**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 34**

**Episodes 4401–4520**

**Episode 4401**

The wolves’ howls of victory were loud enough to hurt my ears, as they echoed through the forest. Lucian stepped back to reveal Malakai’s body. In death, he’d shifted back to human, his fur turning into bloody, torn-up skin. The once powerful leader of the Bitterfang pack was nothing but a mangled corpse.

In death, the beast had become human.

*Is… Is he truly gone? Is the war finally over?*

I’d thought I’d feel relief in this moment, or even joy. Instead, I felt heavy. The sensation started in my chest, then it spread throughout my body as Honora stepped forward. She gasped, falling to her knees beside Malakai. She reached her hand out to touch his face, but then she jerked it back with a flinch, like he was still alive and had just screamed at her to stay away. She cradled her hand to her chest, over her heart, and simply stared at his lifeless form. There were tears running down her cheeks.

She wasn’t the only one crying.

Julia was in Russell’s arms, sobbing quietly.

*What are they thinking? How are they feeling? Are they mourning the man they wish he could’ve been, or the monster he truly was?*

Neither Julia nor Honora had said a word, and yet my ears were filled with noise.

The alliance wolves had shifted back to human, and they were cheering. A man’s death had just ensured our survival, and that was cause for celebration. The ending of a war always meant winners and losers, and we were on the winning side.

But despite the cheers and celebration, I felt numb.

Kira and Jacqueline had died for this.

My friends were gone.

“Cali…” Greyson’s voice was soft, and so was his touch when he rested a hand on my shoulder. I looked up at him. There was a deep cut above his eyebrow, and smears of blood on his chest and arms. But he was standing beside me, alive. Safe.

We were finally safe. But for some reason, it didn’t feel that way.

“You’re hurt,” Greyson said, his expression pinched with worry as he inspected the wound on my shoulder, where Malakai had swiped at me, and the bump on the side of my forehead from when I’d fallen to the ground.

“I’m fine,” I croaked, even though I did feel a little woozy.

Greyson shook his head, pulling me into a gentle hug. I was so lucky to be here with him, alive and in one piece.

It could’ve been me in Kira’s place.

*Why wasn’t it me?*

Did fate decide who lived and died?

A lump grew in my throat, and I held Greyson tighter. I looked over at Xavier—his arms were wrapped around Ava, but when his gaze flicked to me, it lingered. The memory of the kisses we’d shared while fighting to escape the palace invaded my mind, and a shiver ran through me. I was glad he wasn’t dead.

*Does he think of me as much as I think of him?*

But I couldn’t linger on that question right now.

“What should we do about Honora?” Greyson asked me quietly.

A surge of guilt hit me—I was in Greyson’s arms, but I was thinking about Xavier. Again. His question tugged me back to the here and now, and I refocused, turning to look at the Bitterfang Luna.

Honora wasn’t crying anymore. She was just sitting there, next to Malakai’s body, her knees drawn up to her chest. She looked young, suddenly, and my gut throbbed.

I turned to Greyson. “Hasn’t she been punished enough, having to watch the death of the man she loves?”

But Greyson shook his head. “Honora stood by Malakai up until the very last minute,” he said coldly. “She had a hand in trying to kill her own daughter, and Russell.”

“But she came through in the end,” I said. “She helped us. That’s a fact.”

Greyson paused, his jaw clenched tight. “She tried to kill you multiple times. That’s another fact.”

“Do you really think this decision is up to us?”

Greyson shook his head, sighing. “I’m not sure who else would make it. I’m still in charge of the alliance.”

“It feels wrong, though,” I whispered. “Like we’re executioners. Like we’re playing god. This isn’t how it’s supposed to—”

“This is war, love,” Greyson said. His tone was low. Heavy. The truth of his words hurt.

I gestured at Julia. “I think she should be the one to decide. We’ve talked about this before, remember?”

“Julia’s just a kid,” Greyson said. “And at the end of the day, Honora’s still her mother, who tried to do something good at the end of this. It’s complicated. We shouldn’t put her in that kind of position.”

“The Bitterfangs forced her into this position, Greyson,” I said. “This pack war started because Julia’s parents were so against her falling in love with Russell.”

“That’s true,” he conceded. “But I can’t leave such an important decision to Julia alone. I have the other packs to answer to. We can take her opinion into consideration, but we can’t assume she’s able to deal with this right now.” He glanced at the girl, swallowing hard. “She’s a wreck, Cali.”

I followed his gaze to Julia, who was still crying. Sobbing.

I took in a shaky breath. “Let’s give her some time to collect herself before we ask her what she wants to do.”

“Fair enough,” Greyson said, resting his hands gently on my shoulders. “I can’t make any promises, though. You understand that, right?”

Greyson’s touch and presence were as comforting as ever, but I’d seen what this war had brought out of him when he’d attacked Ethaniel. I’d seen what the sire bond could do.

*Tuck those thoughts away, Cali*, I told myself. *You can’t fix everything right this minute.*

“Greyson!” Mace called.

A moment later, he, Duke and Paige, Porter and Rowena, and Xavier and Ava surrounded us. They started talking loudly and all at once, but I wasn’t listening. I took them in, registering cuts and bruises, rapidly closing wounds, and the streaks of blood on their skin that belonged to them and their enemies.

They looked normal, otherwise. Like they hadn’t just witnessed a mass slaughter.

*I guess it’s all part of being a werewolf…*

I wasn’t a werewolf, though.

“… but what do we do with the prisoners?” Mace was asking when I tuned back into the conversation. “We’ve rounded up the remaining Bitterfangs, and a decision needs to be made.”

Mace’s words were sharp, determined, and I swallowed nervously. Porter’s expression was much calmer, though equally imposing. “My pack’s in favor of punishing them. Making them pay for the deaths they caused.”

Kira. Jacqueline.

*They’re gone.*

“Wait,” I said, speaking before my brain could catch up. “Does that mean—”

“An eye for an eye, Redwood Luna,” Duke told me casually. Like he was talking about his lunch plans instead of people’s lives.

I looked over at the Bitterfang prisoners. They’d been organized into a single line surrounded by guards, with rope on their wrists and their heads hanging low. Andrew, the Alpha of the Hackberry pack, was at the front of the line. The other Alpha, Ethaniel, was nowhere to be seen. Had he died? Had he gotten away? My gaze flicked back to Andrew. His shoulder looked dislocated, but other than that he looked pissed off.

*Why isn’t his shoulder any better? Does it have to do with the fact that it was inflicted during the anti-werewolf spell? Is he… Is he going to stay that way until he goes to a doctor?*

Lucian’s voice, nasally and unpleasant as always, made me wince. “Every Alpha here knows that if I hadn’t killed Malakai, we might all very well have ended up as Malakai’s prisoners.”

“We came here to win, Lucian,” Xavier said, glaring at him. “Failure was never an option. Even if we’d been captured, we still would’ve found a way to turn the tables on Malakai.”

Lucian scoffed. “Still, I doubt Malakai would’ve shown any mercy if he’d captured us. I thought you knew that better than anyone, Xavier.”

Xavier’s mouth snapped shut, and I just *knew* his mind had gone to the same place as mine—he was remembering the way Malakai had tried to force us to fight to the death for his own amusement.

*He deserved to die, Cali*, I told myself. *You wanted him to die. You wished for it.*

All that I was wishing for now was to feel relief. To feel *free*, without all my horrible thoughts and fucked-up memories. I wanted to feel human—and I highly fucking doubted that I would if the alliance massacred the rest of the Bitterfangs, like lambs to the slaughter.

*They’re not lambs. They’re wolves.*

But what did that make *us*?

“Maybe we should leave it up to the council to decide if our prisoners live or die,” I burst out.

The group’s reaction was a mixture of scoffs and sighs. Rowena eyed me, pressing her lips together. She hadn’t said a word so far. Was she struggling with the thought of killing the prisoners, too?

“The council did nothing to prevent this war,” Mace said. “They’re useless, and they have no right to make this decision, Cali.”

“But what’s the alternative?” I asked.

Lucian puffed out his chest. “Since *I* was the one who slayed Malakai, *I* should decide their fate.”

Xavier barked out a laugh. “Seriously? You weren’t the one who captured him—you just leapt in at the last moment and stole the kill from Cali, Greyson, and me.”

“Perhaps I did have some help,” Lucian said shiftily. “But the fact remains that the Bitterfangs destroyed my palace. They should pay the ultimate price.”

My stomach twisted at Lucian’s words, but before I could speak, he turned to the Vanguard soldiers who were guarding the remnants of the Bitterfang army.

“What are you waiting for?” he shouted. “Execute Alpha Andrew and the rest of the vermin who desecrated our home!”

**Episode 4402**

**Greyson**

“No!” Cali shouted, marching forward to plant herself between Lucian and the prisoners. “This is *not* your decision to make, Lucian!”

My heart was beating so fucking fast, I knew that every wolf in the vicinity was hearing it. But I didn’t give a damn—that was my mate, my future Luna, and she was taking charge of this fucked-up situation like nobody’s business. And there was righteous indignation in her stance, yes, but that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Cali was angry.

Not *just* angry, though.

Cali was *hurt*. I could see it in her every movement, and in the way she was glaring at Lucian. I ached for her, and I hated that she’d had to witness so much horror throughout this war. I wished I could take it all away and make her feel better, but I couldn’t focus on her right now—not the way I wanted to.

The war might’ve been over, but the aftermath had just started.

“Caliana! That’s not what—*I beg your pardon?*” Lucian sputtered for a moment, clearly surprised by Cali’s outburst, before he made an irritated noise and puffed himself up again. “They are prisoners of war! They need to die!”

Cali didn’t move a muscle. Her hands fisted at her sides, she glared up at Lucian. “Their leader is dead. What is killing them supposed to achieve?”

“It’d sure help me sleep better at night,” Duke interjected.

Mace nodded, his shoulders stiff. “How can we be sure that Andrew won’t come after us with some kind of revenge plan? And what about Ethaniel? What if he’s not dead?”

“I’m done with this war. I want it over—for good,” Porter said. His voice was quieter, but his words landed hard.

Cali swallowed roughly, her gaze flicking from Xavier—who still hadn’t said a word—to me. “Greyson?”

The way she was staring at me *hurt*, but Mace had a point. In the werewolf world, where death was just a fact of life, violent retribution wasn’t uncommon. In fact, it was actively encouraged, and it was occasionally an outright necessity. The other Alphas were right—if we spared the prisoners, one or all of them could return for revenge, sometime down the line.

Cali had mentioned getting the council involved, but I didn’t know that they would do shit. They knew the war was coming, and they hadn’t, so why act now? Or if they did get involved, I doubted they’d lean toward sparing the prisoners, anyway.

That just wasn’t how werewolves operated.

“I should be the one to decide what we do with the prisoners,” Lucian insisted. “*I* was the one who killed Malakai!”

“And Cali was the one who had her sword at his throat first, Lucian,” I said, extremely ready to call out the princeling’s bullshit. I looked around at the alliance Alphas. “You all saw it, right? Xavier and I were holding Malakai down, and Cali was about to kill him, but then Lucian jumped in at the last second. We’re just getting into useless semantics.”

Lucian growled. It was probably the sound of his giant ego wailing on the inside, demanding to be respected. “The Vanguards fought bravely alongside the rest of you! How dare you try to minimize—”

“Nobody’s saying that the Vanguards didn’t play their part,” I interrupted. “But we all played a major part. And all I’m saying is that Malakai’s death was a group effort. You delivered the death blow, sure, but you didn’t take him out single-handedly.”

Lucian crossed his arms. “Are you accusing me of something? Are you suggesting that I stole Caliana’s thunder? Preposterous!”

“This isn’t about stealing anyone’s thunder,” Cali said sharply, taking a step closer to Lucian. “Whoever killed Malakai is totally irrelevant. All I’m saying is that we can’t kill these people—”

Lucian waved a dismissive hand. “They’re prisoners of war, Caliana. When werewolves go to war, prisoners die—that’s just the way things are!”

Cali got up in his face and kept arguing. She could hold her own, so I turned to look at the crowd of alliance fighters. Some of them clearly seemed to agree with the princeling. I wasn’t surprised to see that Artemis was one of them. In the Fae world, justice was swift—act first, deal with the consequences of your actions later, and, above all, survive.

This was a matter of survival. Killing the defeated would satisfy the alliance’s thirst for vengeance, and it would also ensure that the survivors couldn’t come back with a new army. I knew all that.

And yet, the look on Cali’s face reminded me that the ends didn’t always justify the means.

“This was Malakai’s exact method of operation, Lucian,” Cali was saying, looking around at the rest of the alliance Alphas. “How can we claim that we don’t agree with his sick views and then go ahead and slaughter a bunch of defenseless prisoners—just like *he* would have done?” Her searing gaze settled on me. “Silas did the same thing with his prisoners of war. He killed them in cold blood.” Her next words sent my pulse soaring. “Is that who we’ve become?”

You could’ve heard a pin drop.

I broke the silence first, straightening my shoulders as I walked over to stand next to Cali. My mate. My future Luna.

I was so fucking glad to have her.

“Cali’s right,” I said. I glanced at a blank-faced Xavier and added, “Xavier’s and my father, Silas, was no different to Malakai. He chose the easy route and chalked it up as just another unavoidable cost of war. He saw people as nothing but cannon fodder—tools to help him grab power and hold on to it. Is this the message we want to send to the werewolf community? Are we turning into the same monsters we just managed to defeat?”

The horde of alliance pack members immediately started shouting their opinions.

They wanted blood.

“That’s a very noble thought, Greyson,” Duke said with an eye roll, “but it doesn’t change the fact that any one of these sons of bitches could come back and start shit again!”

But Porter shook his head, turning to Rowena. “Maybe there’s a way to keep ourselves safe without killing them. Perhaps there’s a spell that could force them not to set foot on any of our territories again?”

Rowena frowned, clearly already in deep thought.

“This isn’t just an argument between Alphas,” Mace interjected. “Our pack members deserve to have their voices heard. We should vote on—”

“Technically, Greyson is still the leader of the alliance, Mace,” Porter pointed out. “So what he says goes.”

Lucian seethed. “I never agreed to blindly follow Greyson’s orders! I’m not some spineless lackey that he can—”

“Everyone, shut up!” Xavier shouted.

Cali gripped my hand, and I felt her bracing herself for whatever Xavier had to say. He’d been awfully quiet up until this point, and that was a rare thing. A fucking bad thing, too. There was no way Xavier wouldn’t want to soak the ground with Bitterfang blood.

I knew my brother.

“Believe me when I say that I would love nothing more than to cut each of the prisoners down,” he said sharply. “To spill their blood in exchange for the blood they’ve spilled.”

Cali squeezed my hand, so hard I felt her nails cutting into my skin. I let her do it, getting ready to speak—but then I realized Xavier wasn’t done.

“But I agree with my brother,” he said. “And with Cali.”

I fought to hide my shock.

“There’s no victory in turning into your enemy. We’re not like Malakai or Silas, and we should never aspire to be,” Xavier added firmly.

I was so shocked I couldn’t even speak.

Cali gasped in surprise, squeezing my hand even harder.

Silence had fallen over the crowd of alliance fighters.

“I don’t think we should make this decision right now,” Mace finally said, glancing between Xavier and me. “Better to discuss it properly, once we’ve all had time to cool down and think it over.”

I nodded, turning to Lucian. “We’ll hold them prisoner until the decision’s been made. Can you deal with that?”

Lucian glared at me. “I’ll go along with it. For now. We can keep them in the palace dungeon.”

“And do you promise not to hurt them?” Cali demanded.

“Fine.” Lucian huffed. “Armin! Round up the prisoners and escort them to the palace.”

While Lucian and the Vanguards got to work dealing with the prisoners, I turned to the other Alphas.

“We have to clean up,” I said. It was crucial that we burned the dead Bitterfangs, and got rid of any obvious signs that two werewolf armies had just beaten the shit out of each other in the forest. But I didn’t have to elaborate—the Alphas all knew what I meant.

Porter, Mace, and Duke nodded, along with Rowena and Paige, and went to mobilize their packs. At Xavier’s request, Ava went to organize the Samaras.

I turned to Cali. “Could you go check on the witches and the Redwoods?”

Giving me a nod, she squeezed my arm, glanced at Xavier, and headed off. Suddenly, my brother and I were alone.

“What are we going to do about honoring our dead?” he asked.

“We can hold the ceremony first thing tomorrow,” I said.

Xavier looked down at the muddy ground. “By the lake?”

“I think so, yeah.”

He nodded, moving to leave.

“Thanks for having our backs earlier.” My voice wasn’t loud, but it still made Xavier pause.

He turned to look at me, gave me a brief nod, and then walked away, just as Mace returned.

“There’s another thing we need to discuss,” Mace said. “Now that the Bitterfangs have been defeated, is there any reason to keep the alliance in place?”

Now that Malakai was dead, I wanted nothing more than to disband the alliance, focus on my pack and my mate, and help my people through the aftermath of the battle. But, unfortunately, we weren’t done yet.

“Until the prisoners are dealt with and we decide what to do with Honora, I think the alliance needs to stay together,” I said, unable to keep the tiniest note of bitterness out of my voice.

“You’re right,” Mace said. “We’ll need to keep an eye on Lucian, though.”

Fucking Lucian.

“Why?” I asked.

Mace scoffed. “Our dear deluded prince clearly isn’t happy. He’s threatened to pull out of the alliance once already, and now he’s trying to set himself up as the man who single-handedly ended this war. That ain’t good, Greyson.”

I glanced at Lucian, who was still barking orders at the Vanguards, then turned back to meet Mace’s eyes. “You think Lucian’s going to be a problem?”

**Episode 4403**

“This isn’t the Fae world, Artemis!” I snapped. “You can’t just kill people whenever you want!”

My sister gave me a cold look. “You *can*, actually. It’s easy. You just take a knife and slit their—”

“Oh, my god, *stop*,” I burst out, my voice cracking.

Artemis eyed me, her expression dead serious. “It doesn’t matter which world you’re in, Cali. Justice is justice.”

“And who made us judge, jury, and executioner?” I demanded, my voice rising. “Who gave us that kind of power—”

“*Malakai* gave us that kind of power!” Artemis snapped. “He handed it to us the moment he invaded our land and tried to kill us all! People *died* so the rest of us could live—freeing the prisoners would make a mockery of that sacrifice.”

Her words made me feel sick to my stomach. She was calling for blood, and she wasn’t wrong to be. The feeling in my gut only got worse when Mrs. Smith walked over. She’d clearly been crying.

“Torin hasn’t recovered yet,” she told us.

My heart dropped.

*No. He’ll be fine. He* needs *to be fine.*

“He should’ve been awake by now, right?” Artemis—my jaded, levelheaded sister—looked worried, and if that wasn’t fucking terrifying, I didn’t know what was.

I rushed in the direction Mrs. Smith had come from, finding Torin lying under a tree. Big Mac was standing next to him, watching him in silence. His eyes were closed. His skin was covered in sweat. His breathing was slow, like he…

*No!*

*No, he’ll be fine. He has to be fine, because if he’s not, it would be… It would be my fault.*

All my fault.

“Why isn’t he awake yet?” I asked Big Mac, dropping to my knees next to Torin.

I tried to keep my voice low and calm. The last thing Torin needed right now was me having a panic attack over his unconscious body. But Big Mac didn’t answer me. I turned and saw that she’d walked away, pulling Rowena aside. When had the Cobalt Luna arrived?

The two of them were speaking quietly, but Torin’s well-being couldn’t wait.

I stood up, marching over to the witches. “Isn’t there anything you can do to help Torin?”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” Big Mac snapped, her gaze boring into me with a kind of ferocity that made me flinch.

The witch was always mean, grumpy, and unapproachable. But this was something else. Something deeper.

This was *pain*.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m just worried.”

“We’ve done everything we can, Cali,” Rowena told me sympathetically.

Big Mac shot me one last glare and pulled Rowena away so they could keep talking privately. I went back to Torin, practically collapsing by his side. My knees were weak and shaky, like I would’ve fallen if I hadn’t chosen to sit.

Like I *deserved* to fall.

“Don’t take it personally,” Mrs. Smith said from somewhere behind me.

I wiped my eyes quickly, twisting around to look up at her. “It’s okay. I get it.”

Mrs. Smith sat down next to me. “Big Mac took Kira’s death a lot harder than she’s willing to admit. I think she’s in shock.”

Maybe that was why I’d felt numb when Malakai had died, and when I’d learned that Kira was gone. We’d all been in shock, and none of us had had any time to process. Now, though, the shock was gone. All I had left was guilt.

When Mrs. Smith left me to go to Big Mac, I reached for Torin’s hand. It was cool and limp.

*He saved my life*, I thought. *He’s like this because he threw himself in front of me, and I’m just sitting here, completely useless.*

Could I use my magic to help him, somehow? No. My magic was a weapon. I didn’t fix things—I broke them.

*I’m the reason why Torin’s broken.*

I gripped his hand in both of mine and leaned closer. I wasn’t sure if he could hear me, but I suddenly felt like I’d burst if I didn’t speak to him. Right now, I needed to pretend that everything was going to be okay—that *he* was going to be okay.

The alternative was too devastating to consider.

“Torin. It’s me, Cali,” I said quietly.

A few of the beads of sweat on his forehead had formed a perfect line.

“We won, Torin,” I said. “We defeated the Bitterfang army, and Malakai is dead. All the help you’ve given us, all the soul you’ve put into healing the Redwoods—it wasn’t for nothing.”

I lifted his hand up to my chest, squeezing it tight.

“I wish I hadn’t dragged you into this. I’m the reason…” I sniffled. “I’m the reason why you’re here. If I hadn’t gone to the Fae world, you and Astrid would never have left it. And Astrid might still be alive. This is all my fault.”

And then Torin squeezed my hand.

I gasped. “Torin!”

His eyes fluttered open.

I’d been crying quietly before, but now I had to swallow a full-on sob.

“Where am I?” Torin croaked.

I used my forearm to wipe my face and rushed to push him back down when he tried to sit up. “You’re in the forest. You’re safe, Torin.”

He grimaced, squinting up at me until his eyes focused. “Cali,” he said quietly.

I laughed, sniffling. “Yes. I’m right here.”

He eyed me, taking a deep breath. “What happened?”

“You were attacked by a Bitterfang wolf—you saved my life.”

His lips twitched into a smile. “I saved you?”

“You always do,” I said.

“So why are you crying, then?” he asked with a frown.

*Because I thought I lost you. Because you’re my friend, and I love you. Because I’m the reason why you’re here. Because if you’d died because of me, I don’t know if I’d ever have forgiven myself.*

“They’re happy tears,” I said. “I’m so glad you’re awake.”

Suddenly, his smile faded. “Wait… Where are the Bitterfangs?”

“Most of them were killed,” Artemis said. I looked up to see her standing over us. When she caught me looking, she quickly wiped her cheeks and refocused on Torin. “The ones who weren’t killed are being held in the Vanguard palace.” Artemis’s expression shifted, her eyebrows arching as she turned to me. “Actually, that sounds like a fate worse than death. Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps we *don’t* have to kill them. We could just leave them to rot in Lucian’s dungeons.”

Artemis’s train of thought was, as ever, outstanding.

