was jarringly loud in the quiet. I was already edgy, and the noise made me jump. It felt like we were walking on ice with this battle. It felt like the ice would crack at any moment and leave us all drowning.

Greyson stepped to my side. He touched my hand reassuringly. It was a look that said, *hang in there*. He was trying to be encouraging when I wasn’t sure it felt like we could do that anymore. Then he shifted.

I climbed onto his back. He’d just started moving when a tremendous rumbling noise roared through the air, and the ground started shaking beneath our feet.

Greyson froze. Elle and Lucian did, too. No one moved, and the other two wolves looked to Greyson.

*Did that sound like thunder to you?* Greyson asked me, his voice wary.

*No*, I said. *No, I don’t think so. That didn’t feel… natural. We should hurry.*

*Yes*, was all Greyson said.

There was a knot of worry in the pit of my stomach, and it only grew when the rain started. It came suddenly, pouring down in sheets, each individual drop so heavy, it stung as it hit my skin. It felt like being showered with tiny needles, and it was so thick. I could barely see anything through the water. I wiped it out of my eyes a couple of times, but it was a losing battle, and at a certain point, I just stopped trying.

Beneath me, Greyson was running as fast as he could. I didn’t know how he was seeing anything, but he was pushing himself.

He jumped over a log and landed in a patch of thick mud. It made him stumble, and I lost my grip. I screamed and went flying off his back, landing hard on the wet, muddy ground.

*Cali!* he shouted.

*I’m okay*, I said quickly, though pain from the impact was shuddering through my body. *I’m okay. But I don’t know if we can keep going. I think we need to find shelter. We need to reach the others, but I don’t know if we can get there in this rain. Not without getting hurt.*

Greyson didn’t answer for a few long seconds, but then he finally nodded. *You’re right. Even if we did find them, we wouldn’t be able to fight in this weather. Okay, can you stand?*

*Yes, I’m fine*, I said, getting shakily to my feet.

*Climb back on, then*, he said. He looked around, squinting into the sleeting rain. *I think I know where we are. There’s a cave nearby.*

I looked around, realizing that we’d somehow lost Elle and Lucian. But there was nothing I could do about that, so I climbed onto Greyson’s back, and he walked carefully into a patch of thick trees. I couldn’t see where he was taking us, but after a while, we reached a towering rock face, with a smallish opening in the stone.

*In here*, he said, lowering his body so I could climb down.

I slid to the ground and hurried into the cave, relieved to be out of the stinging rain.

Greyson shifted back to human and followed me inside. He sighed, obviously relieved as well.

“What the hell are we going to do?” I asked, trying to squeeze water out of my hair. “We can’t just wait in here forever—all our people are still out there. Though I have to wonder if one of the witches started the storm because they were in danger.” I shrugged. “If so, that might’ve been a smart move, as a last resort.”

Greyson nodded, pushing his drenched hair out of his eyes. “Yeah, it’s a good thing. At least we know no one else can do anything in this weather, either. Everyone’s going to be stuck right where they are until the rain stops.”

“Which is probably what the witches wanted,” I added.

We were quiet for a moment, and in that quiet we both heard it—a scuffling sound at the mouth of the cave.

“What was that?” I asked anxiously.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Not what—*who*.”

**Episode 4383**

**Xavier**

The rain was coming down like a damn waterfall. It was freezing cold, half of the droplets felt like stinging ice, and I could barely see through it as it poured into my eyes. I couldn’t see two feet in front of me—not even as a wolf, with my heightened senses. Thunder and lightning kept coming, constantly. It was chaos. It felt like the end of the world. I couldn’t even see where Malakai had ended up.

There was an unmoving form on the ground, a few feet ahead of me, which I figured had to be Porter. I shook my head, trying to get some of the water out of my eyes so I could take a closer look. The form still didn’t move. Dammit.

I looked around. I couldn’t see anything, but I could smell that Rowena was close by—if it *was* Porter, she’d take care of him. And now that I could see again—at least for the next few seconds—I looked around, wondering where Ava was.

And—as if thinking it had made it so—she appeared at my shoulder.

*Big Mac did this*, she said without preamble.

I nodded. She was probably right. A storm this angry definitely seemed like something Big Mac would’ve conjured up. *Okay, we need to talk to her. We’re going to have to find her.*

*Not that it’ll be easy in this soup*, Ava said.

We started moving carefully toward the spot where the witches had been standing.

*This storm is a rager, but it’s buying us time*, I said. *We need to use that time to get the alliance the hell out of this part of the forest. We need to retreat and regroup*.

Ava nodded. *You’re right, but I hate this. I hate that we almost had that bastard and we lost our chance.*

She sounded furious, and I understood how she felt.

*We’ll get him*, I assured her. *This isn’t over—not by a longshot. He’ll be dead soon enough.*

We moved slowly and carefully, and we finally got close enough I could make out the figures of the witches, standing in the driving rain. They were huddled together, and as we approached, I saw that one of them had created some kind of magical umbrella. Kira was sitting on the ground, Torin’s head cradled in her lap. His eyes were still closed, so he must not have woken up yet—which wasn’t good.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were standing together, talking seriously, and I could see that they were holding hands. They both looked freaked out.

Ava and I shifted back to human as we stepped underneath the invisible canopy and out of the rain.

“If one of you is responsible for the storm, your plan working,” I said. “It gave us the stall we needed. I know the spell broke because Rowena had to get to Porter, but what’s the deal? Can we get it up again? It was working. It was keeping the Bitterfangs down.”

Kira looked up from her spot on the ground. “Big Mac started the storm, but now she can’t stop it.”

Ava frowned. “What do you mean?”

Kira’s face was pale. “It’s out of her control.”

“And what does *that* mean?” I demanded.

“What part of it do you not understand?” Big Mac snapped angrily. “It means that the storm will be over when it’s over. I cast the spell, but I’m not a god! I’m a witch!”

“So what does that—”

“What we need to focus on is getting the original spell back together,” Big Mac went on, speaking over me. “Like you said, it was working for us. It’s the only advantage we have, and we can’t lose it now.”

I nodded. She was right, and I knew it. The fact that Malakai had come out here at all… That wasn’t the move of a man in control. He’d come for the witches because he was desperate.

“Okay, then do what you need to do,” I said. “If that means getting all the witches out of here to somewhere more sheltered so you can focus, then go. Whatever needs to happen so you can kickstart the spell again. And if you do leave, you should take Torin with you.”

Big Mac nodded, but before she could say anything, I heard the sound of running paws and turned to see Lucian and Elle running toward us.

“Where are you coming from?” Ava asked as they joined us under the canopy.

Lucian shifted back to human. “Greyson and Cali were right behind us, but we think they got lost in this damn storm,” he panted, shaking off some of the rain. “I don’t know what this rain is, or what—”

“Is there anywhere close by where the witches can take cover while they get the spell going again?” I asked, cutting him off. I wasn’t in the mood to listen to a Lucian rant. “You know these grounds better than anyone—they need somewhere to go.”

Lucian nodded. “Yes, there’s a cottage nearby. I can take you there.”

Big Mac nodded grimly. “That’ll work.”

Lucian shifted again, and Big Mac, Dani, and Tabitha climbed onto his back. I helped Kira get herself and Torin settled on Elle’s back, and then Rowena—who had hauled Porter over—climbed onto Mrs. Smith.

The magic umbrella disappeared as the witches prepared to depart, and we were all instantly soaked again.

“We’ll cover you from the rear,” I told the witches, just before I shifted.

And then, to my shock, I heard an answering voice.

“Oh, no. I don’t think you will.”

I pivoted around. The Bitterfangs had regrouped. Malakai was back.

*Go!* I told the wolves without looking back. *Get the witches out of here. Run as fast as you can. The rest of us will deal with this.*

Malakai laughed, the sound like grating metal. “You are funny, Xavier Evers. Thinking you can fight us without your precious witches and their godforsaken magic. What do you have? Three wolves and one pathetic vampire. You want to pit that against the brute strength of my people? Please. You can’t beat us.”

Jacqueline crossed her arms over her chest. “Who are you calling pathetic?”

And—like that was the provocation they’d been waiting for—the Bitterfang wolves behind Malakai attacked. They surged forward, and Malakai, shifting in an instant, joined them, creating a wave of teeth and claws.

The rain hadn’t let up, and it was still hard to see. But I could still identify the Bitterfangs, and I went after every single one that I spotted. I used every weapon at my disposal, kicking and clawing and biting and tearing. I could hear Ava nearby, snarling viciously. I didn’t even need to look at her—I knew I could trust her to hold her own. And if I couldn’t get to Malakai, I believed that she would. She wanted to kill him at least as much as I did, and one of us needed to take him out—right now. We were so focused on jumpstarting the spell, but we might not even need it.

A Bitterfang with a bloody cut on his face lunged for me, but I dodged his strike and came at him as he tried again. I sank my teeth into his throat, feeling my fangs pop through the skin and blood start to flow into my mouth. I felt the wolf’s shock in his body. He flailed, but only for a moment. He was losing blood too quickly to put up much of a fight, and when I let go, the body crumpled at my feet.

There were growls and snarls and roars of pain and anger all around me, but through it all, I heard a screaming voice, filled with fury.

“You think you’re *better* than us?”

It was Jacqueline, and she was in a towering rage. Her face was bloodless and her fangs were bared as she squared off against the Bitterfang Alpha himself.

“Let me show you what a vampire can do!” she screamed.

*No! Wait!* I shouted, springing forward, but it was useless. Jacqueline couldn’t hear the mind link.

The vampire lunged at Malakai. She sank her teeth into his neck and held on tight as he tried to shake her off. I was impressed as hell, actually, that she’d managed to bite the son of a bitch.

*Malakai must be* pissed*.*

I ran toward them as fast as I could. Jacqueline was closer than any of us had gotten to ending this, but still, I wasn’t going to leave her to finish it on her own. I would deliver the final blow—or at least be right there to see it land.

As I got closer, I saw Malakai manage to throw her off of him. The vampire landed gracefully, looking like she was ready for more.

And then I watched as Malakai, faster than the blink of an eye, closed his jaws around her neck and bit down. I could only watch helplessly as Jacqueline’s head fell free from her body, landing hard on the rain-soaked ground at her feet.

Then, an instant later, her body disintegrated into a million specks of dust. They hung in the air for just a breath of time before they were washed away by the heavy rain, and the last of Jacqueline was gone forever.

**Episode 4384**

**Greyson**

I was seething with fury. The edges of my vision were shading red, and my breath was coming in fast, short bursts. I felt like I was about to burst into flames.

“Greyson?” Cali whispered. “Who is it? Who’s coming?”

*It’s Honora*, I told her. *She’s standing at the mouth of the cave. I can smell her.*

Cali’s eyes widened in surprise. “Are you serious?”

Then it was my turn to be surprised—by the sound of Honora’s very human voice.

“I can hear you talking!” she called. “You should know, I’m not here to attack. I came in human form as a show of good faith.”

Ha. As if I was supposed to just take that at face value. The woman was a snake. She wanted to kill her own daughter. She was married to a monster. Coming in peace? It was too late for that.

Cali took a shaking breath. *Greyson? What should we do? Talk to her?*

I shook my head. *No.*

*I—okay, I know this sounds crazy, but I think we should hear her out.*

*I don’t trust this*, I said. *She’s had plenty of opportunities to come to us, but she chooses now? When we’re in the midst of battle?*

Honestly, I was confused. What the hell was Honora doing here? And in human form? And I couldn’t tell if the rage I was feeling was because of Honora’s sudden appearance in our hiding spot, or because I was still experiencing the residual effects of my little sire bond flare-up.

I gritted my teeth, thinking about what had just happened with Ethaniel. I still wasn’t sure what had come over me. It had been so damn sudden—like flicking a light switch. And it had been terrifying, too. Like I’d become a stranger to myself or blacked out.

*The sire bond.*

It was the reality I was trying not to think about. If the sire bond had that kind of power over me, then what did that mean for me moving forward? For Elle?

I wanted more than anything to be able to trust my own feelings again, but I could still feel the bones of Ethaniel’s face shattering under my fist. I’d hated seeing him even *touching* Elle, and this powerful sense of wrath had just completely overtaken me. In that moment, all I’d been able to think about was making him regret ever laying a finger on her. And I’d definitely accomplished that—but at what cost?

Then there was the fact that I’d essentially hulked out in front of Cali. What must she think of me, now that she’d seen me like that?

*Greyson*, Cali said, her voice breaking into my thoughts. *You might not trust her, but you trust* me*, right?*

I nodded.

*Then let me talk to her, see what she wants with us.*

I thought about this for a moment, then nodded again. *Okay*.

She took my hand. “We’re in here!” she called to Honora. “Walk toward us slowly!”

There was silence for a moment, then I heard the sound of a single person walking toward us. I extended my senses, trying to scent any other wolves she might have brought with her. I didn’t trust Honora, and I was very worried that this could be an ambush.

But the only scent I could pick up was hers, along with the damp smell of the cave.

When she appeared in the dim light, she was alone. She was holding a flashlight, and she looked terrible—nothing like her usual regal self. And it wasn’t just that she’d gotten caught in the rain. Whatever had happened to her clearly pre-dated this storm. Her eyes were haunted and broken. Something had happened. Something terrible.

Cali gave her a critical once-over. “I thought you said you were going to stay with your mate, Honora. What are you doing here?”

Honora took a breath, and the hand that held the flashlight shook slightly. That surprised me. I’d never seen her look anything less than composed.

“I’m here because I’ve finally decided to be honest with myself,” she said.

Cali shot me a confused look.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked sharply. Honora opened her mouth to answer, but I spoke over her. “And don’t try to bullshit me. Cali is the only reason why we’re talking to you at all. I wanted to kill you the second I heard your voice. My mate might be willing to trust you, but I’m not.”

Honora glowered at me. “This might surprise you, but I don’t care what you think of me, Greyson Evers. There’s no way you could possibly understand the position I’m in.” The fire went out of her eyes again, and suddenly they looked empty. “I had to choose whether to support the love of my life or go after my daughter—my only child.”

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t help it. “I have news for you, lady—the love of your life happens to be a megalomaniacal Alpha lunatic bent on slaughtering as many people as he needs to in order to gain power. You can weave whatever fairy tale you want for yourself, but I’m not going to feel sorry for you.”

Cali gave my hand a squeeze, and I knew she was telling me to calm down. I was getting wound up, and I was glad she was with me. I loved her so much, loved how willing she was to see the good in people. But I knew what kind of person Malakai was. He wasn’t the first sociopath I’d met, and I remembered all too well what Silas had been, and what he’d been willing to do. And I knew what Malakai was doing. What Honora had already participated in.

*I know she’s threatened us before*, Cali said, her tone measured, *but I really think we should hear her out. She’s come to us, and I think she really does care about Julia. I* know *she does.*

I wasn’t as sure as Cali seemed to be, but I turned to Honora. “Fine,” I bit out. “Tell us your story. But remember—I haven’t forgotten the part you’ve already played in this war.”

She bent her head in acknowledgement. “I understand. I haven’t forgotten it either, and I never will. You’re right—I did choose to stay with Malakai when I could’ve left with you to find my Julia. That was a mistake. And not my first.”

Cali jerked in surprise. I understood why she was so shocked. I hadn’t expected Honora to be so candid, either.

*Okay, I wasn’t expecting this*, Cali told me. *This is a total one-eighty. I talked to her about this. I spent our whole escape trying to convince her to leave with us and go to Julia, and it was like talking to a brick wall. She just seemed so unwilling to even* listen*.*

I took that in, mulling it over. *If you were able to make her change her mind, that definitely means something*, I finally said.

Cali eyed Honora curiously. “You said you wanted to be honest with yourself.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I do.”

“Okay, what did you mean by that?” Cali asked. “Honest how?”

“It’s time for me to admit something that’s been kept secret for far too long.” Honora drew in a deep breath. “Malakai is not my mate. He never was.”

Cali gasped, clapping her hand over her mouth. I stared at Honora in total shock. I didn’t know what I’d been expecting her to say, but it certainly wasn’t *that*.

“But—how?” Cali spluttered. “How can that be? Not mates? How—I mean, the way you *act*…”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Honora said, her voice sounding regal once again. “But even if we aren’t mated in the traditional sense, I’ve always been in love with him.”

“Really?” I asked, barely able to keep the incredulity out of my voice.

“Of course, now I know that Malakai doesn’t feel the same way about me,” she went on, her voice taking on a bitterness I’d never heard from her before. “I believed he did, but I see now that he doesn’t. He never did.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. “So, what are you going to do about that? I’d like to remind you that I’m not your therapist, and I don’t actually want to listen to your sob story. Right now, I only want one thing, and that’s to end the assault on my pack. So, what are you going to do about that?”

I wasn’t expecting her to respond to that at all—Honora had never been anything but a pain in my ass—so when she spoke, I thought she was joking.

“I’m going to help you.”

I stared at her.

“What did you just say?” Cali asked breathlessly.

“I said that I’m going to help you,” Honora said, a determined spark lighting up her hollow gaze. “In any way I can. You want to take Malakai down, and I’m going to help you do it.”

**Episode 4385**

**Xavier**

For the first few seconds, I was stunned. Then the pain of loss hit me like a freight train, and I threw my head back and howled. I hadn’t known Jacqueline well—she was Lola’s friend, really—but she’d been a part of the Redwood pack, and she’d fought with us, and I couldn’t believe how quickly her life had ended right before my eyes. She’d been *right there*—shit-talking like usual—and now she was gone. Just like that. It was hard not to imagine how easily it could’ve been Ava or Cali’s neck caught between Malakai’s jaws.

I lurched forward, my own teeth bared, but—with Jacqueline dispatched—Malakai was already moving away. He was heading after the witches, who were his real targets. The rain was still pouring down like some kind of biblical plague, and as I started after the bastard Alpha, I slipped. I was having a hard time finding purchase on the wet, muddy ground.

I tried to ignore it as I went after Malakai, but I slipped again and went down. I scrambled back to my feet. I couldn’t let him out of my sight. I had to reach him. I couldn’t let him get away. Not again.

As I moved after him, something flashed in my peripheral vision—and I only had a split-second’s warning before someone slammed into my side and launched me at the nearest aspen tree.

Gasping, I looked up to see what the hell had just hit me. It was that guy Edgar. He was standing over me, growling in my face. Was he gunning for Titus’s position? A Bitterfang *and* a kiss-ass?

Fuck, I did *not* have time for this. I growled, snapping my teeth at Edgar, searching for any opening that would allow me to just end the guy quickly.

If I could get rid of Edgar, that would be one less wolf for Malakai to rely on, which would be good for me. Anything that rattled Malakai made my job a little easier.

But Edgar wasn’t proving to be an easy get. He was fast, and the rain wasn’t helping.

I was struggling to get him the hell off me, and I hadn’t made much progress when there was a flash of light over his shoulder. For a moment, I thought it was lightning, but when I didn’t hear an answering rumble of thunder, I looked quickly around.

Then a bright tendril of light wrapped around Edgar’s throat, and I realized that it hadn’t been lightning at all—it had been Adair’s energy whip.

The whip tightened around Edgar’s throat, digging into his flesh. He was pulled back—away from me—and his breathing became ragged as he struggled for air.

I leapt to my feet and lunged for Edgar’s neck, just under the whip. I sank my teeth into his throat and pulled back, ripping as hard as I could. My mouth filled with Edgar’s blood, warm and salty and bitter.

Edgar collapsed, breathing once, twice—and then it was over. I stood over him, panting, keeping an eye on him, but I didn’t need to. He was still. Edgar was dead. I could make a hobby out of this.

All around me, Bitterfangs were fighting hard in their aggressive, vicious style, going up against the Samara and Redwood packs.

Adair’s whip shot through the air again, then dissipated, and I looked around for him. He stepped out of the trees, accompanied by Lola, Jay, and Mikah. I breathed a sigh of relief to see them, and I knew that if Mikah was there, then Gabe had to be nearby.

I’d never been happier to see them in my life. Their presence meant that we finally had the superior numbers—at least against this group of Bitterfangs.

“Where is everyone?” Adair asked, looking around. “Dani? Tabitha? Where are they?”

I could hear the fear in his voice, and I felt for the guy, but I didn’t have the time to conduct an interview.

*Ravi!* I called. *Do me a favor and fill Adair in on what’s going on. And the others. Make sure you tell them everything.*

*Got it*, Ravi said. *You going after Malakai?*

I nodded. I wasn’t worried—I felt much better about leaving now that backup had arrived, and Adair was a force to be reckoned with all on his own.

My thoughts went to the witches. At least Malakai didn’t know where they’d gone—he wouldn’t even be able to track them, with this ridiculous rain. And I doubted he knew about the cottage Lucian had mentioned. He’d run off after them, but he was going to have to hunt for them, blindly, in the middle of a torrential storm.

In all our imaginations, Malakai had grown into something more than he really was. He believed he was extra special—and he *was* an Alpha—but he was still just a wolf, and we all had our limitations. The rain was pouring down and flowing downhill, creating streams and brooks where there hadn’t been any before. He was hunting in the rain, which meant that it didn’t matter how fast or how strong or skilled he was—the rain would wash away any scent trail he tried to follow.

I started in the direction I’d seen Malakai go, but I stopped when I heard Lola’s voice—her human voice—cry out.

I turned and saw Lola kneeling on the ground, right where Jacqueline had been killed. She was holding something—the bracelet I knew Jacqueline always used to wear. It must’ve stayed intact when her body had disintegrated.

Lola was staring down at the bracelet, and it was hard to tell in the rain, but it looked like she was crying. “Why is this here? Where’s Jacqueline?”

I looked around and saw that the assembled Samara and Redwood pack members all seemed to be watching her. The Bitterfangs that Malakai had bragged about had been dealt with—their bodies were scattered across the rain-drenched ground.

Jay shifted back to human and moved to Lola’s side, putting a comforting arm around her.

I looked at Lola and had a moment of hesitation. Should I stay? Malakai was still so close—close enough that I’d still be able to catch his scent, despite the rain. I knew that this was my moment—my opportunity. I had to follow him.

*Jay*,I said. *I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry about Jacqueline. I tried to save her. It just happened so damn fast.*

Jay glanced at me. “I’ve got this. You should go.” He nodded into the woods. “Go get Malakai. He did this. We’ll handle things here.”

Ava stepped over the prone body of a Bitterfang and moved to stand at my side. *I’m ready. Let’s go. We’ll take that bastard down together.*

I felt the bloodlust rise in my chest. *Yes. Let’s go.*

Moving as one, we turned and sprinted into the trees.

The woods were always dark, and they were made even darker now by the heaviness of the clouds hanging so low overhead. But Malakai was just up ahead. I could smell him, even through the rain.

*I’ve got the scent*, Ava murmured.

*Me too*.

Then, out of nowhere, another scent presented itself, and I looked up to see Gabe running over to us. He was in his human form, and he was carrying something.

“Hey! There you two are! What’s up?” He was grinning like a loon. “Say hi to Bess!”

I stared at him in shock.

*What the hell is that?* Ava asked me.

*It looks like a fucking bazooka*, I said, baffled.

Gabe narrowed his eyes. “I saw that bastard Malakai. I just went to fetch this,” he said, patting the massive machine in his arms proudly. “Just stop for a second so I can get her going.”

He messed with it for a moment, and then a rumbling noise began, so loud I could feel it reverberating through my bones. What was that? Where was it coming from? It sounded like it was coming closer…

I shifted back to human, and next to me, Ava did the same.

I didn’t like the sound of this at all. “Gabe! Stop! There’s something coming! You need to st—”

“I’ll cut him off!” Gabe bellowed, over the roar of the machine. “The bastard won’t know what hit him!”

“No! Wait! Malakai’s not alone out here, Gabe!” I insisted. “You don’t—”

But I was cut off by the deafening sound of Gabe firing his bazooka. It shook the ground—it shook *everything*. I rocked on my feet, trying to keep my balance.

Ava flinched, her eyes wide with shock. “What the *fuck*?”

But I didn’t answer. I was listening to something else. A distant grinding sound. I recognized it—it was the sound you heard at the beginning of a rockslide, right before things got bad—really, *really* bad.

Ava must have recognized it, too, because her face went pale, and she grabbed my hand. “RUN!”

**Episode 4386**

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn’t believe it. Well. I *could* believe it. This was exactly what I’d been hoping would happen ever since I’d realized how much Honora still cared about Julia. And I’d known in my gut that Honora would come through. I’d just known it. After all, how could a mother just abandon her child? I knew it happened all the time, but I really felt like Honora could come around.

I was happy to be right about that.

“What do you mean, you’ll help us?” Greyson asked Honora, looking wary. “Help how, exactly?”

“However I can,” she said.

“Can you give us any intel on the army’s movements?” Greyson demanded. “Is there a weakness of Malakai’s that we don’t know about? We already know that he’s afraid of magic—”

“It’s not just that he’s afraid of magic,” Honora interrupted. “He doesn’t like the power that fate and magic have over the werewolves.” She shook her head. “He hates it. He wants to burn it all down.”

Greyson’s frown deepened. “Why would he want that? Fate and magic are just part of our world. We have fated mates, and we *shift* into *wolves*,” he said. “If that’s not a type of magic, then I don’t know what is. But if he gets rid of all the packs, of everything, then he’s getting rid of the power structure that keeps him in charge. He’s an Alpha, and it seems like he wants to keep being one.”

Honora gave him a long look. “You aren’t getting it. Malakai doesn’t believe that fate had any hand in his life. He believes he’s an Alpha because he *made* it happen.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “That’s how it works.”

“I know, but he didn’t inherit the title of Alpha. He killed his uncle, who used to lead the Bitterfang pack. Malakai believes in holding on to power—which means he believes in holding on to the traditions that gave the ancient werewolves *their* power. Violence, strength,” Honora told us. “He thinks anything with the ability to threaten the decisions he makes as Alpha—things like magic or fate—are bullshit.” She shrugged. “Malakai leaves nothing up to chance, nothing up to some greater power. He would never use anything other than his own strength to achieve something.”

I stared at her, marveling at the idea that anyone could be so narrow-minded and closed off. What a terrible way to go through life. But I *had* met Malakai, and what Honora was saying tracked with what I’d experienced, so I was inclined to believe her.

Her eyes had gone dark, and when she spoke, her voice was hard as steel. “He wants power, and he’ll use force to get it.”

The cave was cold and damp, but that wasn’t the reason for the shiver that crawled up my spine. I wrapped my arms around myself.

“I can’t even imagine being in a relationship with someone like that.” I shook my head. “He just doesn’t sound like the kind of person who could fall in love.”

Honora’s gaze was distant, now—like her body was with us in the cave, but her mind was far away. “Malakai is a brilliant man. He’s a strategist, and he knew that having a Luna—especially one like me—would only make him stronger.”

I knew it wasn’t any of my business, but I couldn’t stop myself from asking the natural question. “But why would you agree to—”

“I wanted it to be about love too, of course,” she interrupted, clearly having guessed what I was going to ask. “I wanted it so badly that I let myself believe that it *was* about love. And it might’ve been, from my side. But never for Malakai. Making me his Luna was all about power. It was clear, right from the beginning—he never hid it—but I refused to let myself see it. I turned a blind eye. Everything I did was an attempt to get him to love me the way I wanted to be loved. Having his child, spending time with him, building a life for us, supporting the pack—none of it worked,” Honora said hollowly. “It only made him more powerful, and drove him further away from me.”

Greyson didn’t look moved by Honora’s story. “You said you wanted to help us, but I fail to see how this backstory is supposed to help anyone—”

I swatted his arm. “Greyson,” I said reproachfully. “She’s telling us about Malakai. This is information gathering. I’m sure there’s a point to the story.”

“There is,” Honora said stiffly. She cleared her throat. She managed, even in the dank cave, to make me feel slightly out-Luna’d in her presence. It was kind of impressive, actually.

“Okay, so what is it?” Greyson asked impatiently.

“I’m telling you all this because I want to make one thing very clear—I spent so much time giving Malakai my love, he will never expect my betrayal. *That* is the most useful weapon I can offer you. The surprise of it would be the most powerful distraction you could ever have. I will reveal it at an opportune time for you, taking his attention away from you, giving you an opportunity to strike.”

Greyson took this in. The cave was silent, the only sound the blunted noise of the pouring rain outside. Even from a distance, I could hear the water washing over the rocks and the wind thrashing the trees. I’d be amazed if we walked out when the storm was over and half the forest hadn’t been blown down.

Greyson was still considering Honora’s proposition, but I didn’t need time to think it through. I already saw how we could put her plan into action, and I felt like it could work. If we could manipulate Malakai into thinking he’d defeated us, we’d be able to use Honora’s theoretical betrayal to distract him and then surge in to strike the killing blow.

*Greyson?* I asked. *Are you seeing how this could work?*

I told him how I envisioned it playing out, and he nodded thoughtfully.

*It’s a good plan, but I don’t think it would be as easy as you’re imagining*, he said.

*What do you mean?* I asked.

*Nothing is ever that easy when Malakai’s involved.*

I was trying to formulate a response to that when the cave began to shake. I looked down as the ground began to rock beneath my feet. My heart pounded, and I looked at Greyson.

“What’s going on?”

“We need to get out of here,” he said quickly. “I don’t know what this is, but this cave is in the side of a mountain, and we don’t want to get stuck in here if there’s a collapse or a rockslide or something.”

“And we need to find the others,” I added.

He nodded. “Let’s go.”

The three of us started for the mouth of the cave. As we approached it, the sound of the rain grew louder and louder. I’d forgotten how deafening the storm was, but it was loud enough to hurt my ears.

Greyson began to shift into his wolf form for travel, but I put a hand on his arm when I heard the first pop of bone.

“Stop,” I said. “Maybe that’s not such a good idea.”

He looked out at the rain, his expression troubled. “Right.”

“I think we need to be really careful out there and walk slowly. I don’t think anyone should be running right now.”

Greyson thought about this for just a moment, then nodded. “Okay, we’ll walk.” He looked over at Honora. “No shifting for you, either.”

Honora’s expression darkened for a moment, but she nodded. “I understand. And I also understand that it will take time for me to earn your trust.”

Greyson nodded, and we started out into the pouring rain. I held onto Greyson’s hand as we walked. The rain felt strange and unnatural, which was making me nervous. It was also making it very hard to see. Water was running into my eyes, and no amount of wiping them seemed to help.

I glanced upward, wondering if I could use my shield like an umbrella.

This didn’t seem like the right time to experiment, but I made a mental note to try it later. There was too much going on and too much at stake for me to waste my magic on something that wasn’t completely necessary.

We walked for a while longer—maybe another half a mile, though it was difficult to tell in the rain—and were just clambering over a small rise when I took a step and my foot slipped off the ground. I skidded in the mud, then shot down the sharp incline. My hand—which was slick with rain—slid from Greyson’s grip.

“CALI!”

I reached for him, but it was too late—I was slipping, and I couldn’t stop.

**Episode 4387**

**Xavier**

I rounded on Gabe, furious. “What the hell was *that*, man?”

Ava yanked on my hand. “We don’t have time for this, Xavier! Run! *Now!* Rocks are falling!”

And, as if to prove her point, there was an ear-splitting rumble right above us, and the ground started to shake. Shit was about to go down, that was certain.

“My bad!” Gabe yelled over the din.

I rolled my eyes, and the three of us booked it.

As we ran, I heard yelps and shouts around us as people saw the rockslide and started to run—or get caught in it.

We ran on, my only thought getting far enough away that we wouldn’t get swept up in the chaos that Gabe had just caused.

I wasn’t sure how far we ran, but we finally made it far enough away that the ear-splitting rumble of the rock fall had disappeared, and all I could hear was the storm—thank god.

I shook my head; I couldn’t believe I’d just experienced some form of *gratitude* toward this horrible, out-of-control, magical storm.

We slowed, then finally stopped. When we did, Ava turned to Gabe and punched him in the shoulder.

“You’re a fucking moron. You know that, right?” she snapped. “Where did you learn to aim, anyway? The school for the blind? You almost killed us!”

“I said, *my bad*!” Gabe retorted. “And anyway, I probably just killed Malakai, so you’re welcome. You sure have a funny way of saying ‘thank you,’ Ava.”

“*Thank you?*” Ava burst out, her voice sounding strangled. “You—”

“Are you okay?” I asked Ava, interrupting their fight.

“I’m fine,” she said, though her eyes were still flashing. “I didn’t get hurt. But I didn’t see where Malakai went, either, so I have no idea where he is now.”