“Oh.” Big Mac had stomped over to stand next to Artemis. She eyed Torin. “You’re awake. Good. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I winced at her lack of emotion. “Torin still needs to rest—”

“We’re leaving,” Big Mac snapped, stalking off without giving me a chance to respond.

Without a word, Artemis carefully got Torin onto her back.

“She’s right, we should go,” he mumbled, holding onto my sister. “I don’t want to be a nuisance to Big Mac.”

“No, it’s not you,” I said. “Big Mac is upset because…”

Was Torin ready to hear this?

I glanced at Artemis, who nodded.

“Where’s Kira?” Torin asked, as if he’d read our minds.

I couldn’t lie to him.

“She’s dead,” I said. Saying it out loud hurt like a gut punch.

“*What?*” Torin looked around in shocked disbelief. “But Kira—she’s so powerful! Did she get hurt? Oh my gods, I should’ve been there to heal her! If I hadn’t been knocked out, I might’ve been able to save her!”

“There was nothing anyone could have done,” I said.

“Why?” Torin demanded, looking between Artemis and me.

“I’ll tell him what happened, Cali,” Artemis said. Her face was serious as she glanced past me. “You should go check in with Big Mac about her plans to honor Kira.” I didn’t know if that was a good idea, and I was about to say as much, but then Artemis added, “If you don’t go talk to Big Mac, I’ll do it myself.”

Neither Artemis nor Big Mac were famous for their patience, and the last thing we needed right now was for a fight to break out. Swallowing hard, I leaned forward to give Torin, and sort of Artemis, a careful hug. He hugged me back, and this time, the feeling of relief did kindle in my chest.

The guilt of what could’ve been still lingered, though.

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“I don’t know how witches honor their dead,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “But is there anything I can do to help? Anything at all?”

“Just leave it to us and stay out of our way,” Big Mac told me sharply.

I flinched, and Mrs. Smith shook her head, grabbing her fiancée by the arm. “She’s just trying to be helpful, MacKenzie.”

Big Mac shot me a look. “Cali should go be helpful to someone else.”

“Sorry,” I said quietly, stepping away.

I told myself not to take her reaction personally, but it was hard not to.

*Kira’s dead, and I’m alive.*

*Why am I alive?*

*Who decides who lives and who dies?*

“Wait a second,” Big Mac said, blocking my way before I could leave. “There’s one thing you can do—tell everyone we’re going to hold a memorial for Kira.”

I wondered what a witch memorial even entailed,  but I kept that question to myself.

And then Big Mac kept talking. “And witch memorials have to happen on the day of the witch’s death.”

My eyes widened. “Wait… You mean you’re going to do it right now?”

**Episode 4404**

**Xavier**

I stood in front of the Samara pack house, Ava by my side.

There used to be a sort of low-static energy around the place—a faint vibration that only a werewolf could’ve picked up, and the scent of lingering magic. *Kira’s* magic. When she’d first moved in, the house had literally shaken with excitement, like a living thing.

Kira was gone now, and our home no longer buzzed with life.

At least it was still standing. At least we were alive.

But that had come at a cost.

“We should…” Ava cleared her throat. “We should all go clean up and rest.”

I wanted nothing more than to take a shower and then sleep for days. I knew that wasn’t an option, though. The war was over, but the pack was going to need a lot of support in the aftermath. As the high from the fighting receded, the reality of this final battle would sink in. Werewolves were resilient and saw bloodshed as a part of life, but it could still be overwhelming, sometimes.

And there was still Kira’s memorial to think about.

“I need to debrief everybody before we hit the showers,” I told Ava.

She nodded, and together, we waited for the pack to gather in the living room. When they were all standing in front of us, I started speaking.

“The war is over, and the Samaras fought valiantly,” I said. “You had each other’s backs, and that’s what being in a pack is all about. What happened out there proved that the Samara pack is a force to be reckoned with. You held your own—and then some.”

People nodded, murmuring their agreement.

I kept talking, ignoring the way my stomach started twisting into knots.

“I think we all need to acknowledge the fact that Kira’s sacrifice saved us all—both the Samara pack, and the alliance as a whole. She played a key role in ending the war, and she was a Samara. She was one of our own, and we should be proud.”

Silence fell over the pack.

“Normally, I would’ve honored her with a memorial, but I’m leaving that to Big Mac,” I continued. “She’s planning a ceremony by the lake in a couple of hours. I’m going to attend. The rest of you are welcome to join me—but if you choose to stay away, I’m not going to order you to go. I’m not going to force anyone to see Kira the way I saw her.”

My stomach panged, painfully enough that I had to fight off a wince.

“But I still need you all to remember what Kira did for this pack. Never forget that we owe her our respect and our gratitude.”

 I paused, looking around.

“Thank you all for fighting bravely,” I finished.

Murmurs broke out among the pack.

Ava squeezed my shoulder before moving away to talk to Marissa and Knox. I headed for the house, shrugging off the back slaps and the congratulations. There were no cheers like there had been earlier, when Malakai had died.

My pack mates’ voices faded into the background as I jogged up the stairs and into my bedroom. I walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. After waiting for the water to heat up, I stepped into the shower. Dirt and blood sloughed off onto the white tile floor before they were washed away.

My chest felt tight.

Under my leadership, my pack had played a major role in defeating Malakai—but I didn’t feel triumphant. I’d lost Kira. I’d lost my friend. I didn’t have many friends, but she’d been one of them. We’d dealt with so much shit together, and now she was just… gone.

And I was still beholden to Adéluce.

Even after all that fighting, all those near-death experiences, I was just as far away from Cali as I’d been before the war. If anything, I’d made our fucked-up situation even messier—even *riskier*—when I’d kissed her back in that water-filled room at the palace. At the time, I’d believed that both my mate and I were about to die, and that the vampire-witch’s threats didn’t matter anymore. But we’d survived, and her threats were still very, very relevant.

Still… The fighting was over, I was alone, and Adéluce hadn’t made an appearance.

Where the fuck was she?

Right now, her silence was worse than her presence would’ve been. I doubted she was going to give me a pass. Had I just won a pack war, but managed to put Cali in even *worse* danger in the process? How the hell had I messed things up so badly?

“Hey.”

Ava’s voice broke into my thoughts, and I almost flinched. I needed to get a grip. I was in my house, the Bitterfangs were gone, and Adéluce—

Well.

It made sense that I was still feeling twitchy.

But now Ava was here. She joined me in the shower, and for a moment, I just watched her silently as she focused on washing off all the dirt and blood. My eyes dropped to her abdomen, where that branch had punched a hole right through her. She was okay, now.

Thank fuck she was okay.

“How are you?” She spoke quietly, moving closer to wrap her arms around my neck.

“I’ve been better,” I murmured.

She stroked my cheek and leaned in for a soft kiss. I couldn’t help but feel better at the touch of her lips. At least my wolf was happy. My mate was safe.

Both my mates were safe.

“I get that this is rough for you,” Ava said, looking up at me. “But if it’s any consolation, the entire pack wants to go to Kira’s memorial.”

I swallowed roughly. “I thought they didn’t like her. Or at least some of them didn’t.”

Ava shook her head. “They didn’t have to like her to know that she deserves a proper send-off.”

I hated how raw my voice sounded. “Is that how you feel?”

“Kira and I weren’t exactly best friends, but I’m grateful to her,” Ava said.

Hearing her say that made me feel the tiniest bit of relief.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you after she died,” I said quietly, shaking my head. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I knew you were upset,” she said. “You had every right to be.”

“I still shouldn’t have taken it out on you,” I argued.

She shook her head. “It’s okay, Xavier. I’m here for you.”

I took a moment to stare at her. Her hair was wet, pushed back from her face. Water dripped down her forehead, her cheeks, her collarbones. Her gaze was intense, as always. Focused on me. Ava was always focused on me. No matter what, no matter how badly I treated her, her support for me never wavered. And, as fucked-up as it was, that was the only constant in my life right now.

Adéluce wanted me to fall in love with Ava.

At first, I’d scoffed at the very idea of it. But now, I was beginning to wonder. In a moment of panic, I’d told Ava that I loved her. I’d thought she was dying, and it had just come out, completely unfiltered. But had I really meant it?

My feelings for Ava were so complicated, but could they actually be centered on love?

I didn’t know. But I was definitely glad to be with her in this moment.

I cupped her cheek, and she leaned into the touch, her eyes flickering shut. I kissed her gently, then hugged her again, skin to skin, the water cascading over us both.

“I’m sorry about Kira,” Ava whispered against my shoulder.

The harrowing image of Kira holding the rocks back filled my head. She’d told me to run, and sacrificed herself to buy me time.

She was part of the Samara pack, and I was her Alpha, but I hadn’t been able to save her.

Kira was my friend, and I hadn’t protected her.

Even though I was proud of everything the Samaras had accomplished during the war, I’d still failed my friend. I wondered if the bitterness I felt was guilt. I didn’t feel that kind of emotion often enough to tell it apart from the rest of the fuckery that typically went on in my head.

I didn’t know if I could handle guilt right now.

“I’m sorry, too,” I whispered.

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Gabe and Mikah nodded at me when I got downstairs. The entire Samara pack had gathered in the living room, and they looked up at me when I walked in. I felt them gravitate toward me. Toward their Alpha.

I’d taken on that role in the name of winning the war, but this was my life, now.

*What do I do now?*

“Everybody ready?” Ava asked.

The pack made noises of agreement, and as I watched my Luna interact with them, I was hit with the urge to touch her. I put an arm around her, pulling her close. Her scent was calming.

I glanced at my pack, then checked my watch and gestured at the door. My voice was gruff. “It’s time to go to Kira’s memorial.”

**Episode 4405**

In the end, I’d managed to convince Big Mac to let me help with Kira’s memorial. I was pretty sure she’d only agreed because she’d realized I was about to burst into tears, but still.

*Everything needs to be perfect for the ceremony. Absolutely perfect, not a single thing out of place.*

As I walked down the hallway, I heard a door opening, followed by the sound of Greyson’s voice. “Cali?”

When I turned to look at him, he grabbed me by the waist, pulled me into his room, and closed the door. It all happened in seconds, before I could even let out a squeak.

I blinked up at him. “That was a fast little trick.”

He stared at me, his hands still resting on my waist. It felt like he was trying to read my thoughts. “I wanted to see how you were doing.”

My heart throbbed, like it was reminding me of all the things that were wrong right now.

“It’s fine, I’m—I’m actually super busy.” I slipped away from Greyson, looking around the room. “Big Mac said we need more candles. Do you have any in here? I feel like I’ve seen a couple lying around…” I spotted one on top of his dresser. “Aha!”

I snatched the candle and whirled around, ready to head for the door, but Greyson blocked my way.

I looked up at him, my heart pounding. “What?”

“It’s okay not to be fine, Cali,” he said evenly.

“Are you saying that because you’re worried about me?”

“I just wanted to see you.” He took a step closer, taking my hand. The warmth of his touch made the hairs on my forearms stand on end. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk.”

I wanted to pull away and say that I didn’t have time to talk. I was super busy, after all—so very busy, and not thinking at all. I wasn’t thinking, and I wasn’t processing what was happening right now, or what had happened a couple of hours ago.

But Greyson was touching me, staring at me.

He was looking at me with so much love, it was hard to look away. To let go.

*I could never let him go.*

“I don’t…” I paused. “I don’t really know what to say.”

He nodded, pulling me closer. His scent and warmth had me clinging to him.

*God, how the hell am I supposed to let go of him* now?

“What are you thinking?” I whispered.

“I thought I was going to lose you when we fell in the river.”

His words landed hard. I shuddered at the memory of the panic and fear I’d felt in that river—but it hadn’t been for myself. I had no idea what Greyson would do if I died. When he’d attacked Ethaniel, I’d seen a glimpse of something dark in him.

I’d been telling myself Greyson had reacted so violently when Elle was in danger because of the sire bond. But what about our mate bond? If something terrible ever actually happened to me, what would that connection force him to do?

*How much rage does Greyson hold?*

“I thought I was going to lose you, too,” I said, looking up at him.

His grey eyes were shiny at the corners. Even in his sadness, he was devastatingly beautiful.

“I can’t imagine life without you,” he said. His voice was low. Shaky.

“There’s no point in talking like that,” I said briskly. “I made it. We both did. That’s the important thing.” I glanced down at the candle in my hand. “But now we need to focus on honoring those who didn’t.”

He nodded, and I leaned closer, into him, stretching up onto my tiptoes as he leaned down and cupped the back of my neck. He brushed his lips over mine, and I opened up my mouth for him, reaching to wrap my arm around his neck. I wanted to linger, to feel and taste him. I wanted to truly remind myself that he was alive, to cement the knowledge that we’d both survived.

“I love you,” I whispered, resting my forehead against his shoulder.

“Love you more.”

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I rode to the lake on Greyson’s back. It had been a while since we’d been there—long enough that it felt like a lifetime ago. When we were almost there, he stopped, let me down, shifted back to human, and got dressed. We walked the rest of the way.

When I reached for his hand, he gripped mine tight.

“What exactly happens at a witch memorial?” I asked.

“Not sure,” he said. “I’ve never been to one.”

“Guess we’ll both learn something new today,” I said.

*I’m glad you’re here with me*, I mind linked.

He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my knuckles.

I took a deep breath as we emerged from the forest and arrived at the lake. The area was already crowded with Redwoods, Samaras, Blue Bloods, Cobalts, and even a bunch of Vanguard wolves. Duke and Paige were there as well.

The Samaras were right at the front, and Xavier was talking with Big Mac.

“Wow,” I said, looking around. “This must be almost every member of the alliance packs.”

“This is a good thing,” Greyson said. “It’s a sign that everybody appreciates what Kira did for us. And that the alliance wasn’t just a product of the pack war.”

“It does feel like the war brought the packs closer together,” I said.

“Even *if* we don’t agree on everything, and probably have a lot of bickering to look forward to in the near future,” he muttered.

I winced. “Lucian?”

Greyson let out a deep, long-suffering sigh that would’ve made me smile under different circumstances.

“Cali.” Big Mac emerged from the crowd. She was dressed in black, and her expression was completely blank. “Place the candles in a ring around the shroud.”

I paused for a moment, trying to figure out what she meant by “the shroud.” But then Big Mac waved her hands and barked at a few people, and the crowd parted. Right by the bank of the lake, a shrouded body was lying on a stone platform that the witch must’ve put in.

*That’s her. That’s Kira.*

No.

That wasn’t Kira.

Kira was strong and tall, beautiful and intimidating. Kira didn’t smile or laugh a lot, but when she did, she meant it. Kira was powerful enough to save us all.

That body wasn’t Kira.

“Cali!” Big Mac hissed. I jumped at the sound. “The candles!”

“Go,” Greyson said, kissing the side of my head.

My feet started working before my brain could, and that was a good thing.

I didn’t want to think right now.

Quickly, I strode forward and placed the candles around the platform. The murmuring crowd had fallen silent, and Big Mac directed everybody to stand outside the circle of candles. She and Rowena knelt within it, before the platform.

“Everybody, stay quiet,” Big Mac snapped.

“It’s important,” Rowena added.

I quickly moved back to my place beside Greyson, taking his hand. I couldn’t help but steal a glance at Xavier. Stone-faced, he was standing with Ava and the rest of the Samaras.

He didn’t look my way.

The sky was dark blue, covered in twinkling stars, and the moon’s reflection shone brightly in the lake. Everyone had fallen silent—and not just the people. The wind had stopped as well. The birds, the crickets. Nothing and nobody dared to move or make a sound.

This silence was Big Mac’s to break.

She murmured something in a language I didn’t understand. Rowena repeated the words, taking one of the candles and holding it out. Big Mac lit a bundle of herbs with the candle’s flame and waved it gently around, spreading the smoke.

Suddenly, I could feel magic all around me, so different to my own.

The smoke rose as Big Mac kept speaking softly. For the first time since Kira had died, the witch’s eyes were gleaming with tears. When Greyson squeezed my hand, I knew that he’d noticed her crying, too.

*How is she feeling?* I wondered. The answer came seconds later.

When Big Mac and Rowena rose to their feet and threw their hands up, I saw the pain in their faces. Their chanting was low and soft, and it felt like a mourning song. Then the chanting got louder, and Kira’s shrouded body began to glow.

My eyes widened, and gasps echoed through the crowd.

Still, nobody said a word.

Then Kira’s body slowly rose up into the night sky. It rose higher and higher, and then it began to sparkle, like a small sun floating above the shimmering lake. Its reflection rivaled that of the moon—burning bright, powerful and imposing.

She rose higher and higher, and then finally, the sparkles burst apart and scattered across the starlit sky. A million points of light and gleaming beauty swam through the air, becoming one with the cosmos. Kira’s magic was returning to the universe.

High above us all, she glowed.

*That’s her.*

That was Kira.

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Everybody watched the lights as they dissipated into the sky.

When the last of them had disappeared, Big Mac squeezed Rowena’s shoulder. Then she turned and walked away with Mrs. Smith, who wrapped an arm around her.

Greyson watched them go, the worry evident in his expression. Then he turned to me, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“Let’s go home,” I whispered.

A moment later, Greyson shifted back into his wolf. As I was climbing onto his back, I felt eyes on me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Xavier.

He was watching Greyson and me, his expression dark.

And then it hit me.

With Kira gone, what was I going to do about the strange magic she’d detected on Xavier?

**Episode 4406**

**Greyson**

I took the slightly longer way back to the Redwood pack house. I wanted to spend a few minutes alone with Cali. It was selfish of me to steal her away, but it felt like we both needed the respite. The sight of her tearful face as she’d watched Kira ascend wasn’t something I was ever going to forget.

At least there had been glory in Kira’s farewell.

Glory suited her.

I’d taken note of every Redwood’s reaction to the memorial. It was just part of being Alpha. I’d even checked on my brother, whose cold expression had clashed with the tears in his eyes. Nobody’s reaction had felt as bottled up as Big Mac’s, though.

She didn’t *look* devastated, but I knew she was all the same.

*We’re home*, Cali said, interrupting my thoughts.

The pack house had just come into view, and I paused. I realized we hadn’t spoken a word since we’d left the lake, but the silence had been comfortable.

Lowering myself to the ground, I let Cali dismount and straighten her clothes. I shifted back to human and reached for her hand.

“The ceremony was lovely,” Cali murmured as we walked toward the front porch. “I can’t think of a more fitting way to pay tribute to Kira.”

I nodded. “And I think it was good for everyone, in a way. It’s given them an opportunity to start coming to terms with the alliance’s losses.”

Cali glanced at me, then at the house up ahead. Her voice got quieter. “I’m… I’m a little worried about Big Mac. She looked so sad. Not that she’d ever admit it.”

I stopped walking. “Do you think we should talk to her?”

“*We?*” Cali’s eyes were swollen from crying, and when she chuckled, it sounded broken. “Hate to break it to you, Greyson, but Big Mac has a long history of being constantly annoyed with me. I don’t think I’m the best person to approach her about this. If you talk to her alone, though… I think she might be more open with you.”

Cali had a point, though I still doubted that Big Mac would open up. She was like a hedgehog—prickly, and dangerous when irritated. Still, I owed this to her. She needed to know that I had her back. And, if nothing else, my mother would definitely appreciate my checking in with her fiancée.

“It’s worth a shot,” I said. “Though I’m not holding my breath. Somehow, I doubt we’ll end up having a deep and meaningful conversation about our feelings.”

Cali snorted, shaking her head as she walked up the steps onto the front porch. I didn’t follow her.

“Aren’t you coming inside?” she asked with a frown.

“I need a minute to figure out what I’m going to say to Big Mac,” I said truthfully.

I was fairly convinced that no matter what I said, she’d throw up her usual walls and hide behind insults and snark.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Cali said, “Don’t worry. You always say the right thing when it matters.”

It was nice to hear my mate say that—though it definitely wasn’t true.

“I’m going to let you keep believing that because it’s good for my ego,” I informed her.

She let out a soft laugh that faded into a sad little smile. Leaning closer, she pressed her lips to my cheek.

“It’ll be fine,” she said, meeting my eyes.

I tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

She nodded, kissed my cheek again, and then headed inside.

I could hear people moving around in the house, though some of its occupants had to be by the lake, still. The night was cold and windless. Quiet. I could’ve sworn the stars were shining brighter than ever, thanks to Kira and her magic.

I wished our last one-on-one conversation had played out differently.

Kira had just told me that she was going to leave the Redwoods for the Samaras, and that announcement had made me feel so shitty that I’d ended the conversation without letting her say her piece. That whole situation had been crappy. Messy. I wished I’d told her that I truly appreciated everything she’d done for my pack, and that I’d never forget it.

Just like Joss, I’d never forget Kira. I was going to work hard to keep everyone safe and make sure her sacrifice hadn’t been in vain.

The front door creaked, interrupting my thoughts. Someone stepped outside.

Big Mac’s presence had always been intense—magic had energy, energy was electric, and Big Mac’s aura radiated through any space she occupied. Or invaded.

She backed up when she spotted me, clearly startled. “What the fuck are you doing out here in the dark?”

I didn’t dare say that I’d been trying to think of a way to ask her about her feelings.

But before I could say anything at all, Big Mac kept talking. “Never mind, don’t answer. I’m going back inside.”

“Thanks for taking care of Kira’s memorial,” I blurted out. It was the first thing that popped into my head. I’d said the words without thinking, which was unlike my usual method of operation.

It was a bad move.

Big Mac paused at the screen door. She closed it, then, and stepped back outside, crossing her arms. Narrowing her eyes at me, she said, “It had to be done. We take care of our own. It had nothing to do with you, or any of your wolves.”

I was sensing a *touch* of animosity.

“I’m not trying to antagonize you,” I said carefully. “I’m just saying—we werewolves could stand to learn a thing or two about memorials from the witches.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, looking away. She hadn’t left yet, though.

“Cali and I thought it was beautiful,” I added. “Perfect for Kira.”

Big Mac kept looking straight ahead. Her arms were still crossed, but something had changed about her stance. It suddenly looked like she was hugging herself instead of making a point.

I wanted to hug her.

I didn’t dare try.

“Are…” I paused, clearing my throat. “Are all witch memorials like that?”

This conversation definitely wasn’t my best work. But Big Mac hadn’t hexed me yet, so I intended to keep trying.

“They vary,” she replied. “Some are big, like the one tonight, or small…” She trailed off, and her gaze dropped from the sky to the ground. She cleared her throat. “Or small, like my father’s. That was just my mother and me.”

My mom had told me once that Big Mac had lost both her parents.

“What about the memorial for your mother?” I asked gently.

Big Mac glanced at me. Her expression sharpened. “She didn’t have one.”

I waited.

Sure enough, Big Mac finally turned to face me head on. “I wasn’t able to hold a ceremony for my mother. I wasn’t there when she died.”

I didn’t know the full story there, and I doubted that pressuring Big Mac to keep talking would end well. For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Cali had said that Big Mac might open up to me, but the only way that could happen was if I didn’t fuck this up. The witch hadn’t stormed off yet, and I feared that if I said the wrong thing, her walls would go back up, and this time, they’d be covered in thorns.

She kept staring at me, measuring me up, and the silence stretched out.

Between the two of us, *I* was supposed to be the apex predator, but Big Mac was so powerful that I doubted she’d ever fear any werewolf.