“He’s probably covered in rocks,” Gabe insisted.

I shook my head. “No way. I’m not going down that road again.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“We made the mistake of assuming Malakai was dead once already, and it came back to bite us in the ass. I’ll need to see a body before I believe it this time. Besides,” I added, “were you even aiming at him? Did you see him? You can’t see shit in this rain.”

Gabe gave a shifty shrug. “I kind of knew which general area he was lurking in.”

I gritted my teeth, barely resisting the urge to punch my friend in the face. “We’re lucky we weren’t killed.” I looked down at the machine in his arms. “You’d better not shoot that thing again until you can see the whites of Malakai’s eyes.”

“Seconded,” Ava snapped. She looked around for a moment, then sniffed the air.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“I think we’re close to the cottage.”

I smelled the air, and even with the rain, I could catch a hint of Lucian’s scent. “Yeah, I think you’re right. It’s this way.”

I led the way, moving toward the scent, and Ava and Gabe followed. The storm raged around us, so I didn’t bother keeping quiet as we walked—I couldn’t hear my own in this deluge, let alone anyone else’s.

But I just couldn’t believe that Gabe had managed to kill Malakai—the Bitterfang Alpha was proving to be seemingly impossible to kill—and if I was able to pick up on a scent in this rain, then it was possible Malakai that had picked up our scents as well. All I could do was hope that he didn’t get lucky.

Hell, maybe *we’d* gotten lucky, and Gabe really had left Malakai buried under five tons of rock.

But even as this thought crossed my mind, something told me it probably wasn’t the case, and I pushed myself to go even faster. I wanted to get to where we were going and ask Big Mac if she’d figured out how to end this damn storm.

Finally, we found the cottage. It looked like a gingerbread house from a fairy tale. I shook my head. Lucian’s family design decisions were certainly unique.

The cottage was surrounded by trees, but there was warm, golden light coming from the arched windows. It looked inviting as hell, especially after all the time we’d just spent in the rain.

I looked it over as we drew closer, and I was relieved to see that the cottage looked like it had been spared any major damage—inflicted by either the Bitterfangs or by the storm.

As we approached, the front door was flung open, and Kira appeared in the doorway, looking out at us, a relieved expression on her face.

“I’m glad to see you,” she said, stepping back so we could walk inside. “I’m glad you’re okay. Come in, get dry.”

It was a relief to get out of the rain, and as I walked into the cottage, I pushed my sodden hair out of my eyes and looked around. The place was low-ceilinged and intricately carved. Everything that could’ve been embellished with scrolled woodwork *had* been embellished with scrolled woodwork—the window frames, the fireplace, the framing around the archways leading from room to room… It felt like standing inside a folk song.

The front door opened onto the main room, which was filled with spindly chairs and embroidered cushions. Everyone I’d sent on ahead to the cottage was sitting or lying down on the rugs, looking a hell of a lot worse for wear. They looked how I imagined *I* looked—wet, cold, tired, and bedraggled. Like a herd of cats someone had dragged in out of the rain.

Lucian stood as we walked in. He looked like shit—pale and wet, his lips slightly blue with cold—but he still managed to sound imperious when he spoke. “What happened out there? Did you get Malakai?”

I shook my head, my anger rising again. “No, we didn’t. We were close, but we lost him in all this damn rain. And then there was…” I hesitated and shot a dark look at Gabe. “There was a situation.”

Lucian eyes flashed with anger and fear. “If you didn’t get him, then he’s probably on his way here right now.”

“He’s as slippery as a snake,” I snapped. “You know that.”

Lucian nodded. “He is that.” He thought for a moment. “At least now we can figure out a way to try to protect everyone.” He glanced at me. “Two Alphas are better than one.”

“Only two?” I looked around, confused. “What are you talking about? Porter’s here, isn’t he? Where is he?”

“He’s still recovering from his wound. There was silver in that dagger, remember?” Lucian said. “You don’t get over silver poisoning in a moment.”

“No, you don’t,” I muttered, remembering my own experience with silver poisoning. It had been hell. Silver poisoning was so painful that it sometimes felt like dying would be easier than recovery. I didn’t envy Porter in the slightest.

“It’s going to take him some time to heal, but we gave him some of the Fae’s blood,” Lucian added.

“Torin? How is he—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I heard a familiar sound from outside. It was a deep, dangerous rumbling, and I hurried out to see what had caused it, worried that Gabe’s bazooka blast might’ve caused more damage than I’d assumed. To my surprise, Ava and Kira followed me out.

“What are you doing?” I asked them. “Go back inside!”

Kira looked confused. “What do you mean, what are we doing? Did you not hear that?”

Of course I’d heard it, but I didn’t want to put either of them in danger.

The rumbling grew louder.

“Stay here!” I yelled at both of them, struggling to be heard over the noise.

Ava shook her head. “No way! I’m with you, Xavier!”

“Do as I say and get the fuck away from here!” I growled. “I’m commanding you as your Alpha.”

Ava held her head up defiantly, but she nodded. “Fine.”

I nodded, too, then hurried out into the rain.

“I’m not letting you go out there alone!” Kira said stubbornly, right at my heels.

“Kira, go back!” I shouted.

“No! And don’t try to pull that Alpha crap on me, too,” she said.

Fucking hell. I didn’t have time to keep arguing, so I was forced to content myself with stewing angrily while we moved. She followed me as I ran in a wide loop around the cottage, searching for the source of the sound of falling rocks. It was close by—I knew it. I could feel the reverberations in my chest, and my senses told me that danger was getting closer.

Then, as I walked around to the back of Lucian’s gingerbread cottage, I saw it. Even through the rain, the source of the noise was clear, and it stopped me in my tracks.

“Fuck,” I breathed, though the wind carried the word away.

In the mountains just above the cottage, thousands of rocks had been dislodged and were now tumbling down the slope, headed directly toward us.

**Episode 4388**

**Greyson**

I grabbed at the empty space where Cali’s hand had just been. I blinked into the pouring rain, shocked into momentary stillness. What the fuck had just happened?

I couldn’t believe how quickly she’d been ripped away from me. I looked at the spot where she’d disappeared, then stepped forward, looking desperately around, but the rain was falling too heavily for me to see anything. I shook the rain out of my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to focus—I could still scent her, and I clung to that one thing, even though I knew I’d lose it at any moment in this torrential rain.

I couldn’t let that happen. There was no way I would let it. She was my mate, my everything. I wasn’t going to lose her, not like this.

Without another thought, I shifted and took off after her, leaving Honora behind. I had no idea if she’d seen me run away, and I didn’t care. All I cared about was getting to Cali.

I sprinted as fast as I could, but the rocks were loose beneath my feet, and I slipped. I began to slide down the incline, moving faster and faster. The way was rocky, and my body was getting battered by the rocks jutting out of the ground. I was scrambling to get upright and trying to dodge the obstacles at the same time.

Distantly, I could hear the sound of the creek—no, the sound of what *used* to be the creek. It was usually a peaceful little stream, bubbling along even after storms, but what I heard now sounded more like a roaring river. It was loud, the water rushing and crashing violently.

I hoped to hell that Cali hadn’t ended up in that, but the hill I was sliding down led straight to the former stream, so her chances didn’t look good.

Neither did mine, come to think of it.

I hit another rock, and then I was at the creek. I grabbed desperately for a handhold to keep myself from falling in, but there was nothing, and then I was flying into the stream. The icy water was an immediate shock to my system, and I fought to keep my head above the water. How had this gotten so cold? How had it become practically a rushing river?

If Cali had fallen into this, I couldn’t even begin to imagine how she’d be feeling.

*Cali? Love? Cali? Can you hear me? Answer me if you can hear me! CALI!*

I waited, listening hard, but there was no response, and my stomach lurched with terror. I couldn’t bring myself to think of the worst, but it was there in the back of my mind, lingering. I had to act.

The freezing water was shoving me around, threatening to pull me under, but I wasn’t going to let it. I started to swim. When water moved like this, I knew it only had one objective—to keep moving. Nothing I tried was going to change that, so I stopped fighting the current. I let it carry me for a little while, and then—when the main body of water rushed around a bend—I started swimming straight ahead, toward the bank.

I put everything I had into breaking free of the current—I needed to get out of this freezing water ASAP—but then I caught sight of something. There was a figure in the river, a ways ahead of me.

*Cali*.

Fuck. I had to get to her. I immediately stopped swimming toward the riverbank and turned toward her, squinting through the rain to see if her eyes were open, if she was swimming. But I couldn’t tell, either way.

*Cali? Love? Can you hear me? Are you okay?*

There was still no answer.

*Shit*. I swam faster, trying to get to her as quickly as I could, but the storm made the water rough and made it hard to see anything.

*Greyson! Is that you?*

Hearing Cali’s voice in my head nearly made me cry with relief. She was alive—and conscious.

*I’m here, love*, I said quickly.

*Greyson, I’m in the water! I slipped! I need your help!*

*I’m coming for you right now, love*, I assured her*. I’m right behind you. I promise I’ll find you.*

*I’m moving so fast, Greyson. I’m trying to swim, but the current is too strong!*

*Is there something around that you can grab onto? It would help me if you could slow yourself down*, I told her. *A root or a branch or something?*

I was closer now, and I could see her more clearly. And as I spoke through the mind link, she reached out and grabbed onto a tree trunk that had fallen into the water. Its root system was still attached to the bank, but the trunk was half-submerged. The current was fast and brutal, and even as I watched, Cali’s grip on the trunk slipped. But it was enough to slow her down and let me catch up, and I quickly reached her.

When I got to her, I partially shifted, reached for her with my human hand, and used my wolf arm to dig my claws into the tree trunk and anchor us more securely.

Cali grabbed onto me, slipping her arms around my neck and clinging on for dear life. She was panting for breath and was nearly crying with fear, but she looked otherwise unharmed, which was a huge relief. I wasn’t going to let her out of my sight again.

But at the same time, we were still half-submerged in a freezing river with a brutal current in the middle of a torrential storm—we were still in a shit-ton of danger.

“Hold on, love,” I said. “Hold onto me with everything you’ve got.”

“I’m trying to,” Cali said, her teeth chattering with the cold.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said, “but I’m going to try to get us out of this. If you can hold onto me without my help, I’m going to try to pull us along this tree and get back to the bank.”

Cali nodded and tightened her grip around my neck.

I took a deep breath and started moving. Achingly slowly, I inched my way down the tree using my shifted arm. The water was still rushing past us, churning and roaring, but my claws were working as the anchor I’d hoped they would, and we were getting closer to the bank.

Cali was shaking with fear and cold, but we were doing it. I was getting us to safety. I was keeping my mate safe. We were almost there. I was going to be able to reach down and plant my feet at any moment.

I pulled us forward another couple of inches. We were just a few feet away from the bank, now. Then—without warning, and within a second—the tree’s root system tore away from the bank. The added weight of two people hanging off the trunk must’ve been a bridge too far.

With a ripping *crunch*, the tree broke away from the bank, and Cali and I went shooting forward down the river, the force of the water shoving at my back almost painfully.

Cali screamed in my ear and wrapped her arms more tightly around me. “GREYSON! Don’t let go!”

Shit, this wasn’t good. We were moving so fast, and there were so many rocks and branches hanging into the water, I couldn’t even respond to her. I was too busy dodging the obstacles, trying to keep us alive. My eyes were wide open, but we were going too fast for me to process everything, and before I knew it, we slammed into something very solid—and very painful.

I looked around, kicking my legs, searching hopelessly for the bottom. We’d hit what looked like the results of a rockslide. Massive rocks were piled up on the shore, and thousands of smaller ones had poured into the water. What the fuck had done this?

Our impact seemed to have upset the rocks’ unsteady balance, and a large, jagged boulder fell from where it had been balanced on top of a pile of larger rocks. It splashed into the water right by my head and smashed into my leg, pinning it against another rock.

I bellowed with the sudden shock of pain that coursed through me. I pushed at the rock, trying to free my leg, but it wouldn’t move. It was a huge rock—a boulder, really—I couldn’t get any leverage. I yelled out again, straining against it, trying to get purchase, but everything was too wet and slippery.

Shit. *Shit shit shit*. This was not good. I was stuck. I couldn’t be stuck. I needed to get out of this—

And then Cali gave a little scream of fear, and I felt her arms loosening around my neck as the river yanked at her, trying to tear her away from me.

**Episode 4389**

I’d felt the shock wave shuddering through the water—and through Greyson’s body—when the boulder had fallen. Now, Greyson was trying to free himself, but the rock wasn’t budging. As I watched him, a strange feeling came over me—like I couldn’t focus on what was happening. Everything felt distant, somehow, like it was happening to someone else and I was watching from afar.

Objectively, I could feel myself shivering—the water rushing past me was brutally cold—and I wasn’t even sure I could feel my toes. My fingers felt stiff when I tried to move them, but I wasn’t even thinking of them anymore. I was looking at Greyson. Because he looked *terrified*. And somewhere in the back of my slow-moving brain, I knew he was scared—not for himself, but for me. Even now, pinned between two boulders in a roaring river in the middle of a torrential storm, Greyson was worried about *me*.

Which meant that I needed to worry about him.

Shaking my head, I tried to pull myself out of my stupor. “Can you move?” I asked him.

“No,” he said, biting out the word. “My leg is stuck. You need to hold on really tight, okay? If you let go, I won’t be able to go after you.”

“I’m holding on, Greyson,” I said firmly. “I’ve got this. Don’t worry about me.” I looked down at the boulder, which was big enough that the top of it protruded above the surface of the water. “I might be able to blast the rock away. Should I try it?”

Greyson didn’t answer right away. He looked down at the rock and tried to move it one more time, but it didn’t budge.

“Okay,” he finally said. He sounded worried. “Listen, love. I trust you, and I trust your magic, but just be careful. I don’t know what’s going to happen when you blast this thing. You’re too close to it, and I don’t want you getting hurt.”

I nodded. “Got it. I’ll be careful.”

I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. I was cold and shivering so much I could barely see straight. I’d just taken a hard fall into a fast-moving, icy river, and everything was starting to hurt. Greyson was in danger, and my mind was spinning, but I knew I needed to focus. The last thing I wanted was to accidentally hit him with my magic. But there was so much going on around me, it was proving difficult to center myself in the way I preferred.

I breathed in and out, feeling for my magic. I tried to remember what Adair had said to me during our last training sessions. I was nervous, but I didn’t need to be. I was so much better at handling my magic than I used to be.

I could do this. I *had* to do this. Because right now, I was the only one who could.

Taking careful aim with one hand, keeping the other arm wrapped tightly around Greyson’s neck, I released a burst of magic. There was a large blast, and Greyson and I flew backward into the raging current. The boulder had shattered and been forced underwater, but—too late—I realized I’d used too much magic. I tried to shut it off by closing my hand, but magic was still coursing through it, and my hand was too cold and stiff for me to move it. I couldn’t get it under control.

Greyson was holding onto me with one arm while using the other to grab at every possible anchor that we passed—trees, branches, roots—but it was useless. They all slipped right out of his hand, which was probably just as numb and useless as mine.

“We need to get to the shore!” he shouted.

But the force of my blast had rocketed me backward, and I could feel my arm loosening its grip around Greyson’s neck.

“No!” Greyson bellowed, feeling me slipping. “Keep holding on, Cali!”

“I’m trying!” I just about sobbed back. I *was* trying, but there was so much water, and my arm was so tired. Greyson’s neck was wet, and my arm felt stiff with cold. I couldn’t hold on.

I felt myself slipping away from him, getting lower in the water. I felt Greyson shift around so he could reach for me as I slipped below the waterline. Dark, murky water flooded my eyes and mouth, and—with a huge amount of effort—I propelled myself back up, getting my head above the surface. I tried to take a breath, but at that moment, two currents collided just in front of me and water crashed over me, filling my mouth and nose.

Alarms *really* started to go off in my head, now. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t get any air.

“Cali! Love! Hold on!” Greyson’s hand was on my arm, slipping around, fighting to get a good grip. “We’re so close to the bank. Just hang in there!”

He was towing me along, now, and I could feel us moving as I tried to suck in enough air to stay conscious. When Greyson finally pulled me onto the bank, I wanted to help, but I could barely even move my legs, let alone climb onto my knees and crawl. I tried to cough, but I couldn’t even do that.

Greyson’s lips were against mine, and I felt his breath pushing air into my lungs, but I felt myself slipping away. The sound of the river was fading, and so was the light. Everything was going dark and quiet.

I had no idea how long it stayed that way, or how long I was out, but eventually, my eyes shot open, and I gasped. I waited, tense, for the rain and the storm to start battering me again… But there was nothing. No rain, no wind, no thunder, no lightning.

When I looked around, I realized I wasn’t even in the forest anymore. Well, not the forest in Oregon, at least. It actually looked like I was in the Fae world. Was that actually where I was? But how? I hadn’t traveled there. Maybe this was some kind of Fae limbo.

Was I dead?

So many questions swirled through my head as I got to my feet. I looked around, trying to get my bearings, and fought to remember what had happened. I didn’t *think* I was dead, and I knew I hadn’t traveled through any portals. And disembodied visits to the Fae world-slash-afterlife—like those I’d paid my grandfather—usually required special tea and significantly more preparation. But *was* it possible I’d ended up in the in-between place where I’d met Grandpa Innes?

*I wonder if Grandpa Innes is here somewhere…*

I needed to find out if that could be the case. If anyone could figure out a way to send me back to my own world, it was him.

“Grandfather?” I called out, looking into the shimmering tress. But there was no response.

I thought hard, trying to remember everything I knew about the Fae world.

“There’s got to be a way to get back,” I muttered to myself.

My head was aching, but I forced myself to think. The last time I’d come here on my own had also been because of an extreme situation. It had happened because I’d gotten hurt. Maybe… Maybe I just needed to do the same thing I’d done last time by attacking myself, and then I’d be able to wake up in my own world and be with Greyson.

As I thought of him, my stomach dropped with fear. Greyson was in the human world, with my unconscious body. I wasn’t sure what he’d do if he thought I was dead.

I didn’t want to go there, but I couldn’t stop myself from remembering Greyson mercilessly beating Ethaniel because he’d threatened Elle. And Elle wasn’t even his mate.

I had to wake up, and I had to do it *now*.

I gave myself a vicious pinch on the thigh. “OW!” I screamed. The spot stung, but nothing else happened.

Okay, maybe the shock needed to be bigger. I thought for a moment. Last time, I’d blasted myself with my own magic, which had been stupid, but it had also gotten the job done. Maybe I needed to do that again.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding. I sent a blast out, aiming it so it would hit a tree and some of it would blow back toward me. Then I braced for impact.

It was worse than I’d been expecting. The magic slammed into me and threw me backward. I landed heavily on my back, squeezing my eyes shut against the blistering pain. Then, when the worst of it had passed, I took a deep breath and opened them again, praying to see Greyson’s face hovering over mine.

“Dammit!” I screamed when all I saw was that same Fae sky.

I sat up again, panic truly starting to settle in. What the hell was happening? Was I trapped here?

**Episode 4390**

**Xavier**

“We need to get out of here!” I roared, looking back at Kira. “Now!”

The rockslide was coming straight for us. I didn’t know what I’d been planning to do, but right now I could do fuck all. But Kira wasn’t leaving. She ran past me, toward the rockslide.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, my head spinning. “Kira! You’re going to be crushed! What are you thinking?”

I lunged for her, getting an arm around her waist. I started to haul her back to the cottage when suddenly my body was sailing backward. Pain erupted in my abdomen, and then I crashed onto the ground. She’d fucking blasted me back with magic.

“Kira! Get the fuck back here!”

She didn’t answer, but what she was doing quickly became apparent. I could hear her chanting something as she moved toward the falling rocks. She threw up her hands, and—though it was hard to tell—it seemed like the rocks started to slow.

“Big Mac!” I bellowed without taking my eyes off Kira. “We need some help out here!”

“No!” Kira said, finally speaking to me. “No. Don’t call for anyone else. I’ve got this. You need to leave with them, Xavier.”

“What?” I demanded.

“You need to get out of here,” she said, and I could hear the strain in her voice as she kept her eyes and her energy focused on the rocks in front of her. “You need as many witches as you can get to handle the de-wolfing spell. I can handle this alone.”

“They need you, too,” I pressed. “Let me get someone to help—”

“No!” she said sharply. “I can handle this!”

Kira’s arms were starting to shake, but the rocks were slowing down.

“You see it, don’t you?” she said. “I’m doing it.”

“I see it,” I said softly, almost feeling like I was in a dream.

She shook her head. “I can’t stop them, Xavier. I’m not strong enough for that. But I can buy you time.”

“Time?” I repeated stupidly. “Time for what?”

“Time to get the others out of here.” She finally looked back at me, her eyes angry and flashing. “What are you waiting for? *Go!*”

I swallowed hard. *Ava, listen to me*, I said through the mind link. *There’s a rockslide, and Kira’s trying to stop it on her own. It’s heading right toward the cottage. You need to get everyone out of there—now. Get as far away as possible, as quickly as you can.*

There was a brief pause, and I could practically feel the wheels turning in Ava’s head as she took in this flood of information.

*I’m on it*, she finally said.

“Okay, it’s happening,” I told Kira. “Ava’s getting everyone out, so you don’t have to worry about that. They’re safe. What can I do to help you?”

Kira shook her head, and beads of sweat had sprung up on her forehead. “Nothing.”

“Kira—”

“There’s nothing you can do now, Xavier.” She wasn’t looking at me. “I’ve got this. I do. I can save everyone.”

It was starting to sound like she’d forgotten I was there and was only speaking to herself.

My anxiety ratcheted up. “I don’t like how that sounds, Kira. Because it *sounds* like you don’t have an exit strategy. Like you’re not planning to get out of this—but that can’t be true. Because I’m telling you right now that I’m going to get you out. You’re part of my pack.”

She nodded, her face tight with strain. “I know that. And I’m glad I became a part of the Samara pack, Xavier, even if it wasn’t for very long.” Her voice was thick, and I could hear the tears in it.

I looked up at the rocks, which were still moving toward us. They were slower now—unnaturally so—but they were still coming.

*Okay, X, I’ve got everyone out of the cottage. They’re heading toward another part of the grounds with Lucian. We’re going north. They’re safe*, Ava told me. *Now you just need to get the hell out of there.*

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least now I could focus all my attention on Kira.

“Okay, Ava got everyone out. They’re fine. They’re safe. Let the rocks go. They can take the cottage; it doesn’t matter now. Everyone’s going to be fine.”

Kira didn’t move to leave, but she did shake her head. Her arms were trembling with the effort of holding back the rocks, and she choked out a hysterical laugh. “I’m sorry, Xavier, but you have to go.”

I stared at her. “What did you just say?”

“You need to leave—”

“What do you mean?” I demanded. “What does that mean? I’m not going anywhere without you. You can blip us out of here—”

“I can’t!” she nearly screamed. “It’s taking everything I have—*everything*—to keep these rocks from crushing us. I can’t do anything else. I don’t have the strength for it.”

I couldn’t wrap my mind around the words coming out of her mouth. “What are you saying, Kira?”

She took a shallow breath. “You know exactly what I’m saying, Xavier.”

“No—”

“I’m not getting out of this. But you are. And that’s okay—”

“It’s sure as hell *not* okay!” I bellowed. “There’s nothing okay about this! I’m not losing you, Kira. I’m not. You’re my friend. We are *both* getting out of this alive!”

I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears. Everything about this felt wrong and terrible—even more so because I felt so out of control. For all my strength, there was nothing I could do about that rockslide.

Kira looked over at me, though it looked like the effort cost her. “I’m sorry, Xavier. I really am. You’ve been a good friend to me, right from the beginning. You made my life better in ways you will probably never fully know. You got me away from Iñigo, and with you and your packs, I’ve found more happiness than I ever thought was possible. And that’s all thanks to you. You looked out for me, and I have always been grateful for that.”

I felt like I wanted to scream or tear my hair out or crawl out of my skin. “No, Kira. *No*. I won’t do this. It’s not going to end like this. It can’t. Please, there has to be another way.” I glanced up at the rocks, which were closer than ever. “There has to be something you can do—something *we* can do. If you can just hold on a little longer, I’ll get Big Mac. She can help you, blip us all out of here. Let me do *something*.”

But she shook her head. “No, Xavier, it’s too dangerous. And I can’t hold on much longer. You have to go. The Samaras need you. Big Mac can’t do anything right now. She’s going to need all her strength for the spell. And I have something more important to say to you right now, so you can’t go anywhere. I don’t have much time, so listen carefully.” She took a deep breath. “I know you’re in trouble, Xavier. I know there’s a spell on you.”

Floored, I could only stare at her. My mind whirled, trying to put pieces together. Did Kira know about Adéluce? But… How could she? How was that possible? And it suddenly occurred to me that this might’ve had something to do with her wanting my blood.

I wanted to tell her that she was right—in this moment, I wanted to talk to her about it, to pour everything out… but I couldn’t. Because of Adéluce’s damn spell. All I could do was shrug helplessly.

“I don’t know what’s stopping you from answering me, and I’m sorry it’s happening to you, but don’t worry. Whatever it is, it can’t hurt me. Not now. Not anymore,” she said. “But you need to do the best you can to let the others know what’s going on with you. *Fight this*.”

I swallowed back a bitter taste that was rising up in the back of my throat—it was the taste of fear, and I didn’t have much experience with it. How was I supposed to let anyone know what was going on if I couldn’t say anything? “Please don’t say that, Kira. Please don’t do this.”

“I can’t hold on much longer,” she said, and she did look weaker. Her face—once red with effort—was pale and bloodless. “But I need you to leave. *Now*, Xavier. And don’t feel guilty about this. Please don’t. This isn’t your fault. And I’m going to see Geoff again.” Tears filled her eyes. “I’ve missed him so much, but I’m still so glad that you and I got the chance to know each other.”

“Kira…”

She shrugged one shoulder and gave me a crooked smile. “I guess werewolves aren’t so bad after all.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t have any words to speak. My chest felt tight as a drum, like another ounce of pressure would make it explode. I could feel my own tears on my face, mixing with the rain.

“Xavier, you need to go—”

“Kira, I can’t—”  
 “*GO!*” she shouted, all traces of her last smile gone. “Go! *Now!* I’m losing control!”

I didn’t know what to do, but I had to do something. Kira didn’t want it, but I wasn’t going to leave her here. No fucking way.

I shifted to my wolf form and spun around. I hooked Kira onto me, tossing her up onto my back before starting to sprint as fast I’d ever run. I went north, where Ava said she’d taken Big Mac and the rest of the witches. But I hadn’t even gone a quarter of a mile when there was a thundering crash behind me.

The rockslide was at my heels. It was at my heels, until it was on top of me, pushing me forward. Kira screamed, and I tried to jump onto the rocks, to practically surf this thing and stay afloat. But then my foot got caught below. I was slipping—I was starting to sink down into the rockslide with Kira clinging to me. The cottage was coming quickly toward us. We would collide with it, and that would be it. We’d be crushed.

A rock hit me in the side, propelling me onto my side. Then there was a flash of light. I looked to see Kira reaching toward me just as the cottage came up fast.

*NO!*

Magic blasted me back, away from the rockslide. I landed along the tree line, limping as I stood. I started rushing toward the rockslide—Kira was still back there.

But it was too late. My breath caught in my throat. The cottage was completely leveled, and the rockslide continued to move past it like a river of broken, jagged rocks.

I howled, then shifted back to human form and looked around frantically as I pulled at rocks. Kira had to be here somewhere. There was no fucking way she’d just saved my life only to get buried here.

“Kira! *Kira!* *Where are you?*”

But there was no answer. Kira was gone.

**Episode 4391**

I looked around, trying to stop hyperventilating. As I gradually began to calm down, I took quick stock of what I knew: this world often served as a limbo of sorts for the Fae… So was I dead?

*But I can’t be dead! I still have so much to do! I can’t leave Greyson and the pack behind. This is literally the worst possible moment for me to die! The pack needs me, and I want to help defeat the Bitterfangs, but I can’t do that from here.*

I tried not to think of Greyson, sitting with my unconscious body in the real world. I could only imagine the anguish he was feeling at the possibility that I might not wake up. And I didn’t even have the slightest idea how much time had passed for him—time could be weird in the Fae world.

I had to get back to Greyson ASAP and make sure he knew I was okay. He didn’t have time to be worried about me right now—we were in the middle of a pack war, and the alliance was depending on him. With me alive and well and by his side, he’d be able to go up against Malakai with a clear head… But first, I had to get the hell out of here.

Blasting myself with magic hadn’t worked, so maybe I needed to try something a bit more drastic—something that would sever my ties to this world without severing my link to the real world, too.

An idea came to me and, before I let myself think about it too hard, I summoned my sword. For the first time ever, I turned the point toward myself and rested it against my breastbone. I let out a shaky breath and squeezed my eyes shut, counting down from ten as slowly as I could, trying to get my nerves in check.

For the hundredth time, I wished that my grandfather would deign to make an appearance. At least if he were here, I’d be able to bounce my plan off him. He’d never steered me wrong. There was every chance that what I was about to do was a *really* bad idea, but I had no way of knowing for sure.

*What if this doesn’t work? What if all I do is hurt myself for no reason?*

But I couldn’t think of anything else to do, and I needed to get back to Greyson and the pack war. As long as I made it back to the other side in one piece, the ends would justify the means—even if the means really, really hurt.

I jumped as I relaxed a little and the tip of my sword sliced through the top layer of skin on my chest. All I had to do was pull it forward. But first, I had to build up the nerve to actually do it.

*You can do this, Cali*, I told myself. *It’ll work. It has to. It might be your only chance. DO IT NOW.*

Letting out a defiant scream, I yanked the hilt toward me with all my strength.

I gasped at the sudden sensation of air rushing into my lungs, and the weight of something heavy on my chest. My ears started to ring, and my heart was pounding.

*Did it work? Am I back?*

I shoved whatever was on top of me away and rolled onto my side, coughing hard and hacking up water, spitting it onto the already soaked ground. I slumped onto my back again, just as muffled sounds began to make their way around the fading ringing sound in my ears.

*If I were dead, I wouldn’t be able to hear anything, right? Not even the ringing… And certainly not the only voice in the world that I want to hear right now.*

“Cali!” Greyson burst out. “Thank god you’re awake. I was so worried.”

Keeping my eyes closed, I relaxed into Greyson’s arms as he pulled me against his chest, pushing my wet hair back from my face. I felt his hands dancing over my skin as he checked for injuries.

“I can’t believe it—you’re really okay.” It sounded like he was in awe. “Barely a scratch on you.”

When I finally opened my eyes, I let out a happy sigh. There he was—my mate, staring down at me. There were tears in the corners of his eyes, and I reached up to wipe them away. Then I threw my arms around his neck.

“Greyson, I’m so happy to see you,” I rasped. “Are you okay?”

Greyson nodded. “Yes, I’m fine—I’m okay. I promise.” He hugged me even tighter. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t woken up.”

“Well, now you won’t have to find out,” I said.

I pulled back and rested a hand against his cheek, then stretched up to kiss him. Our lips collided almost clumsily, desperation surging between us. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him close, clinging to him like I could keep him tethered to me forever.

His kiss proved how much he loved me, and I didn’t want it to end. I wanted to stay here like this until the end of time, safe in his arms while he demonstrated to me just how deep his love for me ran. I couldn’t have chosen a better way to return from Fae world limbo.

Greyson pulled me onto his lap and I wrapped my legs around his waist, reaching to touch his face, his neck, his back… I wanted to touch as much of him as I could, since I’d come so close to losing him. The idea of never seeing his face again, of never feeling his lips on mine was what had brought me the most pain, and now that he was back in my arms, I felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

Greyson deepened the kiss, his hold on me tightening. I felt his heartbeat against my chest, and I knew he could feel mine, too. At that moment, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

I’d spent every moment of my time in limbo worrying about how Greyson would cope without me—but what would I do without him? He was everything to me, and now that we were together again, I didn’t even want to think about the possibility of letting him go.

I melted into his embrace and ran my fingers through his hair as we kept kissing, desire sparking between us. I was content to live in the moment and shove all my worries and speculation about the future to the back of my mind—at least for now.

Finally, Greyson pulled away and took a shuddering breath. “I’m so glad you’re okay. For a minute there…”

He trailed off, but I knew exactly what he didn’t want to say. I’d had the exact same fear—that I might never see him again.

The rain had let up. The storm was finally gone.

Greyson took a quick look around. “We can probably go find the others, now,” he said. “They have to be wondering where we are.”