Apart from my father.

Silas had captured both Big Mac and her mother, I remembered.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she finally said.

I sighed internally. So much for opening up. The door had just slammed shut. She looked at me like she wouldn’t mind shoving me right now if it meant taking out some of the aggression she was clearly feeling. I wondered if it would be helpful to say that she *could* hit me, if she wanted to.

I was willing to be her punching bag if it meant releasing some of her grief. It was the least I could do for her when she’d done so much for me.

But in the end, with her acting so guarded, I decided not to cross that line.

“I’ll leave you alone,” I said. Glancing up at the stars, I added, “The sky is beautiful tonight.”

She didn’t say another word until I got to the front door.

“My mother did magic for Silas,” she said gruffly. “He forced her to. And look where it got her. Look where it got Kira.”

I froze. Then, slowly, I turned around. Big Mac’s eyes gleamed in the dark. My heart was suddenly beating so fucking fast that I felt woozy.

I felt sick.

“I’ve never forced you to do anything,” I said slowly. “You’ve never felt forced, have you?”

Big Mac straightened her shoulders. “I’ve done everything you and the pack have asked of me, Greyson, and I think it’s time for me to leave.”

My stomach dropped. “Leave?”

“I’m a witch, not a werewolf,” she said coldly. “I don’t belong here. It’s time for me to leave the Redwood pack. For good.”

**Episode 4407**

**Xavier**

The lake was deserted. Ava and I were the only ones left. She looked out over the lake, and I stared up at the sky. The stars stared right back at me, watchful and arresting.

Just like Kira.

“We should go,” Ava said, breaking the quiet. Tugging on my arm slightly, she added, “I don’t think there’s anything more to be done here.”

I looked down at the ground, nodding. “Go ahead without me. I need some time.”

Ava didn’t speak for a moment. Then her hand glided up my arm, and she leaned in to give me a kiss on the cheek. Her voice was quiet. “We’ll be waiting.”

The moment Ava let go of me, I felt cold. I watched her disappear into the woods, my pulse picking up speed. Maybe I didn’t actually want to be alone right now. Ava’s touch and embrace felt much better than the cool night air, and for a weird moment, I felt the urge to run after her.

The impulse was ridiculous. Confusing.

Never in a million goddamn years would I have imagined that I’d end up in this position when it came to Ava. But I couldn’t deny that my feelings for my Luna had shifted, somehow. And at the same time, my feelings for Cali were stronger than ever. This little love triangle was so fucked-up that thinking about what might happen next had me clenching my hands into fists.

Adéluce’s threat lingered.

*I know there’s a spell on you*, Kira had said.

There’d been chaos all around us, rocks falling, the damn ground shaking under our feet—but she’d still said those words.

If Kira had known about the spell, had she also known about Adéluce?

Chills ran down my spine as a brand new shitfest of a possibility formed inside my head. If Kira had found out about the spell, and she must have known about Adéluce, or at least suspected. Could that mean…

Had Kira always been marked to die because she’d found out about Adéluce?

Chills spread through my body, and I nervously scanned the darkness. It would be just like Adéluce to show up in this moment. To desecrate the scene of Kira’s memorial. I held my breath and waited, my heart beating wildly.

Nothing happened.

The vampire-witch’s silence had to be yet another game. Or maybe something witchy was afoot. I knew fuck all about how those things worked, but I had to wonder if the residual energy of Kira’s magic was keeping Adéluce away, somehow. Regardless, my gut was telling me that she wouldn’t visit me tonight. Not with so much power floating in the air.

I stared up at the sky. *Thank you, Kira.*

Perhaps she could hear me. I hoped she knew that we’d always remember her as our savior. That I would think of her every time that I stepped into the Samara pack house. Whether she’d known about Adéluce or not, Kira had managed to figure out that I was under a spell. She’d known my behavior wasn’t normal, and had actually *done something* about it.

She’d always had my back.

When I saw a shooting star, I wished for Kira to be reunited with Geoff. I wished for her to be happy and free and with the man she loved more than anything.

And if I wept—not like an Alpha, but like Kira’s friend—only the stars were there to see it.

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I’d been planning to wake up early and order Knox and a few of the others to prepare the pyres for the werewolf memorial, but I decided to let them sleep in. The truth was, I just didn’t want to talk to anyone.

I slipped out of bed before Ava could wake up and headed outside, stepping out onto the front porch. When one of the boards creaked under my feet, I just about jumped out of my skin.

I was not okay.

My shitty mood got even worse when I found myself unable to shake the suspicion that Adéluce had had something to do with Kira’s death.

Fists and jaw clenched, I headed to the backyard. There, I found both an ax and a pile of wood that needed chopping.

Perfect.

With each blow, I pictured Adéluce’s head on the chopping block. I imagined her wide eyes, her bloody teeth, her brains spilling out as I split her skull in half. I wanted her dead, right this fucking instant. I needed to fix this mess. I needed to make a real plan to get rid of her, once and for all.

I paused, panting, still gripping the ax.

So far, Adéluce had managed to outplay me at every turn. But now that the pack war was over, I could fully give her my full attention. Her silence felt far too heavy, and I was certain that there was a big storm heading my way. I’d have to act soon, before she could first.

But what the hell was I supposed to do?

Adéluce had proven herself to be the closest thing to indomitable that I’d ever encountered. I just couldn’t figure out a way to take her out on my own. If I found a way to ask for help to trap her, things would be different. But as it stood, I literally couldn’t say a word about her, and I was the only person who knew she was alive.

Shit.

With a low growl, I slammed another chunk of wood onto the chopping block and went to town. The process felt almost mesmerizing, and the repetition finally managed to clear my head. It allowed me a few moments where I didn’t feel like the trapped mouse to Adéluce’s cat.

The sound of crunching leaves made me whirl around, still gripping the ax.

“Hey, man, I— *Shit!*” Gabe ducked. “Careful with that thing, dude!”

I’d almost nicked him.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked, looking me up and down. “Have you started a new life as a lumberjack? Not sure if I love that journey for you.”

I shook my head, breathing harshly. I started chopping again. To my surprise, Gabe said nothing else. A moment later, he grabbed another ax and started chopping wood with me. I wasn’t going to tell him to leave. Gabe was my friend. It was good that he was here. That he was alive.

Gabe eyed me, and after a few moments, he spoke.

“I need to talk to you, X,” he said.

I paused, frowning. “About what?”

Gabe looked uncharacteristically serious. “I know my bazooka caused the rockslide. If I hadn’t used it—”

I shook my head. “There’s no need to apologize. The rocks probably would’ve fallen anyway. The storm was uncontrollable. And let’s not forget that the rockslide wiped out a good chunk of the Bitterfang army, so the bazooka was actually kind of a good idea, in the end.”

Gabe raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said it was chaotic?”

“That too.”

Gabe snorted. He went back to chopping wood, and I watched him. I couldn’t tell him about Adéluce, obviously, or my suspicion that she might’ve played a role in Kira’s death. But if the bitch really *had* killed Kira, wouldn’t she already have paid me a visit so she could gloat? That part didn’t make any sense.

Her silence was killing me.

“Thanks,” I told Gabe.

He paused, resting the ax on the chopping block. “For what?”

“You came here to help me out,” I said. “You stuck with the Samaras, and with me. You’ve always stuck with me.”

Gabe snorted, smacking my shoulder. “What’s the ‘thanks’ for, asshole? That’s how we do business. Of course I’m always going to be there for you—just like you’ll always be there for me.” He raised an eyebrow. “You know, as long as the price is right.”

I scoffed, shoving him.

He laughed. “What? You love money! How many cars you got again?”

“Can you cut the bullshit for a second? I’m trying to, like—”

“Tell me how much you love me?” Gabe fluttered his eyelashes at me.

He was lucky I *did* kinda sorta love him.

“You’re a pain in the ass,” I said. “But I’m glad you’re here. You’d better stick around.”

“I guess I’m gonna have to, since you keep nagging me.”

I frowned. “I don’t *nag*.”

Gabe grinned. “Along with brooding, it’s *all* you do. Nag and brood, all day long. You’re worse than Mikah, and that’s saying a lot.”

“Oh, fuck off. I’m not worse than a vampire.”

Gabriel laughed, shaking his head. It was hard not to crack a smile as well. But then his grin faded, his expression turning serious. “You do know I’ll always have your back, right?”

“Yeah…” I trailed off.

And then I had a thought.

Was the solution to my Adéluce problem literally staring at me in the face?

“Actually, I was thinking…” I paused, eyeing Gabe. “Could I hire you and Mikah?”

**Episode 4408**

When I woke up, my heart was pounding—almost like I’d just been fighting in my sleep. I couldn’t remember my dream, though. It must’ve been a nightmare. It *had to* have been a nightmare.

*Forget about the blood, Cali. Just forget about it.*

My sleep had been restless, but every time I’d been startled awake, Greyson had been there to soothe me; to wipe my tears and tell me everything was okay. And with him next to me, that actually felt like the truth. It felt like things really would be okay, one day.

*Don’t think about the blood, Cali. No more blood.*

It was easier than I’d expected to shove the disturbing images out of my brain—when I was awake, at least. In this room, in this bed, I was safe and snuggled up against Greyson. Though “snuggled up” probably wasn’t the most accurate description of what was really happening. After the third time I’d woken up flailing, not remembering what I’d dreamed about, I’d told Greyson to semi-lie on top of me while we slept.

His head was on my chest, his torso across my abdomen and hip. He was like a gigantic, warm, weighted blanket. I’d had a death grip on him for the rest of the night.

Now he was awake and watching me.

My nose felt ticklish, but I refused to cry.

*Don’t cry, Cali. You’re awake, and everything’s fine.*

Today, we would honor the fallen.

Resting his weight on one elbow, Greyson used his free hand to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Are you okay? Am I crushing you?” he asked.

“This is literally the most comfortable I’ve ever been.”

He laughed quietly, the vibration of it coursing through me. I smoothed back his hair, dragging my nails lightly across his scalp, and his eyes fluttered shut. His laughter turned into a soft groan of bliss. He settled back down, nuzzled my collarbone, and stayed right where I wanted him. We lay like that for a while, no words exchanged, or even needed.

*He’s here. He’s fine. We’re alive.*

We were alive.

“Would you like to go to Portland for a few days?” Greyson asked, breaking the silence. He lifted his head to face me. I stroked his cheek.

“What, why?” I asked.

“Now that the Bitterfangs have been defeated and the threat is over, why don’t we just take a little time to recover?”

My heart fluttered at the thought of it. “So… Portland? Just the two of us?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “I want us to enjoy some time alone together, without having to worry about pack business. What do you say?”

The idea made me feel warm. “That sounds great. We had such a lovely time there, last time we visited. And we could both use a break.”

Greyson kissed the side of my neck and sat up, smiling. “Perfect.”

“When do you think we should leave?” I asked.

Greyson’s smile faded. “We’ll have to wait after I finalize a plan for the Bitterfang prisoners. I have to make sure Lucian doesn’t just send them all to the gallows the moment my back is turned.”

He’d probably meant that as a joke, but it stopped being one when we both realized that it was actually a real possibility. I could even picture Lucian commissioning an intricately carved gallows to be assembled on the palace’s front lawn. I knew that Greyson wouldn’t let Lucian get away with something like that, though.

“You’re a good man, Greyson,” I whispered. “You know that, right?”

He stared at me for a moment before reaching out to cup the back of my neck. Pulling me closer, he spoke in a low voice. “You’ve made me a better man than I ever could’ve been without you, love.”

When I kissed him, I felt his smile against my mouth.

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Unlike the memorial for Kira, I knew what to expect from the werewolf ceremony. There would be a few short speeches, then the lighting of the funeral pyre. And then, rather than wallowing in their grief, the packs would celebrate the lives of those they’d lost. That was werewolf tradition.

*How many more memorials await us in the future?* I wondered.

I didn’t ask that question out loud.

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A few hours later, the sun had just set, and I was standing by the lake with the rest of the Redwoods. A huge crowd had gathered, just like yesterday, but the setup was different. My stomach churned as I stared at the floating pyres that had been set up along the bank of the lake, ready to be set on fire and pushed out onto the water.

“Everything’s ready. Now we just have to wait for everybody to arrive, then Greyson can start the ceremony,” Jay said, coming to stand on Lola’s other side.

My best friend’s hand was cold in mine. She was wearing Jacqueline’s bracelet. I swallowed hard at the sight of it, fighting not to tear up.

None of us spoke for a minute.

“Jacqueline fought bravely,” Jay said to Lola, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “You should be proud of her.”

I nodded, and Lola glanced between the two of us. Wiping her tears, she whispered, “I just… I can’t believe she’s gone. I never thought I’d miss arguing with her, but I really do.”

I sniffled. “I miss her, too.”

Lola met my eyes, her gaze watery and sad. “She was *so* mean to you, for literally no reason at all.”

I chuckled, wiping my eyes. “I know. It was ridiculous.”

Lola laughed a little before she started crying in earnest. My heart ached for her, and both Jay and I wrapped her up in a hug. I heard a commotion and turned to see that the Vanguard pack was arriving. Elle was walking with Lucian. She looked pale and withdrawn, her gaze downcast.

I recalled that Jacs had been helping Elle adjust to non-wolf life. She’d taught Elle how to read, write, and use electric appliances without setting herself or others on fire. She’d also taught Elle how to prank call the local bank and tell them there was a bomb in the building. But at least Elle had learned how to use the phone.

Had Jacs’s methods been slightly questionable? Absolutely. But she’d been Elle’s friend. Lola’s friend. Even my friend.

She’d fought bravely for the Redwood pack.

“Welcome, everyone,” Greyson said loudly, after the crowd had settled down. “We are gathered here today to honor our valiant dead.”

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When it was time for a few words to be said for Jacqueline, Greyson looked to the Redwoods. Lola’s hand shot up, and Greyson gestured for her to step forward.

“Jacqueline wasn’t a werewolf. She was a vampire, but she was loyal to the Redwood pack,” Lola began, her voice shaky as she looked around at the quiet crowd. “She fought bravely, took out a bunch of Bitterfangs, and protected the witches. She died at Malakai’s hand. She was my friend, and we cared for each other…” Lola paused. “Even though neither of us would ever have admitted it.”

That pulled a few chuckles from the crowd. I chuckled as well, squeezing Greyson’s hand when he came to stand next to me. His smile was soft.

“Jacqueline was pretty mean, but in a funny way. Most of the time, at least. She could be a piece of work, and very dramatic. But who am I to judge, right?” Lola added with a snort. More sounds of amusement from the crowd. Lola’s smile faded. Her gaze dropped to the ground, and she swallowed hard. “She helped me when I needed it. She always had my back. She was…” Lola let out a soft sob, bringing her fingers to her mouth. “She was one of us. A member of the Redwood pack.”

*Oh, Lola…*

I started to run to my best friend, to hug her, and I saw Jay do the same. But Elle got there first. She rushed up to Lola and wrapped her up in a fierce embrace, the two of them weeping softly. It broke my heart to see. I glanced up at Greyson and saw tension in his face as he eyed Elle.

*What is he thinking?*

“Do you want to say something as well?” Lola asked Elle.

Elle looked around, at the crowd. Then she looked at Greyson, who nodded at her. She took a deep breath.

“Jacqueline was nice to me,” Elle said. “She taught me so much, and she spent time with me when everybody else was too busy. I liked her. I…” Elle dug the heel of her palm into the corners of her eyes. “I will miss her.”

A moment later, holding hands, Lola and Elle lit the pyre that would honor Jacqueline.

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As the pyres drifted away from the shore, their flames illuminated the lake. The sight left me with a heavy feeling in my chest, but I reminded myself that I couldn’t let the grief and fear swallow me whole. I supposed I had to get used to it instead, but the thought of getting so acclimated to loss that it stopped hurting was jarring.

*C’est la vie supernatural, I guess.*

I was still wiping tears from my eyes.

“I got you,” Greyson whispered, handing me a tissue.

I nodded against his chest, hugging him tight, but then Lucian’s voice rang out.

“Good evening, all! It is I, Prince Lucian of the Vanguard pack!”

Only the Vanguard wolves clapped.

“Oh, *god*. Here we go,” Greyson grumbled against my hair.

I felt like laughing, suddenly. Some things never changed.

“I believe the time has come to celebrate my victory!” Lucian added.

Crickets. From everyone in the crowd—including the Vanguards.

Lucian cleared his throat, correcting himself. “*Our* victory would not have been possible without the sacrifices made by the fallen. It’s time for us to honor their bravery with a celebration.” He gestured toward the house. “The Vanguards have set up food and drinks by the Redwood lake house!”

*This* earned Lucian a chorus of cheers from the assembled packs.

Greyson gave me a small smile that didn’t meet his eyes. “Looks like we’re hosting this thing.”

**Episode 4409**

**Greyson**

Cali was looking much better than she had earlier, which was a relief. Death always hit her harder than the rest of us, but she’d dealt with the ceremony with her head held high. I could sense a lingering rawness inside her, though, and I’d never blame her for that.

“How do you feel about the idea of a party at the lake house?” Cali asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m happy if you’re happy.” I glanced at Prince Lucian the Annoying and the cheering crowd. “Though it seems like Lucian has made the decision for us. He didn’t even ask my permission to turn the place into party central.”

Cali slid her hands over my chest, offering me a small smile. My heart raced at the sight of it. “I think it’s going to be nice. Everybody deserves to have a little fun after all the chaos.”

“You do, too,” I said, cupping her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

She leaned into the touch, covering my hand with hers. “I guess it feels like everything’s coming full circle. Life and death and all.”

I swallowed down my worry. “I love you.”

Her smile widened, and she stretched onto her tiptoes and kissed me lightly on the cheek, then the mouth. “Me too. You’re my hero.”

I burst out laughing.

She frowned. It was adorable. “What? You *are* my hero. I’m trying to be romantic here!”

I shook my head, glancing at the ever-boasting Lucian. “You seem to have forgotten that this was the *princeling’s* victory, love. He said so himself—slip of the tongue aside, I think we both know he’s got himself convinced that he’s a legendary general.”

Cali scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Oh, please. Everyone knows that it was your leadership that ensured the Bitterfang defeat.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “I appreciate that, but you’re biased.”

“That I am,” Cali told me with a grin. It felt real and carefree, and I grinned right back at her—I couldn’t help it. *God*, I loved her. “And I think you deserve a reward for all your hard work.”

She stretched onto her toes to give me another kiss. This one lingered and burned. She gripped my hair, right at my nape, and tugged lightly. The simple touch hit me like a fucking lightning bolt.

I ended the kiss, chuckling. “Are you trying to kill me?”

She smiled, shaking her head. “You really *are* my hero, you know. I’m going to go get you a well-deserved beer.”

As Cali walked off, a couple of things occurred to me. One, I wanted her naked and underneath me as soon as possible. And two, while it was nice to hear her call me her hero, I wasn’t one. We’d won the war, yet the outcome could’ve easily been very different. If the wolf-banishing plan had failed, I would’ve been responsible for the ensuing losses. When I’d decided to go and rescue Cali myself, it could’ve ended in disaster.

The truth was, luck had played a massive role in our victory.

Luck and magic.

Kira and Big Mac had certainly done their bit.

“Here you go.” Cali was back, offering me that beer. As if she could hear my thoughts, she said, “Have you seen Big Mac? I don’t think she came to the memorial.”

I hadn’t told Cali about Big Mac’s intention to leave the pack. I didn’t want to sound the alarm bells just yet. I was plenty alarmed myself, and I wasn’t going to spread the wealth. As Alpha, I was supposed to keep a level head at all times—even when my mom’s fiancée looked me in the eye and said she was leaving. I’d told myself that it would be best to let Big Mac sleep on her decision—and hopefully change her mind—but now, I wasn’t so sure.

Not that I had abandonment issues—well, I probably did, but that was a problem for another day—but Big Mac’s words had felt like a slap in the face. I’d kept it together, of course. As ever. I’d reminded myself that Big Mac was still reeling after Kira’s death, and that the Bitterfang war had dragged up horrible memories of her parents.

Memories that involved Silas.

“I’ll go check in with my mom,” I told Cali. “She’ll know where Big Mac is.”

Cali said she’d go check on Lola, and we parted ways. I scanned the crowd for my mom. Last night, when I’d asked Big Mac how my mother felt about the idea of her leaving, the witch had told me it was none of my business and stomped away. Paired with the fact that Big Mac hadn’t attended tonight’s memorial, I was taking that as a very bad sign. I’d expected her to keep to herself during the day while the rest of us ran around getting everything ready, but to actually miss the ceremony? That just wasn’t like her.

“Greyson!” My mother smiled up at me when I approached the massive drinks table Lucian had supplied. “Do you want a cup of white chocolate mocha?”

My mother looked as calm and levelheaded as ever. She’d been acting like this all day—as if nothing was happening. I’d been giving both her and Big Mac their space, but it felt like the time to do that had passed.

“No, I’m good,” I said. “How is everything?” I asked carefully.

I had no idea what the hell I’d said—maybe it was my tone?—but my mom’s smile vanished. Her expression darkened, and she looked away from me. “Fine. I’m fine.”

Well, then.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked, glancing around.

She shook her head, pouring a cup of mocha for Ravi, who’d excitedly bounded our way. Once he was gone, she told me, “I’m busy, as you can see. Very busy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have time for me, then? Your only child?”

She looked dubious, and also kind of pissed. “You did *not* just pull that card.”

How was I fucking this up so badly? I was usually better at talking to people… Wasn’t I?

“Please,” I said, removing a bunch of mugs from her hands and setting them down on the counter, next to the massive urn of mocha. “I just need a minute.”

Her frown was suddenly tinged with worry. “Are you okay?”

Was *I* okay? I was fine. Mostly. But wait a minute—her relationship was falling apart, and she was wondering how *I* was doing?

It was really nice to have a mom, actually.

 “Just—come with me,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her to the side.

Once we’d put a little distance between ourselves and the bulk of the crowd, she said, “What’s going on? You’re worrying me, now.”

“Why isn’t Big Mac here?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

My mom’s eyes widened before she looked away. “I knew you wanted to talk about that. I could just feel it.”

“This isn’t—”

“This isn’t the time or the place to talk about MacKenzie,” she said tersely. “I’m sorry, Greyson. And I *am* busy, actually.”

She headed back to the drinks table without another word.

Fucking hell.

There was clearly a problem here, but neither Big Mac nor my mother were willing to talk about it. And that was to be expected from Big Mac, but my mom? She *loved* feelings. She loved talking about them and wrapping you in them like a warm blanket. It was one of the reasons why her attention had freaked me out at the beginning. Big Mac had probably felt the same way when they’d first met.

Where *was* Big Mac?

I used to think that she and my mom would be together forever. And that we, the three of us, would kind of, one day, *maybe* become…

A family?

God dammit.

Agitated, I headed back to where I’d left Cali, suddenly desperate to find her and fill her in on the situation. But then, out of nowhere, I was hit by a massive wave of sadness.

For fuck’s sake, Big Mac hadn’t actually left yet. Why the hell was I so sad already?

Why the hell—

*Elle.*

That wasn’t *my* sadness.

Instinct made me turn to the left and make a beeline toward Elle. She was standing apart from everybody else, staring out at the lake. Her arms were wrapped around her torso. She seemed so sad that my heart ached for her.