“Any idea where Honora went?” I asked. “Do you think she made it out of the mudslide okay?”

Greyson shook his head. “I can’t be sure, but I don’t think we can rely on her. She might’ve helped you before, but how can we really be sure of her intentions? At the end of the day, we just don’t know her very well—and what we *do* know of her isn’t good.”

I nodded. I wanted to believe that Honora truly intended to help us, but Greyson wasn’t wrong—we couldn’t rely on her. All questions of loyalty aside, for all we knew, Honora was dead.

“You’re right,” I said. “I just wish we had a plan. Do we know where everyone else is?”

“No, but we’ll find them. And there *is* a plan, Cali—kill Malakai. There’s nothing more important than that.” Greyson looked over his shoulder. “We should head back toward the palace. I’ll see if I can pick up any alliance scents on the way.”

The thought of Greyson going toe to toe with Malakai again didn’t give me the best feeling. But I knew that it was the only outcome my mate would accept, so I was going to have to support him, despite my misgivings. It wasn’t that I didn’t think Malakai needed to be killed—I was just scared that Greyson would get hurt while trying to make that happen.

Nothing about this war had been easy or predictable. Greyson sounded confident about our prospects—and I was more than aware of how strong and capable my mate was—but being cast into Fae limbo had reminded me just how quickly the tables could turn.

“We have to find a way to finish this war quickly,” Greyson said. “It’s already gone on for way too long. It’s time for me to end this.”

**Episode 4392**

**Xavier**

Panic coursed through me as I rushed back to the pile of rocks. I had to get to Kira. I had to save her.

*She has to be okay… It can’t end like this, can it? Everything’s going to be okay. I just have to get her out from under these rocks.*

I shifted back to human and started digging with my hands, pulling the rocks away as quickly as I could. The rain had downgraded itself to mist, and everything was still soaking wet—including the rocks. I could barely get a grip on them, they were so slippery. I cursed as I yanked at a massive chunk of rock and my fingers slipped free.

But I didn’t give up. I rubbed my hands together, shook off as much moisture as I could, and kept digging. If there was any chance of saving Kira, I was going to shift this rock ASAP.

I slipped in the mud, and my knee slammed into the rocky ground.

“Shit!” I hissed. I was unable to stop the intelligible, rage-fueled shout that followed—I should’ve stayed back to help Kira. She’d told me to go, but I shouldn’t have listened. If I’d come back for her, if I’d convinced her not to sacrifice herself, I wouldn’t have ended up trying to dig her out from underneath a pile of boulders.

Even though my entire being was screaming with grief, I gritted my teeth and kept going. Eventually, the pile of rocks started to get smaller. I was getting somewhere.

“Kira!” I yelled, tossing a few more rocks over my shoulder. “Kira! Can you hear me?”

No response.

I couldn’t believe this was happening. Kira had only ended up here because of me. I was the one who’d brought her to the Redwood pack house. I was the one who’d asked her to join the Samara pack. I was her Alpha. She was my responsibility. I was supposed to protect her. I was supposed to make sure that things like *this* didn’t happen to her.

*She never would have—*

I didn’t have a chance to finish my thought. I pulled at a heavy rock and it tumbled away, revealing Kira’s lifeless eyes, staring up at me.

I gasped and fell back onto the ground. It was like all the bones had suddenly disappeared from my body. I could barely sit up.

Kira was dead. She was really dead. There was no denying it now.

I rubbed at the angry tears that started flowing down my cheeks as a wave of abject misery overtook me. The unthinkable had happened. Someone I cared about was had become a casualty of this stupid war.

Malakai was going to pay for this.

*It shouldn’t have happened like this. Kira shouldn’t be dead. This wasn’t even her fight.*

I heard the sound of someone shifting behind me, and I jumped to my feet and whirled around to face them, ready to attack. I was excited for the opportunity to take my pain out on someone else. But it was only Ava.

“Xavier?” Ava said, taking a tentative step toward me. “Are you okay?”

“I…”

*What can I say? What* is *there to say? If I say it out loud, if I tell Ava what happened to Kira, then it’ll be real. There’ll be no turning back.*

Ava walked toward me, her eyes on the pile of the rocks and what was lying beneath them. “Is she…?”

I gave her a short nod, still unwilling to say it out loud.

“Xavier, I’m so sorry,” Ava said. “This is… This is awful.”

Irrational fury bubbled up in my chest. “I don’t want your apologies!” I snapped. “You never even liked her!”

I knew it was an awful thing to say, but I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was throwing everything I had into keeping my shit together.

Ava’s expression remained unchanged, and she kept her eyes on mine. “If you want to yell at me, yell at me. Do whatever you have to do. But we need you to come back.”

She was beside me now, but she was taking care not to touch me. She probably wasn’t sure how I would react.

I collapsed to the ground and, not missing a beat, Ava sat down beside me.

“This… This isn’t about you,” I said. It was as close to an apology as I could muster at the moment. “I’m not angry at you—at least I don’t want to be. I’m angry at myself. I put Kira in this position. I led her to her death.”

I stared at the rocks lying all around me, and a sick feeling rose in my stomach.

“And this kind of death? Painful, frightening?” I choked out. “I can’t even think about what her last moments were like. Kira didn’t deserve this.”

“Don’t do this to yourself, X,” Ava said. “It’s nothing but masochism to think about it like that. And besides, it’s not even true. You didn’t lead Kira to her death. Not even a little. Are you going to minimize her sacrifice? Disregard the choice she made to do whatever it took to help us? Are you going to take that choice away from her?”

*Ava’s right… But why doesn’t that matter to me? Even though what she’s saying makes perfect sense, even though I know it’s true, I can’t feel that truth. All I feel is guilt and crushing misery.*

Ava got to her feet and then tugged at my hand, urging me to stand. “Come on, Xavier. We can’t stay here. We have to catch up with the others.”

I let her pull me to my feet, but instead of following her to the rest of the group, I just stood over Kira’s body.

“Xavier, what are you doing?” Ava asked gently.

“We can’t just leave her here. Not like this,” I choked out. “I can’t just walk away and abandon her.”

“You’re right,” Ava said. “We can ask Big Mac to handle it. She’ll get Kira out, okay?”

I shook my head. I wanted to do it myself.  I owed Kira that much. “No. I can do it. I have to.”

But even as I said the words, Ava’s remarks about Kira’s sacrifice echoed through my head.

*I can’t let her death mean nothing. We have to win this war. That’s what I have to focus on now now—I have to make sure that she didn’t die in vain.*

I took a slow step backward, and then another, staring at Kira’s resting place until I was too far away to see it anymore.

“You ready?” Ava asked, standing right by my side in a show of support that I appreciated, even though I couldn’t tell her so.

I shook my head and shifted. Ava followed suit, and then we were tearing through the woods, making our way back toward the witches.

We found them in a large clearing. Everyone was huddled into small groups, talking amongst themselves and tending to the wounded.

Kira would’ve been right here with us if I’d done my job as Alpha and protected her.

I took in the group, silently promising myself that I’d protect them all and get them through this. I wasn’t going to let Malakai cause these people any more pain. I would do for them what I hadn’t been able to do for Kira—I was going to keep them safe.

Big Mac looked up and spotted us from where she was sitting with Mrs. Smith and a still-unconscious Torin. She raised a hand in greeting as Ava and I shifted back to human.

“She’s gone,” I said, not bothering to say any more than that. I had no better words, anyway.

Big Mac nodded and sighed. “I know. We’ll make sure she’s taken care of. Witches always look out for their own.”

“We’ll see to it that she’s laid to rest peacefully,” Rowena added from where she stood wrapped in Porter’s arms.

“I want to be there when you do… whatever you’re going to do,” I told the two witches.

Big Mac nodded. “That’s fine. But you should know that Kira would understand that there are still more pressing matters to attend to, for now. We have to keep up our momentum if we want to win this thing.”

Lucian and Elle stepped forward.

“Let’s get this spell back on the road,” the princeling said, earning murmurs of gloomy agreement from Gabriel, Tabitha, Mikah, Ravi, and the others.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen a group of people so sad in the middle of a war—furious and terrified, yes, but this was different. We’d have to shake off this fog of grief if we wanted to win this thing.

“Can you even do the spell without Kira?” I asked Big Mac.

“No,” Big Mac said. “Her expertise was crucial. Without her, the spell won’t work.”

My heart fell. “So basically, we’re fucked?”

“I didn’t say that,” Big Mac said. “I’ve got something else in mind.”

**Episode 4393**

**Greyson**

Cali gripped my fur as I raced through the forest. I was trying my best to stay in the moment and focus on the fact that she was alive and here with me, but I was having a hard time keeping my mind in a positive place. This war was already taking a lot out of me—along with everyone else too—and now it had nearly cost me the woman I loved.

*How can I fully relax when I came so close to losing the thing that matters most? How can I think straight when all I can think about is how to make every single wolf in the Bitterfang army pay for what they almost took from me? I don’t think I’m going to feel better until I see Malakai’s blood spilled across the ground.*

The memory of Cali’s motionless chest under my hands, her dead weight sagging against my body, her unresponsiveness as I’d called her name… None of that was ever going to go away. I wasn’t even sure if the things I was remembering had actually happened, but I was being haunted by them nonetheless.

I’d nearly lost my mind, right then and there. *Rage*. That was what I’d felt when I thought she was dead. It reminded me of the rage I’d felt while I was beating up Ethaniel—like I’d completely lost control. I was still feeling it now, too. It wasn’t as strong as it had been before, when I’d thought Cali was gone, but it was definitely still there.

I wondered if I should’ve been worried about how unpredictable my emotions had been lately, but really, I couldn’t find it in myself to care. If I could channel this lingering rage into killing Malakai, if I could somehow use my anger against the person who was trying to rip Cali away from me, then I’d be *grateful* for it. All I had to do was find Malakai. He wasn’t going to escape me again.

Cali’s voice came to me via mind link.

*We’re getting closer to the palace*, she said. *Can you tell if anyone’s nearby? Have you caught any hints familiar scents?*

*Not yet*, I said. *The rain might’ve washed everything away. But don’t worry, we’ll find them.*

I knew our people were out here somewhere, and I was confident that once we found them, they’d be more than ready to take the fight to Malakai.

As if summoned by Cali’s question, we bounded through a tangle of brush and nearly collided with Rishika and Artemis. They tensed, getting ready to fight, but then they realized who we were.

“Artemis!” Cali cried, leaping off my back and pulling her sister into a hug. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“You too,” Artemis said, pulling back a little so she could scan Cali for injuries. “Rishika and I were hoping we’d run into you and Greyson soon. You look okay—*are* you okay?”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Cali said. “But that story can wait. Right now, I’m just so glad that we found you.”

I shifted and Rishika came walking toward me, already in reporting mode. Her devotion to the pack and her role in it never ceased to amaze me. And right now, her focus was even more vital than usual—my brain was dangerously preoccupied with Cali’s near-death experience, and my determination to make Malakai pay for it.

“Artemis and I snuck in close to the palace and took a look around. It seems like any Bitterfangs who weren’t washed away by the storm have retreated there—and from what I could tell, there aren’t many of them left. We might even outnumber them, now. We should be able to take them out for good.”

“Good,” I said, absorbing the information. It was strange to hear something hopeful for once, all things considered. “Do you know where the rest of the alliance is? We should regroup as soon as possible so we can figure out our next move.”

“Last we saw, the bulk of the alliance was heading away from the palace,” Rishika said. She turned and pointed. “Lucian took them northeast.”

“Do you think they were looking for someplace to wait out the storm?” Cali interjected.

Abruptly, I realized that there was at least one Vanguard building that the Bitterfangs probably hadn’t found.

“I bet they went to Aysel’s weird sex cottage,” I said. Unable to help myself, I thought of the cozy, provocative interior of the place, and how determined Aysel had been to seduce me within its walls.

Cali scrunched up her nose. “I forgot that place even existed.”

I flashed an apologetic grin. “I’d like to forget it, too, but it’s probably where they all ended up. It’s as good a place as any to hide out.”

Rishika and I shifted and took off, Cali and Artemis riding in our backs. We ran fast and were nearly at the cottage when I picked up a rush of familiar scents. We kept pushing forward until we found the rest of the alliance Alphas, scattered around a large clearing.

Big Mac and Rowena were talking to Lucian, Xavier, Ava, Porter, Mace, Duke, and Paige. I was grateful to see everyone in one place. Everything had gotten so scattered there for a while. We definitely needed to regroup. I could tell that they were discussing something serious, so I quickly shifted and went to join them with Cali.

“Glad you could finally join us, Greyson,” Lucian said. “Not that we weren’t getting along fine without you.”

Ignoring him, I turned my attention to Xavier. “What did I miss?”

I was surprised when Lucian answered—and I was even more surprised when Xavier didn’t stop him. I started to ask Xavier what his problem was, but then I realized that he didn’t look like himself.

“Malakai came for the witches,” Lucian said. “One of them died, which takes the anti-shifting spell off the table, but Big Mac has another plan.”

“We lost one of the witches?” I demanded, searching the group as a chill ran through me. “Who? Who did we lose?”

It didn’t take me long to figure out who wasn’t here. Kira. She was the only witch missing.

 “Kira?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I held my breath as I waited for the inevitable confirmation, hoping I was wrong but knowing I wasn’t.

“What?” Cali gasped out. “Oh my god. What happened?”

Tears were already pooling in Cali’s eyes, and it hurt me to see her in so much pain—especially after what she’d just gone through.

“What happened is she saved us all,” Lucian said in a rare show of sensitivity. His usual cocky, princeling attitude wasn’t detected. “Without her, I don’t think any of us would be standing here talking to you. She was an amazing witch. I wish I’d gotten the opportunity to get to know her better.”

The sentiment was uncharacteristically nice, but I didn’t give a shit about how the princeling felt about Kira’s death—I was more concerned about Xavier. I’d known something was wrong with him from the moment I’d laid eyes on him, and now that I knew the truth, I felt for him.

I eyed my brother closely. His jaw was set, and he was taking pains to avoid meeting anyone’s eyes—mine and Cali’s in particular. But I could still see the misery written across his face, and I understood it. Kira might’ve left our pack, but she’d been a huge part of it while she was still living with us, and she’d always supported Cali and had my back. I didn’t hold it against her that she’d gone to the Samaras—her first loyalty was to Xavier, and I understood that.

She’d been our friend, and she’d been one hell of a good witch.

I sighed, finally managing to catch my brother’s eye. “I’m sorry, Xavier. I know—”

“You don’t know anything,” Xavier spat, cutting me off. “And I don’t want to talk about Kira. This isn’t the time or the place. What I *want* to talk about is how we’re going to take Malakai down. He doesn’t deserve to draw breath for even a minute more.”

I saw Ava place a calming hand on Xavier’s shoulder, but he didn’t even seem to notice it. He’d been trying not to look at me before, but now he was staring at me head-on, and I couldn’t ignore the fire in his eyes.

“You’re the head Alpha, right?” he said. “That means you’ve got a plan—so let’s hear it. This fucked-up war has gone on long enough. How are we going to get Malakai? How are we going to keep him from hurting anyone else?”

I was about to answer, but then Big Mac stepped in.

“About that,” she said. “I think there’s a way that we can—”

The loud, steady sound of running footsteps came from the woods, drowning out Big Mac’s voice. Seconds later, a pack of wolves burst into the clearing.

**Episode 4394**

Instantly on high alert, everyone turned to look at the newcomers… And then we all let out a collective sigh of relief. It was the Pit Bulls. Russell and Julia were leading the way, and I was so happy to see them—and surprised, too.

Julia shifted back to human as she approached. “What did we miss?”

She was clearly doing her best to put up a positive front, but it had to be difficult, walking in on a group of people as they actively plotted to kill your father—even if said father was the absolute worst.

I rushed up to Julia and pulled her into a hug. “I’m so glad to see you—but what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here! You’re supposed to be back at the pack house. It’s not safe for you out here. Or for you!” I added, looking at Russell.

I was feeling a bit of emotional whiplash. I’d just found out that my good friend had died, and Xavier was clearly struggling with it, and I was desperate to be there for him. But now Julia was here, and I wanted to be there for her, too. Of course, Ava probably wouldn’t have let me get within a foot of Xavier to comfort him, which did simplify things. She was pasted to his side like a barnacle.

*But can I blame her for that? They’re together now. It’s* her *job to comfort him. Things have changed.*

A fresh swirl of emotions raced through me as I reflected on how strange everything had become. But I couldn’t dwell on that right now. We had a war to win, and we were going to have to focus if we wanted to avoid losing anyone else.

“I know I was supposed to stay back at the pack house,” Julia said. “But I can’t just stand by and do nothing while my father is hurting people. I don’t want to be that kind of person. I won’t stay safe and tucked away while other people are fighting. I want to be here. I *need* to be here.”

“And I’m here to support her,” Russell added. “But also to stand up for myself. I don’t want to stand by and let Malakai keep terrorizing people like he terrorized us.”

I was proud of Julia and Russell, but I didn’t want them to get hurt. They were so young, and had so much life ahead of them, I didn’t want to see that potential ruined by Malakai. I knew better than anyone how quickly things could go south in the heat of battle, and I didn’t want the teenagers to get in over their heads.

I hugged Julia tightly, then Russell. I couldn’t tell them not to fight—and I doubted they’d listen to me anyway—but I could at least keep my promise to Honora and take care of Julia, regardless of what the Bitterfang Luna decided to do. I would take care of Russell, too, alongside his parents and the Pit Bulls. That’s what I’d been doing this whole time, and I wasn’t about to stop now.

“I’m sure I won’t be able to talk you two out of this, but please stay close to me or your parents, at the very least,” I said. “I’m not kidding about the danger out here. We’ve already… We’ve lost some people we care about.”

Julia nodded briskly. “We will,” she promised. “We’ll be careful, Cali, I promise.”

“As much as I’m sure we’re all enjoying this heartfelt reunion, can we get back to strategizing?” Lucian said. “Perhaps you’ve all forgotten, but we do happen to be in a life-and-death situation at the moment, and time is of the essence.”

I rolled my eyes, but turned back to rejoin Big Mac and the Alphas.

“Do any of the Pit Bulls want to join us?” Greyson asked. “You’ve got as much of a right to contribute to this discussion as the rest of us.”

Vishal stepped forward. “I’ll sit in.”

The witches were clustered behind Big Mac, and the sight of them made my stomach clench. Kira should’ve been standing right there beside them.

I touched Greyson’s shoulder and silently reached out to him. *I need a minute. Is that okay?*

Greyson’s gaze was soft as he looked at me and nodded. He squeezed my hand. *Take all the time you need, Cali. I’ll be right here. Don’t go too far—I’ll call you back once we land on an actual plan.*

I gave him a sad smile and walked away, stopping when I spotted a group of Redwoods standing apart from the others.

“Hey, Cali,” Lola called out when she saw me.

I strode over to join my friend, who’d obviously been crying and was clutching something tightly in her hand. I flung my arms around her, unable to hold my own tears back any longer. Lola hugged me back, and we stood that way for a while before she spoke again.

“I can’t believe we lost them,” she said. “This is like a bad dream.”

I pulled back sharply. “*Them?*”

Lola’s face fell. “Oh. You don’t know. Malakai—” A sob clipped Lola’s voice before she could finish her sentence, but then she swallowed roughly and tried again. “Malakai killed Jacqueline.”

I inhaled sharply. “Jacqueline…”

I went quiet as I tried to wrap my head around the idea of both Jacqueline and Kira being gone forever. I hadn’t known either of them all that long, but they’d become integral parts of my life, and I was really going to miss them. It was just so strange and unsettling to think that I’d been talking to them not that long ago, and now they were both just suddenly… *gone*.

“How are you coping?” I asked Lola. “Are you okay?”

Wordlessly, she showed me what she’d been clutching in her hand—it was Jacqueline’s bracelet.

“It belonged to Jacqueline’s mom,” Lola said. “She never took it off. I just haven’t been able to let it go, even to put it in my pocket. I’m really going to miss her. She could be such a pain in the ass, but I really cared about her. I can’t believe she’s gone!”

“I get it,” I said, holding back my own tears so that I could comfort her. “And you don’t have to let the bracelet go. It was special to her, and now it’s special to you, too—something to remember her by. Keep it close for as long as you want to.”

Greyson’s voice suddenly reached me.

*Sorry for butting in—I see that you’re with Lola right now, but I need you.* We *need you. I want to get your thoughts on our plan.*

*Be right there*,I said.

I refocused on Lola, who was still staring down at the bracelet. “When this is over, we’re going to celebrate Jacqueline’s and Kira’s lives. We have to survive this stupid war for our friends. We have to make sure that their deaths really mean something.”

Lola nodded. “We have to honor them.”

I folded Lola’s hand over the bracelet. “I have to head back to the war room. Are you going to be okay?”

Lola nodded. “Yes. I’ll be fine. Go—help them figure out how we’re going to avenge our friends.”

I hurried back over to Greyson and the others. Greyson put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

*I wonder if he knows about Jacqueline yet*,I thought to myself. *But I suppose now isn’t the time to tell him. He needs to focus on the plan.*

Big Mac cleared her throat. “Okay, let’s get started. Since we won’t be able to do the anti-shifting spell without Kira, I’ve come up with another way to defeat the Bitterfangs. A way that’s only possible because Kira didn’t just save us—she gave us an edge, too.”

“How?” Xavier demanded, his voice low. I could tell that he was still struggling, but Ava was right there to comfort him. I looked away before I was forced to witness Ava clinging to him and smoothing a hand through his hair.

“When Kira died, she released a huge amount of residual energy,” Big Mac said. “The rest of us will be able to use it to boost our own power.”

“Well, I guess her death was worth it, then,” Xavier said bitterly. “Speaking for myself, I’d much rather have her here instead of her residual energy or whatever.”

Big Mac glared at him. “We *all* wish Kira was still with us, Xavier, but she’s not—and now we have to keep going without her, and use every asset at our disposal to win this war. Or have you forgotten about that?”

Xavier’s lip curled as he glared right back at her. Ava’s grip on his arm tightened.

“So what are we going to do?” I interjected, hoping to defuse the situation. “We have this amazing energy that Kira left behind, and we can’t let it go to waste—so how are we going to use it?”

“We’re going to make her proud,” Big Mac said, slowly tearing her gaze away from Xavier. “We’re going to use her energy to take down the entire Bitterfang army at once.”

**Episode 4395**

**Xavier**

It was only getting harder to keep looking calm on the outside when on the inside, I was seething. Kira’s comment about helping Big Mac made a hell of a lot more sense now, but I still hated that we needed her to be dead for this plan to work. It wasn’t fair.

I also didn’t love how flippantly Big Mac was talking about it. She and Kira had been close—I knew that—but Big Mac was speaking about her death like it was a necessary step in some master plan. I wanted an edge as much as anyone, but not like this.

Ava slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it tight as her voice came to me via mind link.

*As soon as this is all over, we’ll do something special for Kira*,she said. *But we need to kill the bastard who created this mess, first*. *I know you’re upset—I can see it on your face—but you can’t let the grief distract you. You need to focus on getting the fuckers who did this.*

She was right.

I took a deep, quiet breath, making a concerted effort to squash down my grief and anger and focus on how I was going to kill Malakai. I didn’t expect his death to make Kira’s any less tragic, but it’d sure help me sleep better at night.

“If Kira’s residual energy will let us kill them all, then let’s do it,” I said. “What are we waiting for?”

Big Mac turned her sharp gaze on me. “Did I say ‘kill’? I said that we’d be able to take them *down.* We’re going to trap them all mid-shift. They’ll be incapacitated by sheer agony for about seventy-two seconds. That’s over a minute of excruciating pain.”

“That’s an oddly specific amount of time,” I said.

“Take it or leave it,” Big Mac snapped.

“Oh, I’m taking it,” I said darkly. “Seventy-two seconds will be more than enough.”

“That’s the plan,” Big Mac said. “It’s not a lot of time, but you’ll be surprised by what you’re able to do under that kind of pressure, and with that kind of reward.”

I couldn’t help but respect the note of joy in Big Mac’s voice—she was relishing the idea of putting the Bitterfang scum through the ringer, just as much as I was. We were finally going to show them how big a mistake they’d made by crossing us.

“Good,” I said. “We can get a lot done in seventy-two seconds. I already have a few ideas.”

The Samaras cheered behind me as I imagined driving my clawed hand deep into Malakai’s chest. Crushing his heart would only take four seconds, tops.

“You’ll have to be strategic,” Big Mac said. “We won’t cast the spell until enough of you are close to Malakai—you’ll have to be ready to take advantage of the time we give you. Once the spell runs out, you’ll be on your own. But I know you’ll put the time to good use.”

“I think we can make that happen,” Greyson said. “How long do you need to prepare for the spell?”

“Not long at all,” Big Mac said. “Kira really came through for us.”

“And there’s no way to make the spell’s effects last longer than seventy-two seconds?” Porter asked. “Hell, just fiveminutes would give us enough time to knock out the entire army.”

Rowena answered, this time. “No. Even with Dani’s help, we won’t have enough strength for that. We’ve been run ragged, just like everyone else. Kira basically gave us one final boost of energy. It’s a wonder we can even do this, so the rest of you really will have to make it count.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “We can do it. Seventy-two seconds works for me. Plenty of time.”

Greyson nodded. “Then our strategy is for every Alpha to get as close to Malakai as quickly as possible so we can take him out the second the spell hits. Do whatever it takes to get past any Bitterfangs who try to stop you. They don’t matter—only Malakai does.”

“When we get rid of him, the rest of the Bitterfangs will fall,” I added.

*And I’m going to be the one to take him down. I’m going to gut that asshole for taking Kira, and for all the other pain he’s caused—including terrorizing Cali. By the time I’m done with him, he’s going to wish he never laid eyes on me.*

Ava squeezed my hand again.

*I’ve got your back*,she mind linked. *I’ll help you get to Malakai. We’re in this together.*

“This will all be over soon,” Cali said. “And then we’ll be able to honor everyone who helped us win. We’re doing this for them.”

Her words settled on me, and I suddenly started to feel a lot calmer. Cali would always have that effect on me, but her words seemed to have shifted the energy of the rest of the war council as well. We needed all the encouragement we could get after the losses we’d suffered, and Cali was the perfect person to provide it.

“The Bitterfang army has retreated to my palace,” Lucian said bitterly. “So can we finally take it back, now? I think we’ve waited long enough.”

Greyson gave Lucian a firm nod. “Let’s do it. Rishika and Artemis scouted out the palace, not long ago—they’re there, and their numbers have been steeply cut by Big Mac’s storm. Now is the time.”

The rest of the Alphas made various noises of agreement before we split up to confer with our respective packs. Some of them were still MIA because of the storm, so we had to hope we’d find all our wolves soon. We’d gotten lucky that the storm hadn’t forced any of us too far off of the Vanguard grounds. Eventually we would’ve all found each other regardless—we’d all be where the fighting was.

I called for the Samaras, still working to keep my temper under control. I had to keep it together, at least until we tracked down Malakai. It was important to present a calm, measured front to the pack—but once I had Malakai in my sights, I intended to unleash every bit of the fury I was currently forcing down.

Ava was standing at my side, and I couldn’t ignore how rightit felt to have her there. Her sheer presence was helping to keep me calm. I wasn’t going to dwell on the repercussions of that.

The rest of the pack was already primed to fight—especially Knox, who didn’t let me get a word out before he started questioning me.

“What’s the plan?” he demanded.

Ava shook her head at him. “Shut up and listen.”

“We’re about to advance on the Vanguard palace, where the remnants of the Bitterfang army have taken refuge—probably to lick their wounds.” There were a few chuckles and cheers. “The witches are going to cast a spell that will trap them mid-shift for exactly seventy-two seconds. While that’s happening, we’re going to go for Malakai.”

“I’m going to rip his throat out!” Knox shouted.

“If you get to him first, go for it,” I said. “It doesn’t matter who does him in, as long as it gets done. But you’re going to have a lot of competition.”

I’d fantasized about ripping out Malakai’s throat so many times that it almost felt like an obsession.

“At least we’re not too far from the palace,” Ava said. “We’ll get there in no time, which means that all of this will be over soon.”

I took in Ava’s words, feeling invigorated and hopeful that we were coming to the end of the war—for real, this time. With Malakai out of the picture, I’d finally be able to focus all my attention on killing Adéluce and getting out from under her thumb.

“Ready?” Greyson called out from where he was standing in front of the milling alliance packs.

“Ready!” a chorus of voices shouted back.

Then, in near silence, what was the left of the alliance shifted and took off toward the heart of the Vanguard estate.

There was an air of confident expectation in the air as we sped toward our destination. I glanced at the witches, riding on the backs of various wolves, and knew that every single member of the alliance was looking forward to what we hoped would be the end of the war. We would take Malakai and the Bitterfangs out.

We would end this.

My blood was pumping, and excitement was stirring in my belly. I was ready for this. After what had happened to Kira, all I could think about was causing the Bitterfangs and their allies as much pain as they’d caused us.

We breached the border of the Vanguard estate. A distant part of my mind was surprised to find the Bitterfang army ready and waiting—but I didn’t hesitate. I threw myself at the closest group of wolves, and the battle began.

**Episode 4396**

I watched as Xavier launched himself into the Bitterfang lines without a moment’s hesitation. He tore into the first wolf he saw, taking it out with ease before he set his sights on his next target.

*I guess we’re just going for it, then*,Greyson said. *Leave it to Xavier to start things off with a bang… Could you ask Big Mac for an ETA for the spell?*

“Greyson’s wondering when you’ll cast the spell,” I told Big Mac, who was clinging to Mrs. Smith’s back, right beside me and Greyson.

The witch turned her attention on Greyson. “Don’t worry about that—you and all the other Alphas just need to concentrate on getting to Malakai. We’ll be watching, and we’ll kick it off at the right moment—which will be when enough of the Alphas have gotten close enough.”

That made sense to me. It would’ve been pointless to cast the spell right now, when we didn’t even know where Malakai was. I only hoped that seventy-two seconds would be enough, when the time came. Xavier and Greyson had seemed pretty confident, but that had been before we’d come face-to-face with a horde of desperate Bitterfangs and their allies.

“Good luck,” I told Big Mac as Greyson sprinted ahead of Mrs. Smith. “And stay safe!”

*Be sure to take your own advice*, Greyson told me. *I trust you to fight—*

*We both need to be smart and safe*,I said, cutting him off. *I expect you to be alive when this is all over—and I’ll hold myself to the same standard.*

*Agreed*, he replied. I could hear the smile in his voice.

And with that, Greyson stopped running, and I hopped off his back. Moments later, I watched him dive into the fray. I paused just beyond the relative safety of the tree line, wanting to get a better handle on the situation before I jumped in myself.

The battle was well and truly underway. Xavier really *had* kicked it off with a bang. Artemis and Rishika’s intel was accurate—the Bitterfang army’s numbers were down, and we were more evenly matched now. In every other battle before this one, we’d been forced to contend with a *sea* of Bitterfang, Hackberry, Northwind, and Ironwood wolves, but now—between the unmitigated savagery of Big Mac’s storm and the Bitterfang dissent that seemed to be in the air—Malakai’s army was a shadow of its former self.

Oh, we *so* had this.

Not too far away, I spotted Artemis stalking around the edges of the battlefield, her magic bow at the ready.

I summoned my sword, hoping that this battle wouldn’t end with me having to stab myself with it… Again.

*This time, the stabbing will be strictly reserved for enemy wolves.*

I trotted over to join Artemis, who flashed me an excited smile. “I’ve really missed the thrill of battle,” she said. “Let’s fight together, Cali—put our training to good use!”

“Let’s do it.” I readied myself, glancing back at Julia and Russell, who’d kept their promise and were sticking close to me.

*I’m going to do everything in my power to keep everyone safe. I feel good about my chances, too—I’ve never felt more comfortable with my sword.*

I caught sight of Zipper and Knox. They were easily taking down a group of wolves, but right across from them, Porter and one of his Cobalts were being pushed back toward the woods by three Bitterfangs.

“Artemis!” I shouted, pointing at Porter.

“On it!”

Artemis nocked an arrow and let it fly in a movement that was so fast, I barely saw it happen. One moment she was taking aim, and the next a magic arrow seemed to materialize in the right eye of one of the Bitterfangs, taking him out and evening Porter’s odds.

I heard a loud growl and spun around, summoning my shield. I was tempted to use my magic to hold both my sword and shield at once, but would I be able to keep it going? Did I want to find out right here and now?