I felt sick with it.

She looked up at me as I approached. I stopped in front of her, my hands twitching.

“I’m sorry about Jacqueline,” I said. “I know that you were friends. She was a good teacher.”

Elle nodded, looking at her feet. Her voice was throaty. “She wanted to go to college. She wanted to do so many things, but she couldn’t because she was hiding from that other vampire, Rafe. She wasn’t free.” Elle looked up at me. Her eyes glistened. “She had so many dreams, Greyson. And now she’s… gone. It’s not fair.”

“I know,” I said.

A tear slid down Elle’s cheek.

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached for her.

I touched her wrist, pulling her in for a hug. Her breathing hitched, and her arms wrapped around me. Her grip on me tightened in an instant, a low, soft sound escaping her mouth. I held her tight, threading my fingers into her hair. She couldn’t seem to stop trembling.

“I know,” I whispered again.

Elle was crying. Elle was hurting, and that fucking hurt me so badly that I needed to actively regulate my breathing.

“Greyson…”

I pulled back far enough to meet her eyes. Swallowing felt funny when I was looking at her teary-eyed face. “What?”

“I’ve made up my mind,” she whispered.

“About what?”

Elle stared up at me, her hand curling into a fist as she gripped the front of my shirt. “I need to come back to the Redwood pack.”

**Episode 4410**

**Xavier**

Gabe squinted at me. “I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I just can’t wrap my head around it. You’re saying that you want Mikah and me to *babysit* you?”

I scowled. I was feeling pretty frustrated, and it showed. Gabriel obviously didn’t give a shit, though. The pyre ceremony was over, and he was back on his bullshit. He’d spent the entire day messing with me after I’d told him I wanted to hire him and Mikah. Over the past few hours, I’d made numerous attempts to tell him about Adéluce without actually telling him, and all I’d managed to do was make a mess out of the situation.

And Gabriel *really* wasn’t helping.

“I never said anything about babysitting! Why would you—”

“I’m just trying to figure out what you mean, dude!” Gabe laughed. He was clearly having fun with this. “Like, why would you hire us? Do you want us to be armed guards for the Samara pack? Should I bring Bess along?”

I sighed. Then I regretted it. Sighing reminded me of Greyson and his constant “*Really?*” energy. That wasn’t the kind of Alpha I wanted to be. I wanted to be the cool, badass Alpha—*not* the pack dad.

“That is *not* what I said,” I told Gabe. “I never said anything about armed guards. Or Bess. Keep her the hell away from me.”

Gabe laughed some more. “Then what *are* you saying?”

“I’m just… hiring you. For a job.” I waved my beer bottle around. “Why do you have to make everything so fucking difficult all the time?”

Gabe was snickering like he was having the time of his life. Fucker.

“So let me get this straight—you want Mikah and me to do a job for you, but you’re refusing to actually tell me what the job is? That’s…” He pointed at me. “It’s fucked-up. *You’re* fucked-up.”

What else was new?

I tried again. “Like I *said*, I want you and Mikah to follow me. Shadow me. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh…” Gabriel narrowed his eyes at me, taking another sip of beer. “And then what?”

“For fuck’s sake! Just do it!”

Gabe shrugged. “Nah.”

My eye twitched. “Why?”

“Because you’re not telling me shit!” Gabe retorted. “What have you done that makes you think you need shadowing? Protection?” He smacked my arm. “You’re a fucking Alpha now—*you* should be protecting *me*.”

I could feel a headache coming on.

“Jesus fuck, look at you.” Gabe was *cackling*. “You’re pouting!” He patted my shoulder. “Are you okay, baby boy?”

I swatted his hand away, half-tempted to tear it off, but then he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away from the crowd. Once we were alone, his mocking grin vanished.

“Okay, seriously. What the fuck is this all about?”

My head was throbbing, now. “I told you. I want—”

Gabe flicked me on the shoulder. “I can’t protect you if I don’t know what I’m supposed to be protecting you *from*. You know how this shit goes! C’mon, you gotta give me something, here.”

I stared at him for a moment. I was beginning to regret bringing this up.

But my silence only seemed to intrigue Gabe further. Smirking, he said, “Are you worried that Ava is going to smother you in your sleep?”

“Death doesn’t sound so bad if it means I get to stop listening to your bullshit.”

Gabe ignored my comment and glanced around. His expression sobered again, and he lowered his voice. “Does this have something to do with Cali?”

My insides went rigid. Gabe had just gotten a little too close to the heart of things, and suddenly, I realized that this wasn’t going to work. It had been a stupid, desperate idea. I’d had the thought that if I paid Gabe and Mikah to shadow me, they might’ve been able to figure out that Adéluce was still alive. But Adéluce would probably see right through that plan—and then she’d do something to harm them.

I could already imagine her shrill laughter as Gabe sobbed over Mikah’s dead body.

“Never mind,” I said, looking away. “Forget it.”

Gabe stared at me incredulously. “What the hell? Do you want my help or not?”

I shook my head. “Forget about it, at least for now.”

Gabe eyed me for a moment, finishing off his beer. “You’re not okay, dude. You’ve had too little to drink, I bet.”

I glared at him. “The hell is that supposed to mean?”

Gabe shrugged. “Just that you’re cooler when you’re drunk. It pulls the angsty stick right out of your ass.”

I rolled my eyes with a sigh.

Gabe patted my shoulder. “Whatever you need me to do, I’m willing and able. Now, stop pouting.”

I decided to walk away from Gabe before I exploded from frustration, but then Blaine blocked my way. Great. What was it this time? The last thing I needed right now was to listen to Blaine running his mouth. I was in no mood to deal with him.

“What do you want?” I asked, glowering.

Blaine shifted from foot to foot. “I just wanted to say that you did good. As our Alpha. During the battle.”

It took a moment for his words to register. Was this obnoxious little asshole actually coming around? I was shocked.

“Thanks,” I said, eyeing him. Then I decided not to be a dick. “You fought bravely. Keep it up.”

Blaine stood a little straighter at my words. I decided to pat him on the shoulder, just to drive the praise home. He looked pleased when I did it. It was weird, but whatever. At least he hadn’t tried to punch me lately, and he really *had* fought well during the war.

I watched him walk off, almost strutting, and I realized I didn’t feel bad. In fact, that interaction had made me feel a little bit better. We were making progress. My pack was opening up to me. I felt a little like a proud fath—

*No*.

“Fuck, no,” I grumbled, turning back to rejoin the main Samara group.

And then I saw Cali coming toward me.

The sight of her was like a punch in the gut. All the air left my lungs, and I stopped breathing altogether. The memory of the kisses we’d shared shot to the forefront, hitting me full-force. The time we’d spent together in the Vanguard palace was etched into my memory, even though I’d been trying not to torture myself by dwelling on it. But nothing changed the fact that I had pleaded with Cali to take my life so she could save her own. She’d told me she loved me, and I had desperately wanted to say it back.

I told myself that none of the things we’d said and done in the palace mattered. They *couldn’t* matter. Not when I wasn’t allowed to be with her, and certainly not while I was with Ava. Ava, who’d been there for me, who’d wanted to murder Malakai for killing me. My wolf was mad for Ava.

My wolf was mad for Cali, too.

Why was she walking toward me right now? Did she want to talk about what had happened in the dungeon? In the pool? Was she going to tell me she loved me again? Would she try to touch me? I didn’t know what I’d do if she touched me.

I wanted to touch her, drag her close, devour her whole.

I knew I had to drive her away.

I fucking knew it, but I wanted her so badly I could taste it.

Her face was hidden in the shadows, so our eyes hadn’t met yet. I stood there, paralyzed, waiting for her to reach me—but then I realized she wasn’t coming toward me at all. She veered off to join Jay and Lola.

Had she even *seen me*, standing here in the dark?

Fuck.

I turned away, ashamed that I’d been so ready to fall at her feet. What if Adéluce was watching me right now? Waiting for me to make another mistake?

*Ugh.* Shaking my head, I decided that Gabe was right—I *did* need another beer.

But my gaze snagged on Cali again as she moved away from Jay and Lola and approached Ava instead.

Ava, of all people.

What the fuck?

What on earth could the two of them be talking about? They rarely even spoke to each other in passing, much less sought each other out for casual conversations.

But, now that I thought about it, they *had* been working together on something with Kira. And Kira had known about Adéluce’s spell. The three of them had asked for my blood, but never really explained why. Was *that* how Kira had figured out there was magic attached to me? It must’ve been. And all three of them had been determined to get my blood. Ava had even bitten me.

But If Kira had known that I was under a spell… Could Cali and Ava know about it, too?

Could they know that I’d made a deal with a witch?

Could they suspect, or even imagine, that that witch was Adéluce?

**Episode 4411**

Ava gave me a wary look, and I could practically *feel* how reluctant she was to enter into a conversation with me. But I hadn’t come over to argue with her.

“I want to talk about Xavier,” I said without preamble.

Her gaze turned cold. She didn’t physically step back from me, but I sensed her walls going up. “Xavier isn’t your problem anymore. Don’t concern yourself about him.”

This shocked me into silence. Ava and I weren’t friends, but, despite our differences, I’d thought we were united in our concern about Xavier’s weird behavior.

Then my thoughts went to the time Xavier and I had spent together in the palace, as Malakai’s prisoners. I thought of the kiss, and the closeness I’d felt with him—and about how Xavier was still very much my concern.

But I wasn’t going to say any of that out loud. Not now, and certainly not to Ava.

“I am concerned about him because like it or not, he’s still my mate, too,” I said. “And don’t play all aloof and coy; you’re concerned about him too, otherwise why did you even bother going through the blood test with Kira?” I demanded, refusing to be blown off.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Don’t catch an attitude with me, Cali. I was the one who had to lie to Xavier to get the blood, so I don’t know where you get off questioning me.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Look, I just thought we both agreed that we need to find a way to get rid of the magic that’s influencing Xavier.” I gave her a searching look. “Or has something happened to change your mind about that?”

Ava’s sharp gaze faltered and—for once—she didn’t lash out with a scathing retort. She glanced at the werewolves standing nearby. None of them seemed to be listening to us—they were too busy drinking and talking and doing werewolf party shit—but they were close enough that they’d be able to hear us if they decided to listen in.

“I don’t think this is the time to talk about this,” she said quietly, and turned to walk away.

I stared after her for a moment, appalled. What the hell was she talking about?

Frustrated, I darted forward and stepped in front of her, blocking her way. “Okay, so when *is* the time?”

“Cali—”

“You know I’m right, Ava. The longer we put off dealing with this—whatever it is—the more dangerous it could become for Xavier. I know that’s not what you want. I know you care about him, and you don’t want to endanger him.”

Ava was glaring at me, but that was just her default expression where I was concerned. I knew she was thinking about what I’d said. She looked over at Xavier, and I followed her gaze.

He’d been speaking to Blaine, but as we watched, he clapped Blaine on the shoulder, and the younger wolf walked away.

Ava turned back to me, her dark eyes flashing. “What do you want to do, anyway? Kira cast the spell. She had the answers—if there even *were* any—but now she’s dead. We can never ask her what she found out. So that’s the end of that.”

That was all true, but I just shrugged. “I think we should go straight to the source. I think we should try talking to Xavier about it.”

“Of course you want to talk to him,” Ava snapped. She scoffed. “I should’ve known. Well, go ahead. Go do the one thing we were told explicitly *not* to do—ask him about it directly. Or are you just using this magic bullshit as an excuse to get close to him again?” She shook her head, and, without waiting for my response, she pointed at him. “You want to talk to him? There he is. Unless you’re afraid that he’ll reject you?”

I gritted my teeth, trying not to lose my temper. “No, Ava. I meant I think we should talk to him *together*.”

“Why?” Ava demanded.

I suppressed a sigh. “So that we can show him that we’re *both* worried about him. We can present a united front. Where’s the harm in that?”

She took this in, then gave a half-hearted shrug. “Fine.”

It was clear that she was reluctant, though I couldn’t figure out why. Before, she’d wanted to know what was going on with Xavier. Not as much I’d wanted to know, maybe, but…

Well, maybe that was it. Maybe Ava was afraid of what she might find out. If we discovered that Xavier had only chosen to leave me for Ava because of a spell, then that meant Ava could possibly lose him if we broke it.

I looked at Ava, wondering if she’d done that math herself. She probably had—not much got by her. But I wasn’t going to ask her. Ava and I weren’t close, and I definitely didn’t want to poke the bear.

No, I needed to be strategic about this. If I was going to get to the bottom of Xavier’s strange behavior—and I intended to do just that—then I was going to need Ava’s help. Whether I liked it or not, she was my access point to him, and I had to do my best not to alienate her.

“Okay,” I said briskly. “Let’s do this.”

As we walked over to where Xavier was standing, I saw Ava’s expression change. Her scowl relaxed, and she smiled as we approached. She sidled up to him and slipped her arm around his waist, stepping right in front of me, like she was trying to block me. Throwing it in my face that *they* were Alpha and Luna, and I was the odd third.

I rolled my eyes. I hadn’t counted on Ava playing these kinds of games, but whatever. I didn’t care. If she wanted to mess around, she was welcome to do so. All I cared about was figuring out what was going on with Xavier and doing what was best for him.

Xavier looked down at Ava, then glanced over at me. His expression was stony. “What’s all this about?”

I widened my eyes, trying to feign innocence. “What’s all what about? We were just saying that it’s nice for everyone to be together and to have a second to catch our breath after everything. Weren’t we, Ava?”

Ava didn’t jump in, and Xavier shook his head, clearly not buying it.

“Bullshit,” he said curtly. “What’s this really about? Why were the two of you talking?”

When I looked to Ava for help, I found her watching me with a distinctly smug expression.

I hesitated, not sure what to say. I knew I couldn’t bring up the spell directly, or it could make things worse—that much Ava was right about.

But Xavier was watching me closely, waiting, so I had to say *something*.

“No—I just—was—” I cleared my throat. “How are things?” I finished lamely.

He stared at me for a moment, then raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

I looked desperately at Ava, wishing she would jump in and help me out. This was getting *really* uncomfortable.

I tried again, fumbling for the words. “We were… Um…” I said. “We were wondering what your plans are, now that the war’s over.”

I nearly flinched as I finished speaking. *At least I said something, I guess.* But the question just sounded ridiculous—like Xavier was a kid from my neighborhood and I’d just dropped by his backyard graduation party. I really wished I’d thought more about what I was going to say before I’d walked over, but I’d been hoping that Ava would help me out. It was now abundantly clear that Ava wasn’t going to do anything of the sort, and that she was actively enjoying watching me squirm.

Xavier’s blue eyes looked like chips of ice. “My plans are to keep building and training, and to make the Samaras the best pack out there.” He tightened his grip on Ava’s waist and pulled her closer, eliminating the last of the space between them.

I felt like I was going to explode. I couldn’t take this anymore. I wanted to ask him why he was acting like this and what the hell had happened between us in the palace, but I bit my tongue. Ava was standing right in front of me, and I didn’t want her to hear about any of that—I didn’t need to make her hate me any more than she already did.

“Well, good luck with all that,” I managed, my voice tight and terse. Then I turned and stormed away, my face burning with humiliation. I didn’t know what I’d expected, but that had been terrible. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I turned to find Xavier standing behind me. “What?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “You took the word right out of my mouth. What was that all about?”

**Episode 4412**

**Greyson**

*I need to come back to the Redwood pack.*

I forced myself to really think about Elle’s shocking words before I responded, and when I did, I tried to keep my tone measured. “You want to come back to the Redwood pack?”

She nodded emphatically. “Yes.”

“Oh. Well… Okay,” I said slowly. I had no idea how I was supposed to respond. Of course I wanted her to come back. I’d never wanted her to go in the first place—I’d been dead-set against the idea, in fact—but I didn’t want to sound too eager to have her back. There would be consequences, after all. I glanced around, worried about how Lucian might react to Elle’s decision. “Have you spoken with Lucian about the idea?”

She shook her head, her long red hair swaying behind her. “No, I haven’t. I was going to, but I wanted to make sure it was okay with you before I said anything to him.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, I think you should talk the idea over with Lucian. After all, he is your mate.”

The words felt strange on my tongue, and I had trouble getting them out. The idea that anyone—let alone a hothead playboy like Lucian—was able to claim Elle as his mate was deeply troubling to me. And that reaction was deeply troubling in and of itself.

I knew what was driving it—the sire bond was making me feel that way. I also felt responsible for Elle because I’d turned her, and because I had promised her father that I’d keep her safe—but I knew that was only part of the truth, and I didn’t like lying to myself.

Our connection had unleashed my irrational fury and directed it at Ethaniel. What I felt for Elle went beyond an Alpha’s desire to protect a packmate. It was a sense of possession, almost—Elle belonged with me and the rest of the Redwood pack. End of story.

I remembered how Elle had reacted when I’d pounced on Ethaniel—she’d encouraged me, cheered me on. She’d seemed to relish the beating I’d given the Northwind Alpha.

That was something to think about, too. How much of that had been Elle, and how much of it had been the sire bond at work?

That was a question I needed an answer for, myself—I needed to know how affected Elle was by the sire bond.

I frowned. “Elle. Do you think your decision to return to the Redwood pack is based on our bond, or is there a more… concrete reason why you want to come back?”

She looked at me for a moment, then she stared down at the ground. “I—I don’t know, Greyson.” She met my eyes again. “All I know is that I was happy with the Redwood pack, and since I left, something just hasn’t felt right. I noticed it right away—like I was missing something.”

I nodded. I knew what she was talking about. Her description reminded me of the way I’d felt when I’d left the pack to go Rogue. I’d done that in the wake of my father’s rampage, when I just hadn’t been able to imagine being a part of a pack anymore. But the emptiness that Elle was describing had always stayed with me. It was a big part of what had driven me back to the Redwood pack and made me become its Alpha.

Elle twisted her hands together, looking uncharacteristically nervous. “You still haven’t answered me, Greyson.”

“What?” I said, pulling myself from my thoughts.

She took a deep breath. “Do you want me to come back to the Redwood pack?”

I passed a hand over my eyes. “I—I’m not sure.”

As soon as I spoke, pain flashed through her eyes. The sight of it stirred something deep inside me, and I spoke quickly.

“You’re welcome to come back whenever you want, Elle—of course I want you with us—but I’m also worried that it might cause problems,” I said.

Elle took this in. “Problems with Lucian, you mean?”

I nodded. “Yes, problems with Lucian. After all, our connection has already been a source of contention with him in the past.”

She seemed to think about this for a moment. “Are you worried about Cali’s reaction?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” I said quickly. “Cali loves you, Elle. She’d be happy to have you back.”

I was trying to sound more confident than I felt. The reality was that while Cali did love Elle, and though I knew she’d try to be supportive, the sire bond was powerful and unpredictable, and it tended to freak Cali out. It had stirred up problems between the two of us in the past, too, and it had the potential to do the same thing again.

Some of my concern must have shown on my face, because Elle didn’t look fully satisfied with my answer.

“Greyson, I—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Lucian strode over and swung his arm around her shoulders.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere, my forest rose.”

I tried very hard not to roll my eyes.

Elle didn’t answer. She looked down again, her cheeks reddening.

There was a beat of tense silence, and then Lucian looked over at me, eyeing me warily.

“Now that the prisoners have been moved to the dungeons in the palace—”

“Yeah…” I interjected. “At some point, we’re actually going to need to have a conversation about *why* you have dungeons in the palace.”

He ignored me. “Now that they’ve been moved, you should know that I’m prepared to push for my original plan.”

I cleared my throat and shook my head. “No, Lucian. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again—I’m adamantly against executing the prisoners.”

“Greyson—”

“And I’m *not* going to change my mind,” I added sharply.

Lucian heaved a sigh. “I don’t think you’re thinking this through, Greyson, but I would encourage you to try. We *could* invite the council to decide, as Caliana suggested, but say they were to take us up on the invitation—what about Elle?” He raised his eyebrows. “Have you forgotten that the council has sent spies to find her, and that if they knew where she was, they wouldn’t hesitate to punish her for what she did to Helix?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. Lucian was right, which always drove me crazy the rare times when that was the case.

“And I don’t suppose it helped matters when you took it upon yourself to beat the hell out of Ethaniel,” Lucian went on grimly. “I suppose the Northwind Alpha has probably already contacted the council about that little stunt of yours since he wasn’t part of the prisoners we gathered.”

I hadn’t given Ethaniel much thought, given the rest of the chaos I’d been dealing with, but he probably *had* gone to the council by now. Nothing would be stopping him, and turning Elle was a huge offense in the council’s eyes. They wouldn’t help with the war, but they would come pursue me for that? Ha. Of course. They’d already had scouts at Lucian’s party who’d been after Elle then…

Shit.

As much as I hated to admit it—even to myself—Lucian had a point. Getting the council involved would only make things harder for Elle. And me and my pack.

Elle looked at me. “Well? What should I do, Greyson?”

Lucian frowned at Elle, then at me. “You don’t have to do anything, my forest rose. Nothing is going to happen to you.”   
 I was about to open my mouth to tell Elle to wait—or at least first discuss the matter with Lucian without me around—but she didn’t give me a chance to weigh in.

“No. I have to do something,” she said. “I want to go back to the Redwood pack!”

Lucian looked just as stunned by this news as I’d expected him to be.

The blood drained from his already pale face. “*What?* So soon? You didn’t need to make a decision yet.”

Elle shook her head. “But I have to make one eventually, don’t I? Why prolong it? It might just make us waste precious time,” she said. “I want to go back to the Redwoods, Lucian.”

Lucian looked like he’d just been hit by a bus. “But, Elle—my forest rose, what do you—”

“It’s where I belong,” Elle said, her eyes meeting his.

Lucian released her from his embrace. For a moment, all he did was look at her, pushing some of her red hair behind her ears. Then the nice moment was over when he rounded on me, his pale eyes shining with fury. “YOU!”

“What?” I said, taken aback by the ferocity of his rage.

“*Greyson Evers*.” He spat my name out like it was an expletive. “Tell me the truth—did you talk her into this?”

**Episode 4413**

**Xavier**

Cali’s eyes widened, and in them I saw a flash of something strange—it was almost like she wanted to say something, to tell me something, but she couldn’t. Or maybe she was afraid to.

I missed the days when she would open up to me; when she would pour her heart out because we were mates, we were together. I missed when she trusted me.

But maybe she still did?

But right now she looked unhappy and anxious, probably because I’d been so dismissive of her. That wasn’t exactly a trust builder. Being dismissive, though, was the last thing I’d wanted to do, but she’d been acting very strangely, and I was still worried about Adéluce.

I just wished I could find some kind of middle ground with all this—a way to keep Cali at a safe distance without actually hurting her. It definitely didn’t help matters that Ava had seemed to relish Cali’s discomfort.

“Well?” I pressed, my anxiety getting the better of me.

Cali dropped her gaze. “I don’t know what you mean, Xavier.” She looked back up at me. “What was all *what* about?”

Her gaze bored into me, and I hesitated. How the hell was I supposed to explain what I meant without violating the terms of my fucked-up deal with Adéluce?

But I was so worried that she’d somehow found out about Adéluce’s spell, I hadto say *something*, so I took a chance and just hoped it wouldn’t get me on the wrong side of the vampire-witch.