I spotted the source of the growl just as a large wolf lunged at Julia. There was no way that she’d be able to fight him off on her own, and Russell was busy defending himself against another wolf.

I dissolved my shield and shot a bolt of energy at the wolf bearing down on Julia, blasting him backward. He hit a tree and crumpled to the ground, but then another wolf immediately headed for Russell.

“Got him!” Artemis called out, killing him with a single shot to the heart.

Sword in hand, I lashed out at an enemy wolf that was lunging for me, slicing him across the flank and leaving him bleeding on the ground as I pushed forward as quickly as I could. The only thing on my mind was taking Greyson’s advice and plowing through the Bitterfang army as fast as I could in favor of getting to Malakai—wherever he was.

*If I were Malakai, I’d be as close to the palace as possible, preparing for a retreat. Things aren’t looking too good for him right now.*

He had to be running scared. We were making real progress, this time. This wasn’t like all the other battles and skirmishes of the war, where we’d only come out on top by the skin of our teeth, and without even managing to make a dent in the Bitterfang numbers.

No, this was different. This time, we stood a real chance at winning a true, decisive victory. The winds had finally shifted in our favor.

To my left, Julia and Russell were fighting side by side, both holding their own. I was so proud of them. Julia had wanted to fight for the alliance and here she was, doing her bit. Russell was right there with her, and together we took down wolf after wolf as we made steady progress through the Bitterfang army, searching for Malakai.

All around us, the other alliance Alphas and Lunas were doing the same, quickly dispatching the Bitterfang foot soldiers and plowing forward.

I heard a breathy growl behind me and turned, my sword raised. A wolf was just about to pounce on me, but I quickly cut him down—just as Andrew’s large form flew past me. Xavier wasn’t far behind him. He had his teeth bared and was moving faster than I’d ever seen him go.

I hesitated, wanting to go after them but not wanting to leave Julia and Russell on their own. I’d promised to protect them, and I wanted to make sure that I was close enough to do that.

*But maybe they’ll be okay without me. They’re holding their own, and taking out tons of Bitterfang fighters in the process. We all are. But what about Xavier? Can he handle Andrew on his own?*

I wasn’t sure if he could. Andrew was freaking *massive*.

*I have to go help Xavier.*

But Xavier wasn’t waiting for me—he had already launched himself into a battle with Andrew.

Both wolves went up on their hind legs as they collided, and Xavier was so immediately absorbed in the fight that he didn’t notice the wolf creeping up behind him.

Without thinking, I lunged forward and buried my sword deep in its side. Xavier didn’t react, still locked in a fierce struggle for dominance with Andrew. At first, I couldn’t figure out who had the upper hand—but then Xavier sank his teeth into Andrew’s shoulder, and I knew he had things under control.

I went back to wading through the chaos, keeping my eyes peeled for Malakai. We had to stay on task. Malakai was the most important thing right now, and we needed to get to him so that the witches could take their cue and put the Bitterfang army out of commission.

And then, finally, I spotted him.

Malakai was in wolf form, moving through the mass of bodies, looking for his next victim. He’d left a trail of downed alliance wolves in his wake.

Lucian had clearly spotted Malakai, too, and was racing toward him from the opposite direction. Greyson was closer than the both of us. We were gaining on him.

*This is working. We’re going to do this. We’re really going to end this war.*

All of a sudden, a wolf appeared out of nowhere and came running toward me, teeth bared and ready. I stumbled backward, raising my shield and my sword, but the wolf was moving so fast, it almost felt like I was about to get run over by a car. All I could do was brace for impact.

But before the wolf could reach me, it dropped to the ground, and I heard its bones start to crack as its body contorted.

*This is it! The spell! It’s time!*

I began the countdown in my head as I took in the awful but glorious sight of the entire Bitterfang army collapsing to the ground, writhing in pain.

“It’s time!” Artemis was shouting. “Seventy-two seconds and counting!”

**Episode 4397**

**Greyson**

Ignoring the agonized howls of the Bitterfangs, I kept pressing forward, heading right for Malakai.

The air was tinted with sparkling blue magic, and I could see tendrils of it seeping into Malakai’s army, sending them howling to the ground as they shifted into grotesque versions of themselves, trapped between their wolf and human forms.

*The witches have held up their end of the bargain, and now we need to hold up ours. We have to kill Malakai.*

We’d had Malakai cornered, at the center of the battle field, but when I looked again, I didn’t see the bastard. Where the fuck did he go? It was time to end this. Would he not face us?

*Find him!* I called out.

The other alliance wolves were searching with as much fervor as I was. Time was running out. By my count, maybe ten seconds had gone by, but everything was so chaotic that keeping an accurate countdown going was easier said than done.

I scanned the mass of writhing bodies as I plowed forward. Malakai had to be here—but where the hell was he?

*Shit. There isn’t a chance he’s not here, is there? Any other time, he’d have been right in the middle of things, running his mouth, but not this time. It’s like he knows we have him right where we want him.*

I leapt over the writhing bodies that littered the ground as the sound of their cracking bones filled the air, mingling with their screams of pain.

I was elated about the blow we’d just dealt to the Bitterfang army—the spell was working so well. Now, every wolf on the Bitterfang side was helpless and writhing, unable to fight back as alliance wolves tore into them and tossed their limp bodies out of the way before continuing with their search for Malakai.

I saw unexpected movement toward the center of the fight. The moves were coordinated—not the pained, spasmodic twitches of the Bitterfangs around me.

*There! He has to be there!*

I ran toward the movement, speeding past the other alliance fighters as they continued to exploit the Bitterfangs’ state of painful shifting limbo, killing them in droves.

*Even if we don’t manage to get to Malakai in time, we’ve already managed to slash the Bitterfang numbers down to almost nothing. This war’s as good as over.*

But it would never truly end until Malakai was dead, and we all knew it.

Finally, I reached the center of the fight and immediately recognized Malakai’s personal squad of guards, who—despite the obvious pain they were in—had formed a protective barrier around their Alpha. Their half-human, half-wolf mouths were letting out strange-sounding howls as they struggled to keep the alliance away from Malakai.

I couldn’t quite believe it. I’d expected to see Malakai on the ground like the others, writhing in pain, but he was still standing. I could see the large wolf’s bones cracking and shifting under his skin, and yet there he was, upright and ramrod straight and staring right at me. He didn’t even seem to be in all that much pain—either that, or he was doing an amazing job of hiding it.

“So this was your plan?” Malakai asked. “Pathetic.” His grotesque mouth curved into something that resembled a smile. “But what else should I have expected from a man with an abomination for a pack?”

I didn’t engage. The time for talking was long gone. Malakai’s insults meant nothing, and I barely registered them. I was too focused on ending this, once and for all.

I took a flying leap over the guards as they reached out with their mangled, partially shifted hands to stop me. They couldn’t do anything but throw themselves into my path. Their strength was gone. I wasn’t even going to waste time killing them—they weren’t in any state to cause me even the smallest degree of harm. I just needed to clear a path.

The seconds ticked away as I bit one of the guards and tossed him to the side before plowing through another group as easily as if they were bowling pins. But no matter how many wolves I tore apart, more always threw themselves forward to impede my progress. It was like every Bitterfang who was still capable of movement was trying to keep me from getting to Malakai. It would’ve been impressive that they were still so loyal to him after everything he’d done if it wasn’t so damn annoying.

*How much time has passed? The spell definitely won’t last much longer. I have to get to Malakai now, or all of this will have been for nothing. I can’t let that happen.*

Finally, there was only a single guard left between me and Malakai. I charged forward and rammed into him, sending him crashing to the ground where he collapsed, unmoving.

Malakai had, with much difficulty, moved a few feet away in an attempt to avoid me. He was still standing, but had gone rigid—either as a show of strength or because he was completely immobilized by agony but too much of a pain in the ass to just fall over. Either way, I could sense his panic. He knew he was reaching the end of the line.

I wished that I had time to relish this moment. This was the man who’d kidnapped Cali, who’d killed countless werewolves, who’d attacked my mother. He’d made it is his mission to eradicate my pack, to murder everyone I cared about—and now I was finally going to end him.

I lunged at Malakai and sank my teeth into his throat. His blood started to drip from my mouth and pool on the ground. I clamped down harder on his neck, and he didn’t seem to have the strength to fight back. He just stood there, bracing himself and most likely sinking every bit of his considerable willpower into staying upright. He knew that if he hit the ground, it would be over for him.

“So this is how you kill me?” Malakai demanded. “Without honor? Using your disgusting witches and their blasphemous magic to rob your opponents of a fair fight? I knew you were scum, but I never thought you’d sink this low.”

“Attacking a wolf who can’t fight back,” Malakai hissed, clenching his teeth against the pain. “I’ll say it again, Greyson—pathetic. That’s all you are. Pathetic!”

*I’ll do whatever I have to*, I mind linked to Malakai. *You’ve left me no choice. My pack and our allies will defeat you, Malakai—the methods we use are irrelevant.*

I didn’t have time for this. I jerked my head, ripping at his throat.I bit down with a little more force, hoping to hear the snap of the bones in Malakai’s neck. But then one of Malakai’s guards rushed me and hit me with such force that I lost my grip on the bastard’s neck.

*Shit, the spell must be fading—and Malakai’s still standing. Shit shit shit…*

I took a quick look around. The remnants of the Bitterfang army were starting to recover.

But that didn’t matter. We could still do this. I’d already done some damage to Malakai, and we’d killed a lot of his people.

I looked at Malakai.

*Now I just need to finish the job. I never should’ve hesitated.*

I watched as Malakai’s bones started to knit back together, allowing him to slide toward his wolf form. I tried not to let that throw me off my game. I had to keep the upper hand.

I rushed Malakai again, gratified that many of his people had stayed down. The spell had been a roaring success in that regard, at least. I crouched, ready to lunge at Malakai and end this. Two wolves landed on either side of me—Xavier and Mace. Together we could do this. None of Malakai’s leftover loyalists would get through to us. I would snap his neck, gladly.

*And you called* me *pathetic*,I said to Malakai. *So what’s the plan? Your army has been defeated. So many have already left you. More will. They’re done. We’ve won this. You’re as good as dead.*

Malakai looked exhausted, but he was now fully shifted into his wolf form and was clearly regaining his strength. I would fight him—I didn’t care how much of my strength it took. I would tear him limb from limb with my own teeth. He had flown too close to the sun, to my Cali. He would pay the ultimate price, and so would anyone who tried to follow him.

I flinched as his voice invaded my mind. *I invoke* Ut Moreretur*, the death wish!*

I clenched my teeth and took a step toward him, ready to tear him to pieces despite his declaration.

*Absolutely not!* I snapped. *Fuck your invocation. I don’t accept it—and neither will anyone else.*

Xavier stalked forward and shifted back to human. “I do. I accept it.”

**Episode 4398**

I kept my eyes on Greyson, Xavier, and Mace. They were about to take Malakai down. I couldn’t believe it. It was almost over. After everything we’d been through, we were finally about to put an end to the pack war. I could hardly contain my excitement.

But then, instead of the brutal ending I’d been braced for, everyone shifted back to human.

*What the hell is going on here? What are they doing? And are Greyson and Xavier actually* arguing *right now?*

I glanced at Artemis, who just shrugged.

“Don’t look at me—I have no idea what’s going on. I’ll never understand werewolves,” she muttered. She had an arrow nocked and ready to fly. “I’m just going to keep picking off wolves before they can fully recover. Just want to do my part.”

I refocused on the main event as Artemis let a volley of arrows fly, eliciting a series of pained cries from her targets.

*Greyson looks furious*, I thought. His heated discussion with Xavier and Mace was still raging on.

*What’s going on?* I asked Greyson. *Why didn’t you all kill Malakai?*

I waited, but he didn’t answer.

I ran toward them, jumping over the mangled, lifeless bodies of too many Bitterfangs to count. I was happy that we’d done a lot of damage, but I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing masses of dead bodies lying on the ground. But I couldn’t have a crisis about that right now. Something was happening between the Alphas, and it wasn’t good.

“I can’t believe you did that! You screwed us all!” I heard Greyson saying as I got closer. “What were you *thinking*?”

“I was thinking that I’d be able to get justice for Kira!” Xavier yelled back. “That I’d be able to hurt Malakai the way he deserves to be hurt!”

“What’s going on?” I demanded, skidding to a halt beside them. “Why didn’t you three just kill Malakai? Wasn’t that the plan? Did I miss something?”

“Ask Xavier!” Greyson growled at me before shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Cali. I didn’t mean to snap at you, but Xavier’s just put us all in an extremely shitty position, and I’m still trying to wrap my head around why he would do something so monumentally *stupid*!”

“What did he do?” I asked. I looked between the two brothers, but they were busy glaring at each other.

“Malakai asked for *Ut Moreretur*, the death wish, and Xavier accepted. Now we’re bound,” Greyson said curtly.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what that is. What does that even mean?”

“It’s an ancient, outdated tradition. I think the last documented instance was over two hundred years ago,” Greyson said darkly, still glaring at his brother.

I glanced at Malakai. He was stalking back and forth behind his few remaining guards, whose expressions were still pained as they shook off the aftereffects of the spell.

“You still haven’t told me what the tradition *is*,” I said, refocusing on Mace, Greyson, and Xavier.

“It means that Malakai just threw a Hail Mary,” Greyson said. “He knew that he was as good as dead. He invoked the right to *Ut Moreretur*, which means someone has to fight him to the death. It means he could get out with his life and win. But it wouldn’t have taken effect if his invocation hadn’t been accepted.”

Greyson glared at Xavier again, but Xavier wasn’t even looking at his brother anymore.

I was shocked. “So you mean to tell me that if Xavier hadn’t accepted Malakai’s *Ut Marri*… His Hail Mary, then the war would already be over? You could’ve killed Malakai and ended this once and for all?” I turned to Xavier. “Why on earth would you do that?”

Xavier turned his pained expression on me. “I don’t expect you to understand. I don’t expect any of you to understand—and honestly, I don’t care. I accepted the invocation because I want to see Malakai’s face when he finally loses. I want to see him take his last breath. And I want to be the one to kill him.”

“We need to talk to the other Alphas,” Greyson muttered, already walking off with Mace. “Cali, wait with Xavier. Make sure he doesn’t do anything else to threaten the safety of the entire alliance.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Dramatic as always.”

It seemed like we had reason to be. Why was Xavier being so cavalier about this? His life was at stake, and he was an Alpha now. He had a pack. Even though my heart panged at the thought, I didn’t want to lose Xavier, and his pack certainly didn’t either. Why had he agreed to this?

I waited a beat after Greyson was gone before I spoke to Xavier. “Xavier? I really don’t get this… And I’m worried. I know you’re strong, but Malakai is no joke. We’ve underestimated him before, and look what that got us. Why the hell would you put yourself in this situation? Especially when Big Mac and the witches all but handed Malakai to you on a silver plate. Don’t you get how risky this is?”

“I’m aware,” Xavier said evenly. I knew that tone. His *I completely disagree, and I’m about to be an ass about it* tone. “And if you’re about to keep telling me how much you doubt me, you can stop. I don’t need that right now, and it’s not useful. What’s done is done.”

“That’s not what I’m doing!” I snapped. “Why are you being like this?”

Xavier was about to answer when Ava appeared at his side. She gave me a hard stare before turning her attention to Xavier. “What happened?”

Xavier and Ava went quiet as they started mind linking. I tried not to look as jealous as I felt.

I watched Ava’s frown deepen more and more as the silence went on before she finally shrieked, “You did *what*?”

Xavier glanced at me before taking Ava’s hand and pulling her out of earshot.

I watched him go, wishing I could keep talking to him, but that wasn’t my role anymore. I’d been replaced.

Deciding to focus on something—anything—that wasn’t Ava and Xavier, I turned away and took stock of the battlefield. We’d done it. We’d taken down Malakai’s army, and a lot of it seemed to have run away. His allies had abandoned him, too. The handful of guards lingering beside Malakai were all that remained.

I spotted Honora at the edge of the battlefield.

*So she didn’t die in the mudslide after all.*

I had mixed feelings about that. She’d helped save Xavier and me, but she’d caused so much pain before that, and was a big part of why we were standing here, preparing to end a war that had dragged on for way too long.

*At least it doesn’t look like the alliance suffered as many casualties. Now we need to finish this so that we can give our dead a proper sendoff. I just want to put this awful war in the rearview mirror so we can all get on with our lives.*

I looked at Malakai again. Now that the spell had worn off, he didn’t look any worse for wear. My stomach twisted at the implications of that.

*Xavier’s strong, but Malakai… I’ve seen what he can do. I hope Xavier isn’t underestimating him. He didn’t even go down while the spell was active. As much as I hate to admit it, he’s a dangerous adversary, and Xavier’s going to have his work cut out for him.*

“What are we waiting for?” Malakai shouted. “I thought you all were hungry to end this fight, so you can go back to your miserable excuses for lives… *If* you manage to best me, that is. I invoked *Ut Moreretur*, and Xavier Evers accepted. I’m ready to state my terms!”

The alliance Alphas gathered, and Greyson returned to stand beside me. We all faced Malakai. Despite the losses he’d suffered, he didn’t seem at all cowed. If this battle hadn’t shaken Malakai, I had to wonder if *anything* would.

Greyson cleared his throat, and I sensed his tension as he began to speak. “We are all here to witness the *Ut Moreretur*. As Malakai, Alpha of the Bitterfang pack, invoked the tradition, he has the right to set the terms of the fight.” Greyson turned a cold gaze on Malakai. “What do you choose?”

It was obvious that Greyson hated every word he was saying, and once again, I was at a loss.

*Why are we doing this? Why would Xavier willfully reject the advantage we had over Malakai? He’s only giving Malakai another opportunity to call the shots and shift things in his favor.*

“Here are my terms!” Malakai announced. “Two on two, fight to the death. I will choose Xavier’s partner, and he will choose mine. Do you agree?”

“I agree,” Xavier said immediately.

I couldn’t believe it had come to this.

I was about to open my mouth to object when Malakai’s booming voice echoed through the air.

“For Xavier’s partner, I choose Caliana Hart!”

**Episode 4399**

**Xavier**

Greyson’s reaction was immediate.

“Absolutely not!” he snarled. “There’s no way in hell Cali’s taking part in this! She’s not even a wolf! She can’t be held to our traditions!”

Greyson was so mad that he looked like he was ready to defy Malakai’s call for *Ut Moreretur* and kill the Bitterfang Alpha right where he stood.

Meanwhile, I was still reeling at Malakai’s audacity. He’d probably had this contingency plan in his back pocket all along.

*What the hell? This isn’t what I wanted—or what I expected. I just opened the damn door for Malakai to get to Cali—like he’s wanted from the very beginning.*

For the first time, I deeply regretted answering Malakai’s invocation. But I couldn’t beat myself up about it. I had to stay focused.

Ava tightened her grip on my hand. I’d expected Malakai to choose my Luna as my partner, or even Greyson. The nature of the rules meant that you couldn’t choose a weak partner for your opponent, and it clearly showed that they thought Cali formidable—which she was. But she also wasn’t a wolf, and this fight was meant for werewolves. They easily could’ve chosen Ava, who was my Luna, but they hadn’t.

*By choosing Cali, Malakai has proven yet again that he wants her dead, and he’s going to do whatever he can to make it happen.*

Ava turned to look at me. *What do you want to do here?* she asked.

I could hear the irritation in her voice. She’d been almost as upset as Greyson when I’d told her what I’d done, and Malakai choosing Cali as my partner wasn’t helping her mood.

*You’re calling the shots here, so I’ll do whatever you think is best*, she continued. *I’ve got your back, X—even if Malakai doesn’t want me to have it. Don’t let him get under your skin with this stunt.*

*You know this wasn’t my plan*,I said. *He got one over on me, I’ll admit it. I really didn’t see that coming.*

*I know*, Ava said. *You never could’ve predicted this. You never would’ve put Cali in this kind of danger deliberately, either.*

I could hear the bitterness in her voice, even though I knew she was trying her best to be supportive. She couldn’t help it. There was no love lost between her and Cali, and this was just another nail in the coffin of their already ragged relationship.

*Nothing to do now but fight*,I said with a shrug.

But the guilt was already starting to eat at me. What if Cali got hurt? Going up against Malakai, there was a good chance that she would—and I knew exactly who Greyson, and everyone else, would blame. And they wouldn’t be wrong.

“Fuck this!” Greyson snapped. “It’s not happening, Malakai, and you’re a piece of shit for even suggesting it! You’re the scum of the fucking earth, and I can’t wait to see you dead and bleeding on the ground.”

Malakai had a bored look on his face as he regarded Greyson, pointedly choosing not to engage. Then his gaze found mine, and he tapped his wrist. “Tick tock, Xavier. Time’s running out. I’ve made my choice. What’s yours?”

I saw Cali put a hand on Greyson’s arm, and something passed between them. Greyson shut his mouth and frowned, then gave Cali a fierce hug before letting her go.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard Cali’s voice in my head. She was mind linking with me. It felt so familiar and welcome that I had to work to keep myself from running to her.

*Choose Honora as his partner*,Cali said.

*Why would I do that?* I asked. *She’s on his side. I should pick someone weak. Someone who’ll assure our victory.*

*Do it, Xavier*, she said. *Trust me. Pick Honora. It’s the right move, I promise you.*

I turned back to Malakai, who was waiting with his arms crossed and a knowing look on his face as he glanced between me and Cali. “Have you two made a decision, yet?”

“I choose Honora as your partner,” I said. “That’s our decision.”

A terrible grin cut across Malakai’s face. “And I accept it,” he said gleefully.

A sick feeling pooled in the pit of my stomach, and I was left wondering if I’d just made a horrific mistake.

Cali didn’t say anything else to me. She’d returned to Greyson’s side and was hugging him. Greyson leaned down to kiss her, and I looked away.

“You’d better not die,” Ava told me. “The Samaras are counting on you. We just got our Alpha back—we’re not about to lose you to the likes of that dumbass.”

I knew that Ava was saying that more on her own behalf than the pack’s, but I read her loud and clear.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of dying,” I said. “And I’m glad you’re here.”

I pulled her close and gave her a long, deep kiss. There was a part of me that was pleased that I was able to tell her that without it being a lie. I really *was* happy to have her by my side. If I couldn’t have Cali, Ava was the next best thing. I winced at the callousness of the thought, but it was true.

A crowd of wolves—mostly alliance, with a few stragglers from the Bitterfang side—closed in and formed a circle around us. I let go of Ava, and she pulled me back before I could walk too far away.

“*Don’t. Die*,” she repeated. “If you do, I’ll kill you.”

I tried my best to give her a cocky grin before I moved into place beside Cali.

Honora pushed her way through the crowd to stand at Malakai’s side, and we stood there facing each other. There was a flash of light as Cali conjured her sword and shield.

Malakai rolled his eyes at Cali, his lip curling into a sneer. “*This* is why your pack must be wiped off the map. No respect for the conventions of werewolf existence. You should all be ashamed to count a Fae among your ranks.”

“Fuck off!” I growled. “You chose her, now suffer the consequences.”

Everyone went quiet as Greyson’s voice rang out. “This is the beginning of the *Ut Moreretur*! Once it begins, no one can interrupt. Understood?”

There was a chorus of agreement, but out of it rose one call of dissent. I recognized the voice immediately. It was Julia.

*What the hell is the kid doing? There’s no turning back, even if she objects.*

Julia stepped forward, her eyes on Honora and Malakai. “I just want you both to know that I don’t give a shit if you die! You started this war in my name, and I never wanted it. You deserve all the pain that Xavier and Cali are about to throw at you! I can’t wait to see two *due destini* mates kill your asses!”

Now, the smile on my face was one hundred percent real.

“That was one hell of a speech,” I said admiringly, looking between Malakai and Honora. “Quite a kid you’ve got there. Thank fuck she doesn’t take after her parents.”

“She’ll change her tune once you’re both lying bloody and dying on the ground,” Malakai said evenly. “So, are we ready to end this?”

Greyson nodded at me, and I got the message without him needing to say a single word. He was telling me not to hold back. He was telling me to kill the fucker—with extreme prejudice.

*Duh. What else would I be planning to do?*

Actually feeling a little bit like my old self, I gave Greyson a thumbs-up and then shifted.

“It begins!” Greyson shouted.

I shot forward, not wanting to give Malakai or Honora the chance to get a jump on me. I heard Cali’s footsteps as she raced after me.

Malakai was rushing my way, his teeth bared and his eyes shining with hate. He wasn’t going to hold back, and neither was I.

But before we could collide, a shimmering, opaque wall appeared between us. I skidded to a halt, but Malakai didn’t see it in time and went slamming full force into the magical shield wall before falling backward.

*Thanks*, I mind linked to Cali.

I smiled to myself, wondering if Malakai even realized what a colossal mistake he’d made by underestimating Cali. His ego was going to be his undoing.

Behind Malakai, Honora was rushing to join her mate. I was ready for her.

Cali’s shield dissipated, and I lunged forward to attack Honora—but I was met with nothing but empty air as she rushed past me.

She was going for Cali.

I changed course and raced to defend her.

*I knew it! She helped Cali and me back in the palace to gain our trust, and now she’s using it against us. Now we might both pay the price for that lapse in judgment.*

We should’ve known that the Bitterfangs couldn’t be trusted—not a single one of them. Anger surged through me as I closed in on the Bitterfang Luna.

**Episode 4400**

Everything was happening so fast—one moment I was dissolving the shield between Xavier and Malakai, and the next Honora was rushing at me.

I staggered back a few steps, bracing myself for her attack, quickly conjuring my sword and shield.

*Is she really about to do this? Did I make a mistake, choosing her as Malakai’s second? Could I really have misjudged her change of heart so completely?*

But then, to my relief, Honora stopped running. Xavier skidded to a stop behind her. And then Honora was standing right next to me, and all my doubts melted away.

I looked at the Luna, and she nodded. The understanding between us was still there, just like I’d hoped. Honora was turning against Malakai—literally. She was making amends for the role she’d played in this war. I didn’t know if it was enough to fully absolve her, but it was definitely a start.

Malakai growled, clearly not pleased with this turn of events.

“*Yes*,” I said triumphantly, a darkly satisfied grin spreading across my face.

Xavier’s voiced entered my head. *He is* pissed*. She just told him, “You thought you*

*could try to kill my daughter, to get rid of me, and nothing would happen?” You were right, Cali. She really* is *turning against Malakai.* Xavier’s voice was laced with awe.

*And now Malakai’s going to get what he truly deserves*, I replied.

Xavier’s words thrilled me. I’d taken a chance by bringing Honora into the fight, but that gamble was paying off. Now all we had to do was ride the momentum to victory.

Malakai only stood there and stared as Honora and Xavier fell into step and raced toward him. I had my shield ready to go if he tried to charge again. Honora’s double-cross seemed to have thrown Malakai off his game for the first time ever, and I was ready to take advantage.

I was so glad that I’d trusted my instincts about Honora.

And now, we were going to kick Malakai’s ass. There was no way he could take on the three of us together. We were going to hit him so hard that he wouldn’t even be able to defend himself. He’d made a mistake thinking he could defeat Xavier and me together.

*He doesn’t respect magic, and now he’s going to die by it. He thought I would be the one to die here, but I’ll show him.*

Malakai let out an earth-shaking growl as he raced toward Xavier and Honora. I couldn’t help but notice that he was completely focused on Honora—Malakai didn’t seem like he was the type to let that kind of betrayal go unpunished. Honora was his wife. I hated to think of what he might do.

*But he’s not going to lay one finger on her—not on my watch. She’s not a good person, but she’s doing this for us, for the greater good. For, hopefully, her daughter. That’s got to count for something. Malakai won’t ruin that for any of us.*

“Out of the way!” I shouted.

Xavier and Honora veered apart, and I summoned a huge surge of magic and sent it spiraling out of my hands, right at Malakai. It caught him head-on, blasting him in the face and sending him sprawling—right into Xavier’s path.

Xavier immediately latched onto Malakai’s side and started ripping into the large wolf.

Malakai let out a howl as he struggled to free himself, but it didn’t sound like a howl of pain. It sounded like he was calling for something… Or someone.

There was a sudden burst of movement just outside the circle of wolves that enclosed us. People started yelling, and the crowd surged.

I heard the sound of someone shifting, just as they burst through the circle. It was Andrew, the Hackberry Alpha—Malakai had called for backup.

“You cheater!” Artemis yelled, struggling against Rishika’s hold as the other woman fought to keep her from running into the circle and tackling Malakai. “You’re a dirty cheat! We should’ve known you were too much of a coward to fight fair!”

Mace’s voice rose above the chaos. “The rules of *Ut Moreretur* are moot! The invocation is over—alliance, you’re clear to attack!”

No sooner had Mace spoken the words than the entire circle closed in on us, wolves shifting and snarling as they lunged toward the remaining Bitterfang wolves.

Xavier was still on top of Malakai, but Malakai was fighting back. Honora was focused on Andrew, which was a relief, since that meant he wouldn’t be able to join Malakai and help him fight Xavier.

Greyson was back in wolf form and racing in my direction.

*We have to help Xavier!* I told him. *If Andrew gets through Honora and teams up with Malakai, Xavier’s going to be overwhelmed.*

I raced forward, trying to get to Xavier. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of fur and realized it was Julia—and she was heading straight for Malakai.

Sensing her approach, Malakai tore away from Xavier and lunged at his daughter instead.

“NO!” I screamed.

I was closer to Malakai than Julia was, so I threw myself between them and summoned my shield as quickly as I could.

But I wasn’t quick enough.

Malakai’s claws landed on my shoulder and raked through my flesh, spilling blood before he tossed me away like a ragdoll. I landed on the ground with a thud, my head hitting the ground hard and my vision blurring.

*Did I do it? Did I save Julia?*

I didn’t know, but I had to get up. If I stayed down, one of the remaining Bitterfangs would jump on the opportunity to take me out and win favor with Malakai.

“Cali!”

Someone was calling my name.

“Cali! Cali!”

I shook my head, fighting to clear my vision. By the time I finally managed to get to my feet, I was horrified to see that Malakai was standing right in front of me, and Xavier and Greyson were nowhere to be found.

Ignoring the burning pain in my shoulder, I summoned my sword and shield. My magic flickered a bit as they formed, but I gritted my teeth and shoved more magic into them until they held strong.

*I can do this. I have to. He wants to kill me, and I’m not going to let him. Simple.*

Malakai stalked toward me, a low growl rolling up his throat.

“Get back!” I hissed.

I lashed out at him with my sword, and he took a step back, which was good. I was keeping him on the defensive. I only needed to kill time and keep him focused on me. If Greyson and Xavier were okay—and my gut told me that they were—then they’d be back by my side in no time. We’d be able to take him down together.

I noticed that Malakai was favoring his right leg and quickly adjusted my strategy. Tightening my grip on my sword, I threw myself forward and focused on his right leg, knowing that one good hit would definitely hurt him. I concentrated, not wasting a single moment as I slashed at his leg over and over.

*I can’t believe how calm and in control I feel. I never would’ve been this collected even a month ago. I’ve really come a long way in my training. I just have to keep pushing him back and holding my own until backup arrives. I can do this. He’s not going to kill me.*

*He’s not going to win.*

As if on cue, Greyson and Xavier appeared behind Malakai. Mirroring each other perfectly, they went wide and closed in fast, attacking Malakai from both sides. Greyson tore into Malakai’s left hind leg while Xavier tore into the right one.

*Do it now!* Greyson mind linked. *We’ve got him right where we want him!*

I rushed forward, my sword raised. I was *inches* away from ending this war, from sending Malakai to the death he deserved. We were going to end him together—Xavier, Greyson, and me. We were finally going to make Malakai pay for all the pain he’d caused.

But just as I was about to drive my sword through Malakai’s throat, another wolf sailed over my head. He landed with his paws on Malakai’s shoulders, tearing him out of Xavier and Greyson’s hold.

Then it happened so fast. Malakai landed on his back, and the other wolf pinned him to the ground.

*Wait, is that* Lucian*?*

It was. I watched as the wannabe prince sank his teeth into Malakai’s throat and tore it out without wasting any time. A river of blood burst from the wound, covering everything and spraying everyone in the vicinity.

Malakai let out a strangled growl, then twitched once and went still. Lucian dropped the body, and it sagged down. His white fur was blood-splattered, and he stepped over the body to howl. The other wolves joined in.

*Victory*, they seemed to say.

It was over.

Malakai was dead.