“I just can’t help but notice that you and Ava were spending a lot of time talking with Kira… before,” I said carefully. “Why was that?”

Cali swallowed. She was nervous and trying not to show it. That was the thing about knowing her so well—it was hard for her to hide anything from me.

“Have you asked Ava about it?” she asked me archly.

I bit back a growl of frustration. We were playing some kind of game here—I could feel it—and I hated it.

“I’m asking *you*,” I fired back.

She pressed her lips together and looked around, almost like she was searching for a way out of this conversation. All around us, people were laughing and drinking and yelling, but the way Cali and I were standing—alone—made me feel like we were the only two people in the world.

But, to be fair, I always felt that way with Cali, when it really came down to it.

When she looked back at me again, her eyes were blazing. “I think you already know what this is about. Ava and I were talking to Kira because all three of us have been worried about you—”

“*What?*” I snapped.

Her eyes flashed. “There’s something going on with you, Xavier. We’re all worried that you’re being affected by something that’s beyond your control.”

I froze as panic coursed through my bloodstream like poison. Cali was *so* close to the truth of what was happening—closer than she should’ve been. I didn’t know why I was surprised—Cali was always quick to spot things that seemed unusual. And Ava and Kira were too smart to be fooled, too.

I forced a laugh, though it sounded hard and fearful, even to my ears. “I think you’re looking for something to be wrong because you *want* something to be wrong. You’re grasping at straws.”

Cali reacted to my cruel words like I’d just slapped her. She jerked back, her face going pale.

“I think you’re looking for an explanation that doesn’t exist,” I added. Then I grabbed her arm, my grip made tight by fear. “I made my decision—and it *was* my decision. I don’t know what little scheme you and Kira were working on before she died, but you need to end it. *Now*. It’s over. What I do with my life is none of your damn business.”

I released her arm, and she stumbled back a step. It was all I could do not to reach out to steady her.

“Go back to Greyson,” I spat, disgusted with myself and the whole situation.

Cali opened her mouth to respond, but only a small squeak came out. My heart ached as her eyes filled with tears, threatening to spill over. Then she pulled in a deep breath.

“And is that how you felt when you kissed me?” she asked, her voice trembling with anger and hurt. “When you thought we were going to drown? You just wanted me to get out of your life then, too?”

My instinct was to reach for her, to wrap her in my arms, to tell her that I loved her and that I was sorry for all of this—every harsh word, every dismissive glance, *everything*. But I couldn’t. Being held captive by Malakai had been hell, but it was nothing compared to the prison Adéluce had me bound up in, where she controlled my every word and action, and not even my thoughts were private.

I balled my hands into fists. “I—I only did that in the dungeon because I knew you were scared, and I didn’t want you to freak out and get us both killed.”

Cali’s eyes widened with shock. “Are you telling me that was just a distraction? So I wouldn’t scream or thrash around or—”

“Call it whatever you want,” I snapped. “It worked, didn’t it?”

She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again, like she had no idea what she could possibly say to that. I didn’t blame her.

Shame was making my whole body burn like fire. My mouth felt dry as a desert, and I shook my head. “You need to stop worrying about me,” I said coldly.

Then, without waiting for her to respond, I turned and walked away. I felt shattered and empty. I wanted to close my eyes and keep walking forever.

*I know you’re lying.*

My eyes jerked open. Cali was speaking to me through the mind link, and she sounded firm and determined.

*I know you’re not telling me the truth, Xavier, and I won’t stop until I find out why.*

It was a struggle, but I didn’t turn back, and I didn’t stop. I kept walking, like I hadn’t heard the voice that was still echoing through my head.

When I looked up, I saw Ava watching me. She was a few yards away, eyeing me coolly as I approached.

Suddenly, I wondered if Cali had told her about what had happened between us in the palace. If she had, things between Ava and me were about to get very tense.

This double life nonsense was only getting worse. I hated feeling like I was lying to everyone, myself included. But that’s what I was doing—there was no other solution. If I didn’t lie to everyone, it could put them in danger.

As I walked over to Ava, she opened a fresh beer and took a pull, then offered it to me.

“Well?” she asked.

I took the drink and chugged it gratefully. The alcohol content wasn’t high enough to have any effect on me, which was a shame. I could’ve used some liquid assistance to make it through this night.

“Well what?” I retorted. “What’s going on with you and Cali? Since when are you two working on shit together?”

I watched her face closely, trying to figure out if she was going to lie to me or tell me the truth. Ava was harder to read than Cali—she knew how to shut her expression down when she wanted to.

“Cali was worried about your behavior,” she said with a shrug. “I offered to help her investigate what was going on.”

“What? Why?” I asked suspiciously. “That’s a little off-brand for you, isn’t it? Helping Cali with, well, anything?”

She shrugged again. “I guess, but I felt sorry for her. I mean, she’s still mooning over you, you know. It’s kind of sad. For some reason, she just can’t accept that you left her and that you’re with me now. And it just keeps getting worse—maybe because you chose me as your Luna, or because she was forced to accept that you’ve really left the Redwoods when you became the Samara Alpha. Or maybe even because she saw how Greyson reacted to your competence as an Alpha. She says she’s just trying to put the pieces together or something. I mean, I get it. It’s a little pathetic, but I get it.”

I couldn’t help but bristle at Ava’s shots at Cali, but at the same time, I also knew there was some truth to what she was saying. That *was* what it all looked like from Ava’s perspective, after all.

“Anyway,” Ava continued, tugging the beer from my hand and taking another drink, “I know I don’t have anything to worry about.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“I mean that I don’t have anything to worry about,” she repeated. Her dark eyes shone as she looked up at me. “You’re going to stay with me no matter what, right?”

**Episode 4414**

My heart was racing as I walked away from Xavier. I was angry and upset and sad and just so humiliated. *And* confused. I knew he was lying to me, but why? What did he have to gain?

I couldn’t figure any of it out, and the more I thought about it, the more questions I came up with.

I’d almost reached one of the bonfires when I saw Mrs. Smith sitting alone and headed toward her—I felt like I needed a dose of her kindness, after the conversation I’d just had. But when I drew closer to her, I saw that she seemed to be crying. Tears were rolling down her face, and I was about to hurry over when a loud snarl stopped me in my tracks.

Swinging around, I saw Lucian shift and lunge toward Greyson.

What the *hell*?

In an instant, a handful of Redwoods shifted, too, and we all sprinted toward Greyson.

But Elle was there already, and she leapt in front of Greyson before Lucian could reach him. Neither she nor Greyson had shifted.

Lucian stopped when Elle blocked his way, snarling and nudging her with his nose, but she refused to budge.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. What was going on with Lucian? Why was he doing this? I knew that he and Greyson didn’t always see eye to eye, and that they disagreed about what to do with the prisoners, but this kind of response was *way* over the top for a tactical disagreement.

Mace sprinted over and got in Lucian’s face. “What the hell are you doing?”

Lucian hesitated for a moment, then shifted back to human. So did the other wolves.

Lucian pointed at Greyson. “The Redwood Alpha has turned my mate against me!”

“No, he didn’t!” Elle protested. “It was my idea!”

I turned to Greyson, baffled. “What’s going on? What are they talking about? What was Elle’s idea?”

Lucian glared at me. “Caliana, your mate wants my mate to live with the Redwoods again.”

This surprised me, and I looked at Greyson for confirmation. “Is that true?”

“Is what true?” Aysel asked, walking over with Armin. She looked around at all the angry and confused faces. “What the hell is going on?”

“I think everyone just needs to calm down,” Greyson said, his voice measured. He looked over at Lucian, who was still glowering, and did *not* seem to be in the mood to calm down. “Elle came to me about this, Lucian—she told me that she’d been thinking it would be best for her to return to the Redwood pack. She asked me if I’d support that decision.”

Pain registered on Lucian’s face, and he turned to look at Elle. “But—my dear—you’re my forest rose. Why would you ever want to leave me?”

Elle went pale as she met his eyes. “I just… I feel like I belong with the Redwoods.”

“But—”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not your mate anymore,” Elle added hurriedly.

Lucian still looked stunned. “Don’t I make you happy?”

He sounded so surprised, and sad… And maybe a tiny bit pathetic.

Aysel must have thought so, too, because she stopped forward to speak quietly to her brother.

“Maybe you should discuss this with your mate in a more private setting, Lucian,” she said. When he didn’t answer, she put her hand on his arm. “And *not* in front of the entire alliance.”

“That’s a good idea,” I added. I looked up Greyson. “Maybe you and I should talk privately, too.”

I had a lot of questions, and I wanted answers, so as Aysel pulled Lucian away with Elle trailing behind, I led Greyson away from the crowd and toward the trees, where we could be alone.

“Hey,” I said, looking up at him.

“Hey.” He looked uncomfortable, but resigned, like he’d known this conversation was coming.

“Did you know that Elle was thinking about coming back?”

Greyson shook his head. “No. It was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you.”

“Couldn’t have surprised anyone more than it did Lucian,” I muttered. “Do you really think bringing Elle back to the pack is a good idea, though?”

“You don’t?” he asked.

I shifted from foot to foot, feeling a little uncomfortable. “Well, I guess I’m a little worried about the sire bond. Don’t forget—I did see what happened with Ethaniel, Greyson.”

He nodded. “Yeah…”

“What if Elle does something to make you lose control like that again?” I asked.

“I really doubt that will happen—”

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t think it would happen with Ethaniel, either,” I interrupted, my tone a little sharper than I’d intended.

He sighed. “I could still tell Elle to stay with the Vanguards. She’ll listen to me,” he said. “I told her to talk to Lucian about everything. I assume you would love for her to come back, or am I totally off base?”

“No, you’re not wrong,” I said. “I like Elle—you know I do. I like having her around. But I’m also aware of the issues with the sire bond. I’m not jealous,” I added. And I wasn’t. Not exactly. If I was upset about anything, it was that this was taking away Greyson’s energy from dealing with other things we had going on. “I’m just more worried about what could happen if she were to come back to the pack house and you two were to spend more time in close proximity.”

“Yeah, I know,” Greyson said with another sigh. He sounded pretty miserable.

I looked over his shoulder to where Aysel was standing with Lucian. She was speaking, and his face had lost its sad puppy look. Now, he just looked angry and dangerous—like the Alpha he was.

I shook my head. “And now it seems like we’ve made an enemy of Lucian. Again.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Okay, that’s the consequence I’m *least* worried about. I’m not going to concern myself with the princeling and his little tantrums. You know Lucian, Cali—he’s always getting himself worked up over something.”

“That’s true,” I admitted.

“I’m sure he’ll calm down when he’s had some time to think,” he said. “The most important thing for me is making sure you’re comfortable with the idea of having Elle back in the pack house.”

My gaze went to Elle. She was standing near Lucian and Aysel, but she wasn’t speaking, and they weren’t speaking to her. I knew it wasn’t actually the case, but from a distance, she looked small and fragile, and my heart went out to her.

“With Elle being with us all the time, I could see how it would be easier to protect her from the council and their spies. We’re there to actually defend her, and we stay in the know,” I reasoned. “But she’s really still figuring a lot of stuff out. It’s possible that she’ll come back to the pack house for a while, realize that she misses Lucian and the Vanguard pack, and then want to go back.” I looked up at Greyson. “I mean, I can’t imagine moving away from you.”

He smiled, his face relaxing. He pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me. “I saw you running over when the princeling lunged at me,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “What was your plan? What would you have done if he’d managed to pounce?”  
 I leaned back and held out my hand, summoning my sword. “Let’s just say that Lucian would’ve regretted his choices pretty quickly. He hasn’t gotten the memo that I’m on the verge of becoming a bit of a badass.”

Greyson laughed and pulled me closer. “You’re right. He’s lucky that Elle and Mace were able to break it up first. My girl would’ve finished him off.” He looked over to Lucian, who’d finally turned to speak to Elle. “I don’t know how this is going to shake out, but I told Elle that she should discuss moving back with Lucian first, and I meant it. I think we should just let them sort it out.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said, glad that we weren’t going to have to referee that particular conversation.

“Should we get a drink?” Greyson asked. “Since there’s a party and all.”

I nodded, but as we headed to the drinks table, I suddenly remembered something and stopped walking. “Hey, I think there’s something wrong with your mom. I saw her earlier, and she looked upset.”

He frowned. “Upset? Why? What happened?”

“I don’t know. I was heading over to talk to her, but then Lucian attacked you,” I said. “Not sure what happened, but maybe you should go talk to her.”

Greyson nodded and let go of my hand. He started to stride away, but then he stopped, looked around, and looked back at me. “Where is she?”

“She’s right over…” I looked at the stump she’d been sitting on, but it was empty.

She was gone.

**Episode 4415**

**Ava**

I finished my beer as I watched the Lucian-Greyson drama wind down. It had been entertaining enough, but ultimately a little disappointing. Mace had stuck his nose in and broken things up, which had felt like a bit of an anticlimax. I would’ve liked to have seen the two Alphas go at it, but—alas—calmer heads had prevailed.

However, the fight had still caused a commotion that had interrupted my conversation with Xavier, and I hadn’t gotten an answer to my question.

“Well?” I asked, turning to face him.

“Well what?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Should I be worried that you’re going to leave me and go back to… to the Redwood pack?” I couldn’t bring myself to say “go back to Cali.”

Xavier gave me a long look, and then he pulled me close, sliding his arms around my waist.

“I’m here with you now, aren’t I?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

I loved the way his body felt against mine, but I wasn’t a fool. I knew an evasion tactic when I saw one. “What I’m looking for here is a direct answer, X.”

I hated that I felt the need to press like this. I hated that insecurity—something I rarely experienced—always seemed to rear its ugly head when Cali was involved.

A muscle in Xavier’s jaw twitched, and he shook his head. “It’s impossible.”

“What is?”

“I’m never going back there,” he said stiffly. “The Samara pack is my home now. I’m the Alpha.”

“You’re the Alpha,” I murmured, looking up into his blue eyes.

“In fact, we should be celebrating with our pack right now. We proved to them that we make a kickass Alpha-Luna team, didn’t we?” He smiled and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my lips.

I rested my hand on the back of his neck, deepening the kiss and savoring it—we felt so right, so connected. It made me wonder why I kept doubting him.

“We sure did,” I said, pulling away and looking up at him with stars in my eyes. “We should celebrate.”

As we headed toward the main group of Samaras, Xavier took my hand. “Did I tell you that even Blaine seems to be coming around?”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

Xavier nodded. “Yeah, he *complimented* me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And exactly how drunk was he at the time?”

Xavier laughed.

As we approached the Samaras, it became very clear that they’d all been doing a *lot* of drinking.

Zipper, Knox, Blaine, and a couple of other wolves who’d been pulled into their idiotic orbit were standing in a circle, yelling at each other.

“CHUG IT!” Zipper was shouting as Knox shotgunned a beer.

He finished the beer, threw the can to the ground, and gestured for Blaine to step forward. The two of them started to grapple—almost like wrestling, if the wrestlers were unskilled and extremely drunk.

When they caught sight of us, Zipper tapped Knox on the shoulder, and he pulled away from Blaine.

Knox looked over at Zipper. “Go ahead.”

Zipper looked a little confused, then a little freaked out.

Knox pushed him forward. “Go on.”

Zipper was clearly drunk. He stepped forward, stumbled, then got his feet back under him. He looked up at Xavier, puffed out his chest, and took a deep breath. “I think I should call for a Lupo Finale.”

Then, like he’d forgotten to do it earlier, he jabbed Xavier in the chest with his finger.

Xavier looked down at him, raising an eyebrow.

I tensed up. I knew Zipper was bullshitting—he was just running his mouth—but the call for a Lupo Finale was serious business, no matter how drunk the initiator happened to be.

I looked over at Xavier, who shot me a wicked smile.

He turned back to Zipper. “Hang on, you *think* you should call for a Lupo Finale?”

“Wha—I mean, yeah, I think so…” Zipper stammered.

“So does that mean you aren’t sure?” Xavier pressed.

He’d made his expression hard and grim, and after a moment, Zipper’s chest deflated.

“I was just kidding,” he said, looking down.

Xavier took this in stride. “I thought so,” he said, slapping Zipper on the back. The slap was just a little harder than necessary, and Zipper stumbled forward, wincing.

“You’re a chicken, Zip!” Knox heckled drunkenly.

“Why don’t you say that to my face!” Zipper said savagely, spinning around and lunging for Knox.

“Where is it?” Knox asked, dodging Zipper’s wild grab. “I can’t tell it from your ass.”

They kept shit-talking each other as they wrestled, and I turned away, rolling my eyes.

“So,” Xavier said to me. “You want to stay here and play drinking games with the rest of the frat bros, or do you want to find something else to do?”

When I looked up at him, there was a twinkle in his eyes that made my heart race.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, feeling my body go tingly all over.

He took my hand. “How about a walk?”

The heat from his hand shot up my arm and coursed through my body. I felt electrified, and I wanted more. I dropped my chin and looked up at him through the veil of my lashes.

“Oh,” I purred. “A *walk*? I was kind of hoping you’d take me for a ride.”

Xavier met my eyes, and a jolt of understanding passed between us. He nodded toward the trees. “Come on.”

I laced my fingers through his, and we casually strolled away from the partiers. A breeze kicked up as we walked, wrapping around us, and I pressed myself closer to Xavier’s side.

I felt like I was a teenager again, back when Xavier and I had first started to get serious. We’d known each other for so long, but when we’d finally decided to take the next step, it had been like flipping a switch. I’d known him my whole life, but suddenly there was all this anticipation about what would happen the next time I saw his face. When would he hold my hand? When would we kiss?

When would he tell me that he loved me?

Those had been the best days of my life, and I’d lost all of that—I’d lost *Xavier*—when Silas had started his pack war, which had raged on until everything it touched had been destroyed.

But that wasn’t going to happen again. I wasn’t going to *let* it happen again. I didn’t know what secret Xavier was hiding, or what magic was hovering over him—Kira had said there was *something* going on—but I didn’t care. Cali was determined to figure out what was going on and put an end to it, but my enthusiasm for the project—which had always been fairly weak—was starting to wane.

I didn’t want to learn that my new start with Xavier was really some kind of illusion—that we were nothing but smoke and mirrors and hope. But my gut was telling me that wasn’t true. There was no fucking way it could be.

I knew what I felt, and Xavier’s hand in mine was real. His lips on mine when he kissed me were real. When I made him come, it was real.

It all felt real—and, more than that, it felt *right*. And I was going to do whatever it took to keep it that way.

When we reached the edge of the lake, Xavier pushed me against an aspen tree and kissed me. This was what I’d been waiting for. This was what I needed—what we both needed.

I felt my whole body relax as he touched me. I arched against him and kissed him back, hard, sliding my tongue along his. I loved kissing him, and I had this crazy thought that the more I responded to this kiss, the more certain I would be that our bond was real.

Kira had said that there was magic working on Xavier, but she hadn’t gotten a chance to elaborate. I didn’t even if it actually *was* magic—maybe it was just the remnants of the *due destini* bullshit. Or maybe Kira had just been plain wrong. She could’ve been wrong. And even if she’d been right, and Xavier *was* under the influence of some kind of magic, there was no reason for me to think that magic had anything to do with how or why Xavier had returned to me. I was his mate—his *first* mate.

I was where he belonged.

Xavier pulled away from the kiss, and when he looked down at me, his eyes were hungry. I loved when he looked at me that way. Like he wanted to devour me. He dove back into me, kissing me harder, pressing me against the tree. He lifted me up, grabbing me by the ass, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

“More,” I whispered.

With a low growl, he started to tear at my clothes.

**Episode 4416**

**Greyson**

“Well? Where is she?”

Cali looked around, frowning. “I swear, she was right there a minute ago. Right before Lucian tried to hulk out on you. She was sitting right there. She was crying, but I don’t know why.” She paused for a few seconds. “Maybe she was upset because of Kira. That would make sense. Everyone’s upset about that.”

I’d been looking around, too, but I stopped when Cali mentioned Kira. Everyone *was* upset about Kira, but I knew that wasn’t why my mother had been crying. I’d been hoping not to drag Cali into this, but I didn’t see a way around it.

“I don’t think she was crying over Kira,” I said slowly.

Cali looked up at me. “What do you mean?” She narrowed her eyes. “What do you know?”

I sighed. “If she was crying, it probably had more to do with Big Mac’s decision to leave the pack.”

Cali stared at me. “*What?*”

“I know.”

“Why would Big Mac want to leave us?” Cali burst out. “I mean, she’s practically family!”

“Well, I guess you weren’t actually too far off when you mentioned Kira,” I admitted. “Her death really hit Big Mac hard. That combined with the strain she was under, trying to protect the pack… It took its toll.  
 Cali nodded. “I guess I can understand that. So she’s really leaving?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know for sure. She and my mom both refused to talk about it when I tried to bring it up—which leads me to believe that if my mother was crying, that’s why.”

“Oh, Greyson,” Cali said softly.

“It’s just hard to think that even though we’ve beaten Malakai and the Bitterfangs and the rest of those bastards, my mother’s the one who’s crying. It just doesn’t seem fair.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Cali shook her head, then she frowned. “Do you think your mom would leave with Big Mac? I mean—they’re still getting married, right?”

“I honestly don’t know what their plan is,” I admitted.

“Oh. Wow,” was all Cali could say to that. She turned to Ravi, who was standing nearby. “Hey, have you seen Mrs. Smith?” she called.

Ravi shook his head. “No, not for a while.”

We asked a few more people, but no one had seen her.  
 I was starting to get a little worried. “Where the hell did she run off to?”

“Hey, Greyson.”

I turned to see Rishika walking over. “Hey.”

“I heard you were asking around about your mother?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Have you seen her?”

She nodded. “Yeah, a little while ago.”

“Where is she?”

“She told me that she wasn’t feeling well and wanted to go lie down. She said she was going back to the pack house,” Rishika said. “She did look pale, and I offered to go with her, but she told me to stay. She was pretty insistent, actually.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“Thanks, Rishika. That helps a lot.” I turned to Cali. “I’m going to go check on her. Will you be okay, staying here with everyone else?”

Cali glanced around. “I mean, I guess—but I’d rather go with you. Unless you’d prefer to talk to your mom alone?”

I smiled. “I appreciate that, but I already tried to talk to her, and I didn’t get anywhere. Who knows? Maybe having you with me will help. I mean, it couldn’t hurt.” I looked over at Rishika. “Will you keep an eye on things here while I’m gone?”

Rishika nodded. “I’ll give it my best shot.”

“And try to make sure Lucian keeps his head,” I said. “Don’t let him cause any trouble. Well, any *more* trouble.”

“Roger that,” Rishika said with a wry chuckle.

I shifted, and Cali climbed onto my back, gripping my fur tightly. Turning my back on the lake, I ran into the woods, heading for the current Redwood pack house.

*Do you think your mom went back to the house to talk to Big Mac?* Cali asked after a few minutes of thoughtful silence.

*I don’t know. Maybe*, I said hopefully.

After another couple of miles, the pack house swam into view between the trees. But I could immediately see that—while the porch lights were on outside—there were no lights on inside the house.

I frowned, wondering if my mother was even here. But she’d told Rishika that this was where she was going. And if she wasn’t here, then where *was* she?

Feeling unsettled, I slowed to a stop and lowered myself down so Cali could slide off my back. I waited until she’d jumped down to the ground before I shifted back to human.

Cali glanced up at me, and I could see the same questions I’d been asking myself swimming in her eyes. “Well, let’s go inside,” she said.

We walked through the front door, and the house was eerily quiet. It was dark inside—no lights had been turned on. It was cold, too, like no one had bothered to turn on the heat. We didn’t bother with it for the wolves, of course, but I was always mindful of it for Cali’s sake, and I knew my mother did the same for Big Mac. They were human—sort of—and needed more heat than the rest of us.

“Mom!” I called into the darkness. “Sabine?”

“Mrs. Smith?” Cali called. “Are you here?”  
 We both paused to listen, but there was no response. Just the pressing quiet of the seemingly empty house.

“This is so weird,” Cali said as I turned on the hall light.

“What’s weird?” I asked.

She shook her head. “The house.” She shrugged. “I don’t think I’ve ever even seen it this empty.”

I nodded. “Let’s go check my mother’s room. She told Rishika she wanted to lie down—if she really wasn’t feeling well, she might’ve just gone up there and fallen asleep.”

Cali nodded. “That makes sense,” she said, though I could detect some doubt in her voice.

We headed upstairs, the stairs creaking beneath our feet as we climbed. Cali was right—it *was* weird for the house to be so still and quiet. Someone always seemed to be in the kitchen, or watching TV, or running up and down the stairs. There was never a time when I didn’t hear someone talking or laughing or slamming a door. Usually, that annoyed me, but right now, I found myself longing for the usual ambient noise.

I stopped outside my mother’s bedroom door and knocked softly. If she *was* asleep, I didn’t want to startle her.

There was no answer, so I shot Cali a quick look and then pushed the door open.

I’d had my doubts, but I really had been hoping to find her here, so my stomach dropped when I turned on the light and saw that the room was empty.

“Where is she?” I wondered aloud. I was starting to get really worried. “Did she lie to Rishika about where she was going? But *why*? Rishika wouldn’t have cared where she was going.”

“Hey,” Cali said softly, resting her hand on my arm. “Let’s not jump to any conclusions, here. Okay?”

I nodded. “Maybe we should go check some of the other rooms.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad…” Cali trailed off as she looked around the room. “Hang on.” She frowned.

“What is it?”

“Where are Big Mac’s things?” Cali asked, looking at the desk in the corner.

The surface was usually covered with jars and canisters and the little sacks of ingredients Big Mac used for her spells, but now it was completely empty.

Cali hurried over to the closet and pulled it open. “It’s empty.”

“Shit,” I breathed. “Did Big Mac already move out?”

I shook my head, feeling totally blindsided. I’d known Big Mac was serious when she’d spoken to me about leaving—she was rarely *not* serious—but I’d figured that she’d at least think it over a little more before she packed up and left.

I shook my head. “Let’s look downstairs. My mom wouldn’t have gone into anyone else’s room.”

Cali nodded, and we headed downstairs. We checked the living room, the den, the study, and the kitchen, but she was nowhere to be found.

Feeling worried and frustrated, I walked into the laundry room, grabbed a pair of sweats, and pulled them on. I was wondering where the hell I was going to look next when I heard a strange noise.

“Are you hearing that?” I asked Cali, stepping back into the kitchen.

She nodded, and we followed the sound out the back door to the deck, where we saw a figure sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs. It was my mother. She was curled into a ball, and she was sobbing. That was the sound I’d heard.

“Mom,” I said softly. She looked up as I rushed to her side. “What happened?”

“It’s over,” she said.

“What’s over?” I asked.

She took a shuddering breath. “The wedding is off.”

**Episode 4417**

My heart broke as I looked at Mrs. Smith sobbing, and I felt tears gathering in my own eyes. The entire pack had been so excited about the wedding, but my reaction was about so much more than that. I knew how much Mrs. Smith loved Big Mac, and how much she’d been looking forward to finally getting married. They’d been through so much together. They’d both faced Silas together. Big Mac had helped protect Mrs. Smith against him and gotten her away for her own safety. They were bonded in a way that none of us really knew. To see that kind of love just… end. Well, what did that say about love?

And what did it say to Greyson? I knew how much Greyson had been looking forward to the wedding. He’d spent so much of his life all on his own, and with this wedding had come the promise of a sense of family for him—the very thing that Silas had robbed him of as a child. This was supposed to finally be the happy ending that they all deserved.

Greyson knelt next to his mother and took her hand.

“Are you all ri—” he started, then he stopped himself with a shake of his head. He seemed to know there was no point in asking that question. She wasn’t all right, and she wouldn’t be. Probably not for a while. My heart broke just seeing it. Instead, he just reached for his mother and pulled her into a hug.

Mrs. Smith leaned against him, crying harder. “I’m not all right,” she sobbed. “I’m not.”

“I know, Mom,” he said. “I’m here, okay? I’m not going anywhere. Ever.”

She nodded, holding him back.

“What happened?” I asked carefully. “Did you have a fight with Big Mac?”

Mrs. Smith leaned back into the chair, still gripping Greyson’s hand. “No, it wasn’t a fight. I wouldn’t call it that. It was too one-sided to be a fight.”

“Was it Big Mac who called off the wedding?” Greyson asked.

His mother nodded, tears still leaking down her cheeks. “I tried to talk to her, but it was no use. She refused to listen to anything I said.”

Greyson sat back on his heels. “Some of this is my fault.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked him.

“I asked too much of the witches,” he said. “In this battle and in all the battles before it. It was too much—”

“You had nothing to do with this,” Mrs. Smith said somberly. “Don’t say that, Greyson. MacKenzie had talked about moving back to her own house before now—she just always backed down in the end.”

I looked at Mrs. Smith as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Is that really so bad? Would you not consider moving with her? Into her house?”

Mrs. Smith’s expression hardened. “No, I wouldn’t.” She shook her head. “I spent so much of my life without my son—I’m not going to leave him. Not when I finally have him again.”

Greyson looked stricken. “Mom, it doesn’t have to be like that. We could—”

“Greyson, no,” she interrupted. “I won’t hear of it. You don’t know what it’s like to be separated from your child. I have you back now, and I’m not leaving. I always thought MacKenzie understood that.” She took a deep breath. “But I guess I was wrong.”

My heart was aching for Mrs. Smith. She was obviously heartbroken, but I could hear the fervor in her voice when she spoke about staying with Greyson. She was fully committed to her son above all else.

“Maybe she’ll back down again,” I said. “I mean, Greyson’s right—this last battle was really hard on her, and I know she’s upset about what happened to Kira. Maybe this is just her reacting to everything. It’s a lot to process. And if she was willing to back down before, maybe she’ll do it again. After she’s had time to think.”

Mrs. Smith pulled a tissue from her pocket and wiped her eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“But you don’t—”

“This time was different,” she said. “It *felt* different. She wasn’t just suggesting it, she was doing it. She packed up all her things—everything—and just blipped away.” A sob burst out of her throat. “She’s never done that before.”

She broke down again, sobbing harder than ever, and Greyson leaned forward, pulling her into a hug. She threw her arms around his neck and cried into his shoulder.

I felt useless. I wished there was something I could say to make Mrs. Smith feel better, or something I could do to make Big Mac come back to her, but I was at a loss.

I knew Big Mac loved Mrs. Smith—I’d seen the truth of that written on the witch’s face more times than I could count—so this development just didn’t make any sense. Why had she done this? I could understand her being done with the pack—she had no real allegiance to us—but how could Big Mac love Mrs. Smith so much and yet do something that caused her so much pain?

I wondered if it would do any good for me to find Big Mac and talk to her myself. I kind of remembered where her house was. I could probably find it. Or would that just make things worse?

Big Mac and I had never been close, and I wouldn’t have described our relationship as warm and fuzzy, but I *liked* to think we were friendly. Or that she at least tolerated me. But Big Mac did listen to me. Sort of.

Behind me, I felt the air on the deck stir. It wasn’t wind—it was too charged and focused to be wind. I spun around just in time to see Big Mac appear out of thin air.

I stared at her in shock, and she stared right back at me. Then her gaze flicked over to Greyson and Mrs. Smith.

No one said anything for a long moment, and the silence was charged with tension.

Finally, Big Mac spoke. “I forgot something.”

Greyson stood, his eyes flashing. He opened his mouth to say something, but I grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze.

*No, Greyson*,I said. *We should let them talk.*

He looked down at me, hesitated, and then nodded. He leaned down and kissed his mother on the forehead, then—after he shot Big Mac a vaguely threatening sort of glare—he followed me back inside.

We shut the door behind us, but it still didn’t feel like we were giving the women enough space, so we headed deeper into the house, finally shutting ourselves into Greyson’s study.

He leaned against the desk with a sigh that seemed to emerge from the depths of his soul.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m okay,” he said wearily, rubbing his eyes. “But I can’t help but feel like all this drama between my mom and Big Mac is all my fault.”

“Oh, Greyson.” I wrapped my arms around him. “I know you feel bad—I feel bad, too—but remember what your mom said. It sounds like whatever’s going on between them didn’t just happen out of nowhere. It’s clearly been brewing for a while.”

“But Kira—”

I shook my head. “I know Big Mac’s upset about that, and maybe Kira’s death was the final straw for her, but that still doesn’t mean you should shoulder all the blame for this. The battle with Malakai was brutal. You were in an impossible situation, and you did what you had to do to protect the entire alliance. You already have so much on your shoulders—you shouldn’t try to take responsibility for this, too.”

He shook his head, like he didn’t believe me.

He was looking down, so I ducked my head so I could look into his eyes.

“Hey, at least it looks like they’re going to talk,” I pointed out.

He sighed, then nodded. “Yeah, it does. And that’s something. It’s a start.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks for coming back here with me, love.”

“Of course.”

He hugged me, pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

“You know,” he said, speaking against my lips, “we should probably head back to the lake. The celebration is still going on, and people will probably start wondering where we are.”

I leaned back so I could look into his eyes. The only light in the room was the moonlight pouring in through the window. “Is that what you really want to do?”

He shook his head, then tightened his hold on me. “What about you? Do you want to go back?”

Electricity was already coursing through my body as I smiled up at him. “Yes. But maybe not right away.” I stretched onto my tiptoes to kiss him. “I think the party will be fine without us for a little while, don’t you?”

**Episode 4418**

Greyson grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head. He looked down at me, his grey eyes bright in the dark room. “Fuck, Cali. You’re so beautiful.”

I shivered under his gaze. When he looked at me like that, I felt so beautiful. So wanted. I took off my bra, and Greyson reached to cup my breasts, his thumbs stroking my nipples. I sucked in a sharp breath and tilted my head back as pleasure coursed through me. It was such a small act, but I was already panting.

Keeping his hands on me, he kissed my lips, then my ear, then my neck. His touch was like a spell, making me forget everything but the feel of his hands and his mouth and his body against mine. I leaned into him, letting everything in my head fade away.

It was just me and Greyson.

I yanked off my jeans and kicked them away, then pulled his sweats down. His arousal had been evident before, but now it pressed against my hip. I loved that I could make him feel this way; it was like something I could get drunk on. He shuddered when I took him in my hand.

His whole body stilled as I stroked him, but when I increased the speed and kissed him, he growled and reached for me. He ripped off my panties and threw them aside, then lifted me up and onto the desk.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and before either of us could even take another breath, he drove his cock into me. I gasped. The pressure of him inside me felt brutal and wonderful, and I arched my back, bracing my hands so I could take more of him.

“Oh my god!” I moaned.

“*Shh*,” he whispered, covering my mouth with his hand. His eyes sparkled with a dangerous fire. “You have to be quiet, love. And if you’re not…”

“Then what?” I whispered.

“Then you’ll be very naughty, won’t you?” He licked his finger and brought it down to my clit, making slow, lazy circles. He was teasing me, daring me to scream. “And you don’t want to do that, do you, love?”

I bit my lip, feeling like I was about to explode into a thousand pieces. I was already getting close. I could feel my orgasm coming, like a pot starting to boil. I ripped his hand away from my mouth and sucked his fingers.

Greyson groaned and thrust harder, making my breasts bounce. He was starting to lose control, and I had to smile.

“Stay… quiet…” I panted.

His hair was mussed, and his expression was intense as he brought me closer and closer to the edge. He pulled me close, still driving himself in and out. “That’s it, love, take what you need,” he said. “Come for me.”

“Oh god, Greyson,” I whispered, barely able to form the words.

I tightened around him, gasping as my climax overtook me. He came an instant later, his fingers digging into my flesh as the orgasm rocked him. Pens and notepads from the desk went flying to the floor as he drove me across the surface with his thrusts.

“*Fuck*, Cali.”

We slowed down gradually, both of us still spinning from the mind-blowing climaxes. Greyson leaned forward with a sigh, bracing his arms on either side of my hips.

As my heartbeat wound down to a more normal rhythm, I suddenly remembered Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, out on the back porch.

“Do you think they heard us?” I whispered.

Greyson grinned. “Let’s hope not.”

I giggled, feeling like a naughty teenager trying to have sex while my parents were still in the house. Well, I guess one of them *was* his parent. Hopefully they really hadn’t heard us, because the thought of that was too much.

He pulled away from me and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “I’m going to go grab something to wear and clean up a bit.”

“Same here,” I said.

Sliding off the desk, I gathered up my clothes, and then—after poking my head into the hallway to make sure the coast was clear—I sprinted upstairs to my bedroom.

I took the world’s quickest shower, then pulled on a clean pair of jeans and a sweater.

By the time I went back downstairs, I was feeling very curious about how things were going between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. I stood in the hallway for a moment, wondering what I should do. I absolutely refused to snoop or be nosy, but I was getting kind of worried. It seemed awfully quiet.

I really hoped Greyson and I hadn’t been too loud. Was it possible that they’d heard us, and we’d scared them off?

My face heated at the thought. We’d *tried* to be quiet, but at the end…

The thought was just too embarrassing to consider, so I pushed it out of my head. Anyway, Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had lived in the pack house for long enough that they probably weren’t all that easy to shock.

There were footsteps in the kitchen, and I turned to see Greyson emerge into the hallway. His hair was wet, like he’d also taken a quick shower, and he was wearing jeans and a dark T-shirt.

“Do you know where—”

“They’re gone,” Greyson interrupted.

“What?”

“After I got dressed, I went outside to see how they were doing, but they’re gone. Both of them. No sign of them.”  
 I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “I can’t believe this. They probably heard us and fled the scene.”

Greyson shrugged, looking thoughtful, but not as embarrassed as I felt. “It’s possible, I guess, but I don’t think so. I think it’s more likely they went somewhere else to talk.” He chuckled a little at the look on my face. “Try not to worry about it, Cali. The important thing is that my mom and Big Mac are at least *trying* to talk. That’s all we can hope for.”

“That’s better than nothing, I guess.”

“Exactly. Are you ready to head back to the party?” He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and held them up. “How about we drive this time?”

I hesitated, feeling torn. I’d just showered and changed clothes, and driving back would be warmer and probably more comfortable, but it wasn’t nearly as satisfying as riding on Greyson’s back.

But Greyson had just put on clean clothes, too, so I nodded. “That sounds great.”

As we drove back to the lake house, I leaned back in my seat and looked over at Greyson. His eyes were on the road, and—though he wasn’t smiling—he did look a lot more relaxed than before.

I smiled at him. “I can’t help but notice that your spirits have lifted considerably, Greyson Evers.”

He glanced at me. “Good catch, my love. They have.”

“I’d like to think I can take some of the credit for that,” I said playfully. I was trying to tease him, but I felt my face flush as I spoke, remembering how I’d managed to lift his… *spirits*.

Greyson grinned, resting a hand on my thigh. “You can take *all* the credit. Thank you.”

I lifted his hand to my lips and kissed it. “Oh, any time.”

He chuckled. “I’m going to take you up on that, love.”

It didn’t take us long to get to the lake house, and when we pulled up, I could hear the music even before Greyson turned off the car. I rolled my eyes, but I wasn’t surprised to see that what had started as a somber gathering had kicked into high gear and now resembled every other werewolf party I’d ever been to.

I looked past the party to the lake, which shimmered in the moonlight. I thought of Kira, and how the air had been filled with twinkling lights as she was honored and remembered. And I thought of Jacqueline, who had fought so selflessly and had died doing what she loved—shit-talking and standing up to assholes.

I was going to miss them both.

After a moment, I felt Greyson’s eyes on me, and I looked over.

He smiled, his gaze soft in the darkness. “I’m going to miss them, too,” he said gently, like he’d read my mind.

I nodded, tears gathering in my eyes. I couldn’t help but think of all the lives that had been lost in the war. Not just our friends and allies, but also the wolves from the Bitterfang army. It was all just such a waste.

I could only hope we were past all of that, now.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the door handle, but I froze when an angry, bruised face appeared in the window.

I screamed in shock and jerked back.

Ethaniel’s eyes flashed angrily, and his voice was muffled when he spoke. “I’m here to talk to Greyson.”

**Episode 4419**

**Greyson**

Ethaniel started pounding on Cali’s window, and I pulled her out of her seat and onto my lap. She clung to me as we both stared at Ethaniel’s battered, bruised face through the window. If I hadn’t heard his voice, I didn’t think I would’ve recognized him.

“Greyson?” Cali said apprehensively.

“Lock the doors after me,” I told her as I climbed out of the car.

Her expression went from uneasy to determined in an instant. “I’ll come with y—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I can handle it, love. Stay. Please.”

She huffed, but I heard the click of the lock behind me, and I walked around the front of the car.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded.

Ethaniel straightened and glowered at me. “You did this to me!” he snarled, gesturing jerkily at his face. He lunged at me, but his aim was off, and he missed, sailing right past me.

Using his momentum, I grabbed the back of his shirt and pushed, easily throwing him to the ground.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re doing here, but I’m telling you right now, you need to stop this,” I said, stepping to look over at him. “Back off right now, or I’ll kill you.”

Ethaniel twisted around so he was glaring up at me. “You should’ve killed me before!” he hissed. “Instead, you left me looking like this! You think you did me some kind of *favor*?”

I looked at the guy’s face. It looked… bad. Kind of like a Picasso painting, but not as pretty.

“Why aren’t you healing, anyway?” I demanded.

“I am,” he shot back. “This is what me healing looks like. It’s painful, and it’s taking far too long, and I probably won’t look the same as before.”

His face didn’t seem to move much as he spoke, almost like it had been paralyzed. It was strange, and hard to look at, and I wondered if he was right—if it really would’ve been better for me to have killed him.

I gritted my teeth as a wave of guilt broke over me, but I wasn’t about to take all the blame for this. The sire bond had a lot to do with the whole incident. I would’ve liked to pass that on to Ethaniel, but I couldn’t risk explaining it. Besides, he *had* attacked Elle, so it wasn’t like the beating had been entirely unearned.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Cali staring Ethaniel down.

When I looked back at Ethaniel, he was wiping a trail of drool from his mouth, which he didn’t seem able to close.

Why was he even *here*?

Was that me talking or the sire bond? I shuddered. I didn’t want to do what I had before to Ethaniel, but I didn’t know if I might have to.

I started to pull my phone out to call Rishika, I heard a car door open and close behind me. My stomach dropped, but before I had a chance to say anything, Cali walked over to join me. She came up next to me, her arms crossed.

“What’s going on?” she asked, looking between Ethaniel and me.

“Greyson!”

I looked up to see a Vanguard wolf sprinting toward me. There was blood dripping from her nose, and she looked extremely freaked out.

“I’m sorry, Greyson. I saw him and tried to apprehend him, but he just hit me and took off,” she said breathlessly. “I don’t think anyone knew what happened to him after the battle, and I saw him, but… clearly wasn’t fast enough.”

I frowned. I still couldn’t believe Ethaniel had been unaccounted for after the battle. I couldn’t believe *I’d* overlooked him somehow. But why wouldn’t he have left the area as soon as he could after losing the war? Why wouldn’t he have tried to salvage what he could with his pack? Did he still want revenge for not being able to avenge Evan by killing Helix himself? I wasn’t sure what to make of the Northwind Alpha’s risky move, here.

I grabbed Ethaniel roughly by the arm and yanked him to his feet. I was about to hand him over to the Vanguard wolf when the fallen Alpha looked at me, his eyes wide and mad.

“I know what you did,” he hissed.

“Excuse me?”

“I know what you did,” he repeated, his mangled face just inches away from mine. “I know, and when I tell the council what you did, they’ll know, too.”

I looked at Ethaniel, and he looked back at me. We stayed like that for a long moment. Was he trying to see if I’d react? Is that what he wanted? I kept myself neutral, not wanting to let him think he was rattling me in any way.

“What are you talking about?” Cali finally asked, breaking the silence.

Ethaniel looked at her, and his face twisted unpleasantly into a sneer. “God, Malakai was right about you. How did I not see it before?”

“See *what*?” Cali demanded.

“You’re naïve,” Ethaniel spat, his voice thin and cruel. “And you’re a Fae freak, and you and Greyson belong together.”

Cali’s eyes widened with shock. “And you’re a washed-up Alpha,” she said. “You lost a war, and here you are trying to threaten us? You and who? You have no one left.”

Ethaniel sneered, and I stepped forward, ready to break the dude’s fucking neck if he tried something with Cali.

“Just admit it, I’d love to hear you do it,” he said. “You turned that girl.”

Cali spoke before I could formulate a thought. “Of course he didn’t turn me,” she said dismissively. “I’m not even a wolf. You said it yourself, I’m a Fae freak. Did you hit your head or something?”

It was a decent attempt at evasion, but Ethaniel saw right through it.

“You know I’m not talking about you,” he snapped. “The wolf girl. The one who killed Helix. He was mine to kill, and she took that from me.” He looked back at me, his eyes wild with madness and pent-up fury. “You turned her. I know you did. You violated the law the council put in place, and you’re hiding from it, hoping no one says shit. But you turned a true wolf, you bastard, and you’re going to *die* for it.”

His words hung heavily in the air around us. I shot a glance at Cali—she looked shocked and scared again. I probably looked the same, because Ethaniel laughed.

“I thought as much,” he said bitterly. “Malakai suspected it, but he couldn’t prove it. Even I wasn’t sure until this moment. But the truth is written on both of your faces.” He shook his head, looking disgusted. “It all makes sense, now.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re talking about,” I growled, knowing I was protesting too late, “but—”

“Save your breath, Evers,” Ethaniel said, glowering at me. “This explains why you were so damn eager to defend her. She’s your little pet, that’s why. I just don’t know how no one else has noticed. It’s so fucking obvious—”

I didn’t let him say anything more. I just shoved him back into the arms of the bleeding Vanguard soldier.

“This guy is out of his fucking mind. Get him the hell out of here,” I told her. “He’s dangerous, too. Just look at him,” I said, eyeing Ethaniel’s mangled face.

Beneath the bruises, I saw Ethaniel flush, but he still yelled at us as the Vanguard wolf dragged him away. At least now he was actually our prisoner. He’d made a mistake by coming here to confront me. “I know! You can pretend all you want, but I know the truth! The council will know it soon, too! And they’ll punish you for your sins, Redwood Alpha!”

When the guard had dragged Ethaniel far enough away that his screams disappeared into the sound of the music and the party, Cali turned to me, her expression stricken.

“Greyson,” she breathed. “Oh, god—”

“I know,” I said grimly. Ethaniel’s desperate words just kept echoing through my head, no matter how much I tried to push them out. “I know.”

“What are we going to do?” Cali asked, looking up at me.

I shook my head. “Come on, Cali. No one’s going to believe Ethaniel. He’s crazy, and he sounds it. This isn’t actually a big deal,” I said, hoping to hell that I was right.

But Cali didn’t look convinced. “Greyson, come on. Think about it. The council’s already on the hunt for Elle. She’s already on their radar. Crazy or not, if Ethaniel got free, all he would have to do is tell the council his suspicions, and they’d come for not only Elle, but for me, too—to find out if he’s telling the truth, if nothing else.”

I swallowed hard, trying to rid myself of the bitter taste that was rising in the back of my throat. “Cali—”

“And they won’t just come for us, Greyson,” she added, her eyes wide with fear. “They’ll come for you, too.”

**Episode 4420**

**Xavier**

Ava and I lay on the cool ground, leaning against an aspen tree, entwined in each other’s arms. I looked out over the glimmering lake and breathed deeply. Her head was on my chest, and her fingers absentmindedly drew circles on my abdomen. She looked calm, finally. Relaxed.

And I felt… *good*. Peaceful and content. The war was over, Ava and I had just had great sex, and I could hear the pulsing sound of the party going on behind us, reminding me that we were surrounded by friends and allies. Those facts granted me a sense of peace that I hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

I was actually a little surprised that I was finding this feeling with Ava—and yet there she was, wrapped around me, cradled in my arms.

Part of me sensed that this feeling of peace was just an illusion. That all of my problems *hadn’t* magically disappeared. If anything, they’d only gotten worse.

With a sinking feeling in my gut, I counted up all the times I’d endangered Cali by kissing her, by getting closer to her, by talking to her. And now Cali was getting suspicious about the source of all my strange behavior, and that was putting her in even more danger. In all my efforts to keep her safe, I was putting her, likely, in danger. All because I still loved her.

*Ava might be a part of that, too*, I thought, looking down at her dark, shining hair.

Whoa. Did I mean that?

I shook my head, getting rid of thoughts of loving Ava. I couldn’t deal with that right now. I had the pack to think of, and the aftermath of what had happened.

My pack no longer had a witch. That knowledge hurt. Kira’s death was a tragedy, in so many ways. Not only had I lost a friend, but her passing was going to have a negative effect on my pack. We’d benefited from her abilities, and I’d benefitted from having her as a friend. And now it was just over. *Kira* was gone.

Ava shifted a little in my arms. “Well?”

“Well what?” I asked, my voice low. It was quiet where we were sitting, and we both spoke softly, as though we didn’t want to disturb the water.

“What do you think is going to happen now, X?” she asked.

This question snapped me back to the moment, and I looked down at her curiously. “What do you mean?”  
 “I mean, the Bitterfang army has been defeated. Now that that chapter is closed, what are you going to do with the Samaras?”

I let my head fall back to rest against the aspen trunk for a moment, then I got to my feet. I reached down for Ava’s hand and pulled her up.

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I need to figure out a plan, though, and that’s probably not going to happen while everyone is getting shitfaced.”

“You can let everyone enjoy our victory for a little while longer before we start talking about next steps,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess.”

She smiled at my tone and reached up to kiss me. “Of course you can,” she said, speaking against my lips. “Enjoy away. Take all the time you want. You’ve earned it, Alpha.”

I chuckled, and, as we strolled back toward the party, Ava took my hand. I laced my fingers through hers.

It still felt a little strange to be with her. Dream-like, almost. Nearly real, but not quite. It wasn’t that I didn’t like being with her—I did. Ava and I had a lot of history, and her focus on the pack was admirable. But being with her just wasn’t the same as being with Cali.

Being with Ava was sharp like a knife. She didn’t mince her words or emotions. Initially, we’d been so much at odds, the attitude of “are we fighting or fucking?” She was a strong leader for the pack—this I knew.

But at the same time, my love for Cali was so strong it was indescribable.

As we approached the party, where the packs were mingling and drinking and yelling, I heard someone whisper my name.

I looked around, but no one was looking at me.

*Xavier…*

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and in an instant, I knew who it was. It was Adéluce, calling me.

My whole body tensed up as I paused to listen, trying desperately to convince myself that I hadn’t heard what I’d heard. Maybe it had been the wind.

*Please let it have been the wind…*

“—and then I think we need to talk about doing more regular training sessions,” Ava was saying. She’d been talking for a while, but I hadn’t heard a word. “We need to get a training regimen in place for the whole pack. The battle shone a light on our weaknesses, and I want to see improvement from everyone.” She looked up at me. “But I was also thinking about taking a quick trip—just you and me. After everything, don’t you think it would be nice to get away?”

*Xavier…*

Ava was looking at me, waiting for a response to her question, but I couldn’t even remember what she’d said.

*Xavier.*

A chill ran down my spine. There was no mistaking what I’d heard this time. It was Adéluce. The vampire-witch was back.

I looked around, fully expecting to see her lurking in the shadows somewhere, but I didn’t see anything.

“Xavier?” Ava looked up at me, her expression concerned. “What’s going on?”

I swallowed down the fear that was rising in my chest. “Nothing. I just… I thought I heard something.”

*The lake, Xavier. The lake*, Adéluce hissed.

My gaze shot to the lake, but the water was flat and undisturbed, and I didn’t see anyone nearby.

Ava turned, following my gaze, then she looked at me again. “Xavier, what’s going on? What’s wrong with you?”

I forced myself to laugh. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ve got battle fatigue or something. I’m just seeing movement in the shadows.” I shrugged like it didn’t matter, even as every nerve in my body went on high alert. “I’m still seeing the enemy everywhere, I guess.”

Ava gave me a long, searching look. “You need to relax, X. Maybe you need another drink.”

“That’s a great idea,” I said quickly. “You should have one, too. Maybe get one for both of us.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, still looking confused. “What do you want—”

“Surprise me.”

She raised an eyebrow, then smiled. “Okay. I can do that. I hope I can always find ways to surprise my mate.”

She reached up and kissed me, then turned away.

As she walked toward the house, I spun around and strode toward the lake. I wanted to run, but I didn’t want to draw any attention to myself.

When I reached the edge of the water, I looked around. The moon was still bright and mirrored in the water, which looked as dark as the night sky. The lake was still and placid, but when I looked down, I saw that the water at the very edge was frozen.

I looked up again, my mind reeling.

“Adéluce!” I hissed, trying to keep my voice down. “Where are you?”

I listened hard, but there was no response. The only thing I heard was the distant sound of the party. Out here, there was nothing but the quiet of the winter night.

Fear had been coursing through me, but as I stood at the edge of the freezing lake, that fear was replaced with anger. It surged within me, filling my chest with fire. What the hell was she playing at? Why was she calling my name, whispering in my ear like a lover? What did she want? Or did she even want anything at all? Was she just toying with me?

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was close enough to hear.

“ADÉLUCE!” I called, louder this time.

I waited, but again, there was nothing.

I turned and walked toward the woods, scanning the dark trees. I kept expecting her to appear out of nowhere, like she’d done so many times before.

My feet crushed the frozen leaves as I walked. The crunch of the ice seemed uncannily loud as I listened carefully for any sign she was nearby.

I stopped when I reached the edge of the trees. Something moved in my peripheral vision, and I whipped around.

“Fuck,” I muttered, realizing that I’d reacted to a small pine tree, swaying in the wind. My heart had gone into overdrive, and I rested my hand on my chest, trying to slow it down.

“You’re a fool.”

The cold, cruel voice cut through the air like a knife, and I whipped around to find Adéluce standing a few yards behind me. My whole body went cold when I saw that she was clutching a subdued Ava in her arms.

Adéluce’s face was hard and angry, but she smiled as she reared back, bared her fangs, and sank them into Ava’s neck.

**Episode 4421**

**Xavier**

I roared into the wind as I broke into a run, charging toward Adéluce as she sank her fangs into Ava’s neck.

I’d *known* that Adéluce wasn’t just going to sit quietly by while I broke her rules. She was always going to make sure that I knew exactly how she felt about my disobedience. Maybe she thought she’d taken it easy on me the other times I’d defied her, and now she was making up for it.

Ava squirmed in Adéluce’s hold, trying to fight back, but Adéluce wouldn’t let up. I was only a few steps away when Adéluce turned to look at me, her mouth dripping with Ava’s blood.

“I warned you!” Adéluce hissed. And then she was gone.

I lunged for Ava as she slumped toward the ground, just managing to catch her. I pulled her close and stroked her hair as her eyes fluttered open. Her gaze was twitchy and unfocused. She was obviously disoriented, and seemed unaware of what exactly had just happened to her—or who’d had their filthy hands all over her.

“Xavier? What happened? Who was that?” she asked weakly. “Did someone…” She trailed off, and her head lolled against my chest.

I clutched her tightly and looked around, not convinced that Adéluce wasn’t still lurking somewhere, just out of sight.

“It’s okay, Ava,” I said. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be okay. I promise.”

I was putting up a good front, but inside, I was freaking out. Adéluce could easily have killed Ava, just now.

*Did she stop short of killing her because I got too close, or was this whole thing a ploy to torment me? If she was trying to prove just how far she’s willing to go, then mission accomplished.*

I looked around, wondering whether to go find Torin so he could heal Ava. I had no idea how much blood she’d lost, which meant I had no clue how much danger she was in. And since Adéluce was a vampire as well as a witch, it was possible that her bite had done something else to Ava—something that Torin might not be able to heal.

*Fucking Adéluce! Why is she punishing Ava for my stupid mistakes?*

But that was Adéluce’s game, wasn’t it? Hurting people to make me suffer. She knew that biting *my* neck wouldn’t have had nearly the same effect on me as draining Ava, and she’d taken advantage of a perfect opportunity to torture me.

I spotted Knox a few yards away. He stared at me for a few moments before breaking into a run.

“What happened to Ava?” he demanded as he came to a stop in front of us. “Who did this to her?”

It wasn’t like I could tell him the truth—that the vampire-witch who’d been tormenting me had attacked his cousin to prove a point. I hesitated, trying to keep my expression blank while I tried to come up with an explanation that wouldn’t sound like the lie it was going to have to be.

Knox’s eyes dropped to Ava’s bloody neck. “A *vampire*?” He jumped into action, yelling for the rest of the pack. “Alert! Samaras! Alert! Vampire attack!”

I grabbed him. “Forget about vampires! We need to get Torin over here to help her. I’m not sure how bad the bite is, but we can’t afford to waste any time!”

Knox hesitated, and I gave him a hard shove.

“Go get Torin!”

Knox finally sprinted off, and I carried Ava back toward the lake house. As I strode through the trees, I scrambled to come up with a cohesive, plausible story to explain what had happened to Ava—one that left out the most crucial detail. *Adéluce*.

I couldn’t even say her name, or imply that she was still alive. I was going to have to rely on what Knox had already guessed—and strictly speaking, Ava *had* been attacked by a vampire.

Ava gasped. She was so pale, and her skin was cool to the touch. I was starting to worry.

*Shit! Ava doesn’t deserve this. This is all my fault. I never should have kissed Cali, or even talked to her! What was I thinking? I know what the stakes are, and what Adéluce is willing to do if I disobey her. How could I have been so stupid? So shortsighted?*

The only thing that gave me even a *shred* of hope that Adéluce didn’t actually want Ava dead was the vampire-witch’s command that I fall in love with her. I couldn’t do that if Ava was dead, could I? It was a tiny glimmer of hope, but it was all I had, and I was going to hold onto it for dear life.

Marissa and Josephine came running over.

“Knox said that Ava’s hurt!” Marissa said, her eyes on Ava. “What can we do?”

“What happened?” Josephine pressed. “Is she conscious?”

“She’s drifting in and out,” I said. Knowing that I couldn’t hide the fang marks, I said, “A vampire attacked her.”

Ava’s eyes went wide. “A vampire?” she whispered. “It hurts, Xavier.”

I held her even closer and pressed my lips to her ear. “Rest, Ava. Don’t worry about any of that. We’re getting you help, okay? Just stay strong for me until we can fix this.”

Marissa and Josephine looked around.

“We should go hunt that bloodsucker down!” Marissa snarled. “We can’t have vampires running around our woods, attacking people.”

“Yeah, we have to make sure it doesn’t get anyone else. What did it look like?” Josephine demanded.

I shook my head, evading her question. “It doesn’t matter; it’s too late. The vampire was already gone by the time I found Ava.”

Marissa’s eyes narrowed, and she and Josephine exchanged a significant glance.

*Fuck! Just leave it! Don’t make me lie any more.*

This was pure torture. It was bad enough that Ava had been attacked as a direct result of the choices I’d made, but it was even worse that I couldn’t tell my pack members what had really happened to their Luna. I could only hope that they wouldn’t grow suspicious of me, since I normally would’ve been the one leading the vampire-hunting party.

“If you say so,” Marissa said, and she and Josephine fell into step beside me as we kept moving back toward the gathering.

The massive lake house had just loomed into view when Knox came running up to meet us with Torin and a few others in tow.

“Torin!” I shouted, angling Ava so that he could get a good look at her neck. “Can you help her? She’s been bitten by a vampire.”

Torin eyed the wound. “I can try.”

He still didn’t seem one hundred percent recovered from his own injury, and that worried me.

*What if his healing powers have been reduced because of what happened to him? What if he doesn’t have enough strength to heal Ava? What will I do if she doesn’t recover from this? Or if she* dies*?*

I quickly curbed those thoughts and laid her on the ground, then stood back and watched as Torin got to work on her.

Rishika came walking over. “I heard there are vampires running around?”

I shook my head, trying to play it down. “Vampire, singular. I think there was only one. Probably a hungry loner that wandered into the woods and thought Ava was an easy target.”

Rishika nodded slowly. “Maybe. But just to make sure, I’m going to organize a search and destroy party.” She got Sage’s attention. “Sage, go find Charlie. We need to get our people out combing these woods to find out what we’re dealing with, and hopefully neutralize any threats.”

“On it!” Sage said, then she ran off.

I didn’t want to argue—I knew that would only draw more questions that I wasn’t in any position to answer. I was surprised they’d come to me at all about this, but I appreciated it. Maybe all of the Redwoods didn’t hate me.

To make matters worse, I’d just spotted Greyson and Cali rushing toward us. I didn’t need my brother to get involved in this, and I didn’t even want to *look* at Cali. There was every chance that it would put her in immediate danger, and Adéluce had just made it very clear that she had no qualms about physically attacking the people I cared about most.

Cali looked at Ava before her eyes found mine. “Is she okay?”

*Fuck. Of course Cali’s first concern is for Ava. I can’t fault her for that, but it only reminds me of how much I miss her. But I can’t be nice to her. I shouldn’t even be near her! I have to keep my distance.*

“Everybody needs to just back the fuck off!” I snarled. “Give Ava some space! How’s she supposed to recover with everyone crowding her like this?”

Cali looked stunned and hurt, and Greyson hit me with a glare, but I didn’t care. I had to do what I had to do to keep Adéluce off our backs—snapping at Cali was an easy price to pay to keep her safe.

Ava’s groans drew my attention, and I turned to Torin. “How is she? Making any progress?”

Torin looked up, an anguished expression on his face. “It’s not working,” he said. “She just won’t heal.”

**Episode 4422**

Despite Xavier’s harsh words, the worry on his face broke my heart. I hated to see him in pain—even though he’d inflicted plenty of it on me lately.

“What do you mean she won’t heal? Aren’t you a healer? Fucking heal her!” Xavier shouted at Torin.

Torin recoiled, and I stepped between them and shot Xavier an admonishing look. “Torin’s doing the best he can,” I snapped. “Don’t talk to him like that. He’s been through a lot—just like the rest of us!”

Xavier cursed under his breath and turned away, but he didn’t apologize. Not that I’d expected him to.

I wanted to believe that Xavier’s harsh tone was a result of his worry for Ava, but I also knew that he’d talked to me with that same tone far too many times, lately—which was one of the reasons why I’d agreed to Kira’s plan to figure out why he’d changed so dramatically. Xavier had always been a little rough around the edges, but his recent unpleasantness was something else altogether.

But right now, I had to focus on Ava and the possibility that there was a vampire with a taste for werewolf blood roaming the woods.

*The last thing we need is another run-in with vampires. Iñigo and Sabyr were enough for me. We just got rid of the Bitterfangs—let’s hope we’re not about to face an onslaught of vampire attacks. I don’t know if the alliance is up for back-to-back wars.*

Greyson had pulled Rishika aside and was talking to her about the patrol she was about to run with Charlie, Mikah, and Gabriel. I’d seen the look Greyson had aimed at Xavier after he’d snapped at me. It had taken a lot of restraint for him to avoid actually fighting with his brother, and I was both proud of him and grateful that he’d once again decided to be the bigger person.

I glanced at Torin, who was standing off to the side with a forlorn look on his face.

“Sorry about Xavier,” I told him.

Even though Xavier wasn’t my responsibility anymore, old habits were hard to break.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked Torin. “Even before this, I was a little worried that you weren’t fully recovered. Is that what the problem is?”

Torin sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s almost like Ava’s wound is refusing to respond to my magic. That’s never happened to me before, and I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

I reached out and squeezed Torin’s shoulder. I hated to see my friend so upset. “Don’t worry, Torin. Whatever’s going on with you, I’m sure it’s temporary. And even if it’s not, we’ll find a way to fix it.”

“Thanks, Cali,” Torin said, though he didn’t sound convinced.

“Where’s Big Mac?” Xavier asked no one in particular. “Someone needs to go find her, now. Bring her here. She’ll know what to do.”

“Big Mac isn’t here,” I said gently. “Maybe Rowena can help?”

Xavier nodded at me with a pleading look in his eyes. Again, my gut twisted at the sight of him in such distress.

I jogged closer to the house and spotted Rowena on the porch, talking with Porter. I ran over. “Rowena! Ava’s been bitten by a vampire, and Torin’s healing isn’t working. Can you help her?”

A flash of uncertainty passed across Rowena’s features, but then her expression softened. “I don’t know if there’s much I can do—healing magic isn’t my specialty. But I’m willing to try.”

“That’s all we ask,” I said, grabbing her hand and pulling her along with me. “She’s right over here, at the edge of the yard.”

By the time we got back to Ava, she was sitting up and looking around, confused but alert. I was stunned to see her even halfway lucid, but I was relieved, too. Ava and I weren’t BFFs—not by a long shot—but that didn’t mean that I enjoyed the sight of her in pain. As difficult as it was for me to admit it, Ava had become an important person in Xavier’s life. Maybe even more important than me.

Just the thought of that took my breath away.

I felt so stupid for thinking that I somehow could’ve still been important to him. I’d thought I’d started to move on, or whatever it was I was doing, but it hurt more than I should’ve let it. Of course, Ava was important to him. She was his Luna now… She was also his mate.

*But that could still be a result of the magic Kira detected. I can’t let that go just because I haven’t been able to get to the bottom of it yet. I saw the look in Xavier’s eyes when he kissed me. As soon as things settle down a bit, I’m going to do whatever I can to figure out what’s really going on with him.*

Xavier had Ava’s hand clasped in his, and they were gazing into each other’s eyes. I quickly looked away. I might’ve been on the verge of coming to terms with their relationship, but that didn’t mean I wanted to stand by and watch it in action. It still hurt too much, and reminded me of what I’d lost.

“Do you remember what happened?” Greyson asked Ava. “Can you remember what the vampire looked like? What they were wearing? Anything?”

Ava pressed her fingers to her neck, the bleeding puncture wounds glistening in the firelight. They didn’t look quite as bad as before, though.

Ava’s reply was soft, bordering on inaudible. “Last I remember, I was walking toward the house to get a drink, and then…” She trailed off and stared down at the blood on her fingers. “A vampire?” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I remember feeling really tired and just wanting to lie down and go to sleep.”

Greyson started to ask another question, but Xavier cut him off.

“That’s enough for now. She needs to rest.” Wordlessly, he helped Ava to her feet. “We should get back home.”

To my surprise, Ava waved him off. “No, I’m feeling better. I’d rather get that drink.”

Knox stepped forward. “I’ll get you whatever you want.”

“Water, please,” Ava said.

“I guess you don’t need me after all,” Rowena said.

“Guess not,” I replied. “Ava seems to be healing fine on her own.”

“Not surprising—werewolves do have a knack for that,” she said. “Give me a holler if anything changes.”

She made her way back toward Porter, just as Knox reappeared with a glass of water for Ava.

Ava took the glass as the Samaras fussed over her.

I approached Xavier cautiously, wondering which version of him I was going to get. “Is there anything I can do? Anything you or Ava need?”

Xavier shook his head and mumbled a terse, “No, thanks,” before backing away from me to join Ava.

*What the hell? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was actually afraid of me! But what could I have done to make him too frightened to even be near me?*

The whole thing only intensified my curiosity, making me even more determined to uncover the truth.

Greyson’s deep voice interrupted my thoughts. “I hope Xavier’s right and there really is only one vampire out there. Otherwise, we could have a problem on our hands.”

I saw the strain on Greyson’s face and wondered why we couldn’t ever catch a break. Greyson had just poured everything he had into fighting the Bitterfangs, and now it looked like there was already some other threat lurking just out of sight.

*Maybe going to Portland really is the right move. It would be nice to get away for a few days.*

But part of me worried that no matter where we went, trouble was bound to follow.

“Did you notice anything unusual about Xavier just now?” Greyson asked as we made our way back toward the lake house.

I choked out a laugh. “Where do I begin?”

Greyson nodded. “If you’d been attacked by a vampire while Xavier was still with the Redwoods, he would’ve stopped at nothing to hunt that vampire down. But tonight, he didn’t even try. In fact, it almost seemed like he was trying to downplay the threat. That’s not like him.”

I shook my head. “To say Xavier hasn’t been himself lately is an understatement. And you’re right—it was almost like he wanted us to forget about the vampire entirely.” I stole a look at Xavier and Ava, where they stood talking quietly, surrounded by a group of Samaras. “Maybe he was just so upset about Ava, he wasn’t thinking straight.”

As we turned back toward the party, I spotted Lucian and Elle in the middle of what looked like a pretty passionate conversation.

*Great. Something else that Greyson and the Redwoods will have to deal with. I wonder why solving problems doesn’t seem to get any easier? Maybe it’s because every problem is so different and unexpected that we’re always unprepared.*

My worries mounting, I turned to look up at Greyson.

“What are we going to do about Ethaniel?” I asked. “What if we let him go and he makes good on his threat to tell the council that you turned Elle?”

**Episode 4423**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t deny that I was worried about Ethaniel ratting me out to the council, but I was less worried for my own sake than I was for Elle’s.

If the council really wanted to come for me, I’d take them on the best I could. For myself, for Cali, and for the pack. And, of course, for Elle. I felt an overwhelming need to protect Elle from them at any cost. The council didn’t shy away from capital punishment, and there was no way in hell I was going to let them get their hands on Elle.

I was convinced that my sire bond with Elle had driven me to go off on Ethaniel. If I’d been able to control my temper, we wouldn’t have ended up in this position. Ethaniel probably would’ve ended the war as just another defeated member of the Bitterfang alliance. If he’d just left when he had the chance, he could’ve simply skulked away to lick his wounds. Instead, I’d ensured that he would remain a threat to both me and Elle because of his fallen pack member, Evan, who Helix had killed.

A dark thought flashed through my mind.

*There’s an easy solution to this. Kill Ethaniel. It would be easy enough to arrange, and I very much doubt Lucian would take issue with it. The princeling has already made it clear that he wants to kill all the prisoners. Hell, he’d probably help me do it—it might even help to repair the rift between us.*

But then I glanced at Cali. I knew that she’d never accept that—it was just one of those major cultural differences that separated our worlds. Personally, I saw no problem with eliminating a threat like Ethaniel—especially since he’d made it his mission to hurt me and Elle, and I would never assume that Cali wasn’t part of that, too. And why would he stop there? He’d come for my entire pack.

“What I’m going to say might sound, well, like I’ve been possessed again,” Cali started. “But do you think it might make sense to go to the council first?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that maybe you could get ahead of this. Explain yourself,” she said. “They might be more reasonable and receptive than you think.”

I laughed. “I doubt Cesaries would be very sympathetic. In the council’s eyes, I’ve committed an unforgivable sin by turning Elle. To them, she’s nothing but a threat that needs to be eliminated.”

“So, what do we do?” Cali asked. “Do we just wait around for word to get back to the council?”

I chewed my lip, thinking. “I figure that as long as Ethaniel remains a prisoner, he won’t be able to talk to the council. And the truth is, even if he does, what proof does he have?”

Cali pondered that. “Right, but could the council find proof? Is there some kind of DNA test they could run, or something?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Let’s just hope that if he were to be let go or if he escaped and he’s able to present this to the council that he comes off as nothing more than a vengeful, raving lunatic.”

“Which wouldn’t be far from the truth,” Cali added bitterly. “The Bitterfangs and their flunkies really are the gift that keeps giving, aren’t they?”

I sighed. “Tell me about it. But let’s try not to dwell on that for now. Despite everything, we should at least *try* to enjoy our victory over the Bitterfangs. It was a hard fight, and we lost some people who were very important to us. But we won, and Malakai is dead. That means something, and it’s definitely worth celebrating.”

I looped my arms around Cali’s waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

“Why not start now?” I added, before plunging my tongue between her lips again, taking her breath away. “You and I could have our own little celebration, right here.”

Cali laughed. “Oh, an exclusive event?”

She gave in and allowed herself to get lost in the kiss for a brief moment, then she pulled away to look over my shoulder, just as I realized how loud Lucian was getting. His passionate discussion with Elle had obviously turned into a full-blown argument.

I sighed. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Cali said grimly. “I think you need to fix things with Lucian before the situation gets out of hand.”

I groaned. “You’re right, but I have a feeling that Lucian isn’t going to listen to anything I have to say. It’s obvious that he blames me for Elle’s decision to come back to us, and once the princeling has something in his head, it’s hard to change his mind—you know that as well as I do. And when it comes to love, he’s even more irrational than usual.”

“You know I agree with you, Greyson, but there’s more at stake here than Elle leaving the Vanguard pack,” she said. “We were only able to defeat Malakai because of the alliance—and Lucian and the Vanguards played a big part in the alliance’s success. The Bitterfang war might be over, but there are always more threats out there—look at what just happened to Ava. Staying friendly with the alliance Alphas could prove useful in the next conflict.”

I pulled back and eyed her with admiration. “You know, I think you’re better at this than I am.”

Cali ducked her head and smiled. “Oh, stop. I’m just saying what you already know.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need to hear it,” I said. “You’re right, and I know it—but how am I supposed to resolve this? Lucian is a hothead. I was hoping he’d cool off, but his pride’s hurt, and we all know how Lucian values his pride.”

We both watched as Lucian continued to plead his case to Elle, who wasn’t talking and had her arms folded impassively across her chest.

“Maybe the best thing we can do is use that pride against Lucian,” Cali suggested. “Tell him how valuable he is. Tell him how we never would’ve been able to beat Malakai and the Bitterfang army without him.”

I winced. “I get it. Lucian feeds on praise. It’s his Achilles’ heel. Guess I’m going to have to swallow my pride and give life to his.”

“That’s the spirit,” Cali said cheerily as I started toward Lucian. “And don’t slack off, Greyson. Really pile it on.”

I looked over my shoulder and rolled my eyes at her.

Lucian stopped talking at Elle and eyed me coolly as I approached. “Have you come to apologize?”

I clenched my jaw, knowing I’d have to bite my tongue if this was going to work.

*If I have to endure a few insults and accusations from Lucian to keep the alliance intact, I’ll do it.*

“Greyson has nothing to apologize for,” Elle interjected.

Lucian flicked a wounded glance at Elle. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on that one, my forest rose.”

“Elle, do you think Lucian and I could have a moment alone?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

She turned on her heel and headed off toward the lake house without giving either of us a second glance.

*She’s probably desperate for a breather. The princeling is so damn intense.*

Lucian waited until she was well out of earshot before he turned his heated glare back on me.

“If you’re not here to apologize, then why *are* you here?” he snarled.

I hazarded a glance at Cali, who gave me a sly thumbs-up. She had no idea how difficult this was going to be. The princeling was *steaming*.

I cleared my throat and swallowed my pride down deep. “I just wanted to, um, take a moment to thank you.”

The irritated fire in Lucian’s eyes dimmed, but only slightly.

Taking Cali’s advice, I proceeded to lay it on as thick as I could. “I also wanted to acknowledge how you helped save the alliance. Your bravery, your leadership, your quick thinking, not to mention your ferocity in the heat of battle—it was all integral to our victory. I just thought you should know that.”

Lucian’s expression softened even more. He was soaking it up like a sponge.

“So, with that said, it’s clear to me—and to everyone else—that the alliance needs you,” I said. “The world is an uncertain place, and the alliance helps ensure that we’ll always be well prepared for whatever comes our way. I think you made that clear when you brought us all together to start the alliance in the first place. It’s only right that you stay with us and see this through. We’re a force to be reckoned with, but only if you—”

Lucian held up a hand, stopping me.

A slow, mirthless smile spread across his face. “I agree with you, Greyson. Victory *would* have been unattainable without me and the valiant Vanguard pack. Still, I see no further need for the alliance.”

“But—”

Lucian sniffed, lifting his chin. “There’s nothing you can say, Greyson. I’ve made up my mind. The Vanguard pack is pulling out of the alliance.”

**Episode 4424**

**Xavier**

My only plan at the moment was to stay close to Ava. She was healing up nicely and seemed to be in good spirits, but I was still rattled by Adéluce’s brazen move—she’d attacked Ava right in the middle of an alliance party, of all places.

It seemed to me that the vampire-witch was only getting bolder as time wore on. I wondered just how far she was willing to go to punish me and the people I loved.

*I’m not letting Ava out of my sight. There’s no way I’m going to let Adéluce get her hands on Ava like that again. If I can’t protect my Luna, what good am I?*

Still, I couldn’t help but steal glances at Cali. She shouldn’t be left alone either, even for a second. A second was all it had taken for Ava to fall into Adéluce’s clutches, and I didn’t plan to let her do the same thing with Cali.

The threat would’ve been bad enough if Adéluce were just a regular vampire. But if that were the case, at least we werewolves would’ve been able to deal with her the same way we dealt with any other threatening vampire—terminate with extreme prejudice. But Adéluce was way more than just a vampire—she was also a dangerous, vindictive witch with enough magical skill to make it almost impossible for anyone to harm her.

*I need to warn Cali, but I can’t. And if I can’t do that, then my only real option is to enlist Greyson’s help. But how? It’s not like I can tell him what the threat is. Adéluce made sure of that.*

I was still racking my brain when Ava touched my arm, interrupting my thoughts.

“I’m still thirsty, X. Can you get me another drink?” She held up her glass. Once she’d started feeling better, she’d switched from water to beer, and I could tell that she was finally starting to relax.

“Why don’t we go get you one together?” I suggested.

Ava arched an eyebrow. “Afraid to leave me alone?”

I didn’t deny it. I wasn’t about to take any more chances. A shiver ran up my spine, and I couldn’t resist the urge to scan the tree line for any sign of Adéluce. There was no way I was going to let her catch us by surprise again.

“Wow. You really are freaked out, aren’t you?” Ava said as she followed my gaze. She linked her arms around my neck. “Don’t worry, I doubt the vampire would single me out again. If it’s still lurking about—and I hope it isn’t—it could attack anyone.”

I pulled her close. “But your blood is so sweet. The vamp wouldn’t be interested in anyone else’s.”

Ava laughed and swatted me on the chest. “You’re so smooth.”

“I try,” I said.

I took her hand and led her to the drinks table.

“There’s my favorite Luna and Alpha!” Marissa said in a singsong voice as we approached. “How you holding up?” she asked Ava, pulling her into a hug.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Greyson arguing with Lucian. I stared at them with interest.

*Wonder what that’s all about… Probably more princeling drama, as usual. Lucian just can’t chill and have a good time. He’s always barking about something.*

A second later, Lucian turned his back on Greyson and stomped away. I saw my chance.

I turned back to Marissa. “Stay with Ava, will you? Don’t leave her alone for a second. I mean it.”

Marissa nodded, her expression suddenly serious. “Of course. I’ll stay by her side, don’t worry.”

I gave her and Ava a nod and then headed toward Greyson, trying to think of a way to make him understand the threat that Cali was under as I walked. The problem was, I couldn’t explicitly tell him what he needed to protect her from.

I had no idea how I was going to convince Greyson to take extra care with her now that the Bitterfangs were gone and I’d played down the vampire threat, but I was going to have to figure it out, for Cali’s sake.

The vampire patrol group emerged from the trees only a moment later, and my focus immediately shifted to finding out what they knew. Anything they might’ve learned could be useful, and might help in my pursuit of Adéluce. I needed all the help that I could get, at this point.

“Little to report,” Rishika said as she approached Greyson and me. She threw a puzzled glance my way. “Gabriel and I weren’t able to pick up the vampire’s scent. It must have been really faint, or it just vanished completely along with the vamp.”

Greyson looked surprised. “Vanished? Scents don’t usually just vanish. They fade. But this sounds like something else. How do you explain that?”

Charlie shrugged. “We can’t. Not really. The only possibility I can think of is that the vampire used the water in the lake to help hide its scent.”

I was growing tenser by the moment. I knew exactly why the scent had disappeared—because Adéluce was a witch and had simply blipped away, leaving behind no trail to follow. This was the reason why I’d suspected that the patrol wouldn’t be able to track her in the first place.

*Unless Adéluce was stupid enough to stick around after her attack on Ava. The vampire-witch is a lot of things, but she’s not dumb. She wouldn’t risk being caught by a pack of werewolves.*

I didn’t have the foggiest idea about the limits of her power, or if she’d be able to withstand the full force of multiple werewolf packs attacking her at once, but I knew that she had no plans to expose herself. If she did that, she’d lose her power over me.

There was also the possibility that she’d just started masking her scent with some kind of spell, which meant that she could still be nearby, waiting for another opportunity to attack Ava. Or Cali. Just the thought of it put me on edge.

“Everyone, keep your eyes open,” Greyson said. “But try to enjoy the rest of the night as much as you can. We can’t let one rogue vampire ruin this celebration.”

There were some nods of agreement, but I could sense the tension in the air.

“How’s Ava?” Greyson asked as everyone began to move off.

“I was concerned at first, but she seems to have recovered,” I said.

Greyson frowned. “It’s crazy to me that a vampire would even dare to attack a werewolf here. Seems like a risky move.”

“Agreed, but the packs should be more careful. Vampires have a thing for Alpha blood—Fae blood, too.” I gave Greyson a look. “Like Cali’s.”

We both looked over at Cali, who appeared to be comforting Lola about something.

“I don’t think you should let her out of your sight,” I added.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Greyson said.

“Why don’t you just stay close to her for a while, just in case?” I pressed, hoping I wasn’t about to give myself away.

Greyson eyed me with a raised brow. “You’re encouraging me to stay close to Cali? Never thought I’d see the day.”

I shrugged. It killed me to say it, but I added, “You’re her mate, which makes her your responsibility. Simple as that.”

Greyson moved closer to me. “Why the sudden concern over Cali? What’s going on?”

I hesitated, hoping I hadn’t just overplayed my hand.

“Common sense,” I said, trying my best to brush it off. “We don’t know why the vampire attacked, and since we haven’t caught h—” I tried to say “her,” but I couldn’t get the word out. *Fucking Adéluce. I can’t even refer to her* not *by name, or am I too scared to do it?* “Caught the bloodsucker,”I finished, “we should be extra careful. I’m sure you agree.”

Greyson slowly broke our almost-stare-down and looked at Cali. “You know I’ll always be there for Cali.”

I waited a moment, half expecting Adéluce to appear and warn me that I’d gone too far. But I’d never said her name, and I hadn’t told Greyson what had really happened to Ava—how could I? Every time I tried to talk about anything to do with Adéluce, it was like my throat closed up. Whatever I was saying right now, the vampire-witch was allowing it.

Greyson turned his gaze back on me. “Are you sure you’re okay, Xavier? Is this really just about the vampire who attacked Ava? Because—”

“That’s all it is,” I snapped. “Don’t make more of it than you need to.”

I didn’t want to draw Adéluce’s attention to this conversation. It would only put Greyson in danger if Adéluce thought I was even trying to hint at what she was doing to me. It was better to leave things completely vague.

“You know as well as I do that vampires are a major threat to our packs,” I said curtly. “And it doesn’t help that we’ve been weakened by the war. But the old rules still apply—we have to guard against those bloodsuckers at any cost.”

And then Lola’s voice rose up from behind me.

“What the *fuck*, Xavier?” she snarled, shoving me hard. “How *dare you* talk shit about vampires when Jacqueline *literally just died* protecting us!”

**Episode 4425**

Lola shoving Xavier like that startled me. It was just such a sudden explosion of fury, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen my friend so mad outside of battle.

I quickly jumped between them, Lola on one side, and Greyson and Xavier on the other. “Lola, calm down.”

“*Calm down?* Xavier’s over here condemning vampires! And loudly enough so that everyone can hear! How could he, after what Jacs sacrificed? Not to mention the fact that *I’m half vampire!*” Lola glared up at Xavier. “You have a lot of nerve, you know that?”

She had a point. I turned to Xavier, hoping that he had some kind of explanation, a clarification for what he’d said, or an apology, but he wasn’t backing down.

“Give me a break,” he snapped. “Ava was just attacked by a bloodsucker! It’s impossible to defend them.”

I was horrified. “How can you say that in front of Lola?”

Ava appeared out of nowhere and jumped into the fray.

“Leave my mate alone!” she snapped at me. “He’s not your problem, and he can say whatever he wants. Besides, I agree! I was nearly drained to death earlier—or does no one care about that because it’s *me*?”

Ignoring Ava, Lola tried to move past me to get to Xavier. I was starting to worry that Lola was going to lose it and just try to fang him. How had this blown up so quickly? More to the point—how was I going to calm them down? It looked like they wanted to tear each other apart… Well, Lola looked like she wanted to do that to Xavier.

Jay came rushing over and got in Xavier’s face. “Don’t you touch my mate!” he hissed.

“You don’t even know what happened, so stay out of it!” Xavier said, his voice dangerously low. “Watch yourself!”

“He’s right,” Ava snapped at Jay, sneering. “Lola got in *his* face. Get your facts straight and control your girl—if you even can!”

“All of you need to calm down!” Greyson barked. “This is getting out of hand.”

The yelling continued. I was tempted to calm things down with a blast of magic, but I knew that probably would’ve been overkill, not to mention wildly dangerous.

“Everyone, stand down!” Greyson yelled at the top of his lungs. “This is obviously a misunderstanding!”

“A *misunderstanding*?” Lola demanded, rounding on Greyson. “Xavier just said I’m a threat! He made his opinion more than clear.”

“Quit playing the victim,” Xavier shot back, rolling his eyes. “I said *vampires* are a threat, and you know it. But surprise, surprise, you’re making it about you!”

“I’m making it about me because I *am* a vampire!” Lola retorted. “And so is Mikah, and so was Jacqueline.” There was a catch in Lola’s voice as she said Jacqueline’s name, and I caught the quiver in her lip, too.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Obviously I wasn’t referring to you or them, but you seem to want to fight about it, so go ahead.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen a fight yet,” Lola said darkly, shoving Xavier back again.

Ava stepped in and shoved Lola so hard that she nearly toppled to the ground. “Touch him again and you’ll regret it!”

“I’d like to see you try!” Lola snapped, stepping up to Ava. But before she could get too close, Xavier strongarmed her away.

“Don’t you touch my mate!” Jay roared, launching himself at Xavier.

Greyson quickly stepped between them.

“No, brother,” Xavier said, standing his ground and turning a fiery gaze on Jay. “Let Jay prove himself in front of his mate, if that’s what he wants. I’ll do the same.”

“He sure will,” Ava said.

Greyson pushed both Xavier and Jay back. “Stop this! This is supposed to be a celebration of the victory we *all* contributed to. Why are we ruining it by fighting amongst ourselves?”

“Because Xavier is an asshole!” Lola hissed. “And I demand an apology!”

Xavier’s expression went blank. “I’m sorry that you were offended by a statement that had nothing to do with you, personally—but that doesn’t change the fact that we all need to be on the lookout in case there are any more vampires roaming around!”

Hearing the frantic tone in Xavier’s voice, I frowned. I understood that he was upset and worried after what had happened to Ava, but to apply that reaction to all vampires seemed extreme—even considering the fraught relationship that werewolves and vampires had always shared.

*The werewolves seemed to soften on their stance on vampires when Jacs and Mikah joined our ranks. And once Lola was turned, it kind of seemed like there was an unofficial vampire truce… At least on the Redwoods’ part. Why is Xavier suddenly so on edge about them? He’s the one who downplayed the threat only a minute ago after Ava was attacked. What’s changed?*

I glanced at Ava, wondering if she felt like Xavier was overreacting a bit, too. But, given our last conversation and then the awkward conversation with Xavier, it seemed like she might’ve changed her mind about getting to the bottom of Xavier’s behavior. But that didn’t mean *I* was going to let it drop.

Greyson spoke calmly but forcefully. “We will take the usual precautions, but I also want to make sure that no one turns on Lola and Mikah because of what happened to Ava. Is that understood? They’re our friends, and we can’t forget the sacrifice that Jacqueline—a vampire—made for us all.”

There was a general murmur of agreement, and the group began to break up.

“Sometimes, you can be a real dick!” Jay yelled at Xavier.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Right back at you.”

Xavier and Jay kept glaring at each other as Jay threw his arm around Lola’s shoulders and led her away.

Xavier glanced at me and started to say something, but then he just shook his head. Taking Ava’s hand, he walked off without another word.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Greyson muttered when we were left standing alone.

“No idea,” I admitted.

“Looks like your alliance isn’t as strong as you think,” Lucian said as he sidled up.

“The alliance is fine,” Greyson said darkly.

Lucian snorted. “Sure looks like it.”

Without another word, the princeling left, too.

We both watched him go, a thick silence settling between us.

“So… I assume the whole ‘buttering him up’ plan didn’t work?” I asked. “Did you make any progress with him at all?”

Greyson shook his head. “Nope. In fact, things took a turn for the worst. Lucian says he’s pulling the Vanguards out of the alliance.”

“*What?*” That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. “Damn, I really thought he’d put aside his beef with you in the name of the greater good.”

Greyson sighed. “I thought so, too, but I’m not giving up yet.” He gestured to Jay and Lola. “Lola is still upset, and I don’t want Xavier’s stupid outburst to cast a shadow over everything. Lola fought alongside everyone else—she doesn’t deserve Xavier’s cruelty. Maybe I should go talk to her.”

I put a hand on Greyson’s arm. “I’ll go. I know Lola better than just about anyone.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Greyson said before pressing a kiss to my lips.

“And maybe you should give Lucian another go?” I suggested gently. “Couldn’t hurt, right?”

Greyson heaved a huge sigh. “I suppose it won’t hurt *him.”*

I chuckled at that as I walked over to Lola.

Seeing me coming, Lola broke away from Jay, and I gave her a hug.

“I’m really sorry about all those awful things that Xavier said,” I told her. “I think he was just reacting badly to the attack on Ava. He didn’t mean it.”

“Don’t apologize for him,” she said. “Xavier’s an asshole, plain and simple—and a selfish one at that.”

I felt for Lola. She was hurting over losing Jacqueline, and Xavier’s comments must have felt like salt on a fresh wound. But I also knew that Xavier was dealing with something big that I had yet to figure out, and I was willing to cut him a little slack—even if Lola had no plans to do the same.

“Listen, Lola… I know Xavier and I aren’t in the best place right now, but you have to know he wasn’t referring to you or Jacs when he made that comment. Ava was literally just attacked by some random vampire out in the woods. So just… don’t take it personally, okay?”

Lola sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

I hugged her again. “Thanks, Lola. Come find me if you need me, okay?”

I was heading back toward Greyson when I spotted something moving in the distance, right at the tree line. I paused, trying to make out what it was, but it was so dark and shadowy…

I moved a little closer, unable to shake the feeling that whatever it was—*who*ever it was—was watching me, too. My heartbeat quickened.

*Could it be the vampire who attacked Ava?*

**Episode 4426**

**Greyson**

I wasn’t too keen on talking to Lucian again. In fact, the sheer thought of it pissed me off. I was tired of his shenanigans, and I just wanted to enjoy the calm after the storm—but clearly, that wasn’t going to happen.

It wasn’t lost on me that Lucian had made threats about pulling out of the alliance before, but he’d never made good on them. This time, though, I had a sinking suspicion that he was serious.

As much as I hated to admit it, the Vanguards had been crucial to the alliance’s victory—we’d desperately needed them to help offset the Bitterfang army’s superior numbers. Without Lucian’s pack, there was every chance that we wouldn’t have been celebrating tonight.

Now that the Bitterfangs were no longer a problem, it wasn’t quite as vital to keep the alliance together, but I was already thinking ahead. There were always new threats cropping up. And while I’d initially been hesitant about Lucian’s idea to start an alliance, the Bitterfang war had shown me how much power there was in numbers.

But I was tired of dealing with Lucian—tired of his threats, his tantrums, his demands, and his overall behavior and disposition. He’d never been my favorite person, and while my respect for him might’ve been bolstered during the war, my overall feelings about him hadn’t really changed.

It pained me to even think of having to appeal to him again. There was still a chance that the princeling would settle down and be reasonable, but I wasn’t holding my breath. Lucian was always a bit temperamental and moody, but Elle choosing to rejoin the Redwoods had sent him over the edge, and I had no clue how to pull him back.

But Lucian’s threat to leave the alliance wasn’t my only problem—not by a long shot. The problem posed by Ethaniel and the council was both bigger and more dangerous. I’d downplayed my concerns to Cali so that she wouldn’t worry, but I was going to have to do something about Ethaniel. Too bad I didn’t know what.

I spotted Aysel laughing with Armin, and an idea popped into my head.

*Maybe Aysel can help convince Lucian to stay in the alliance. There’s a chance she can get him to stop blaming me for Elle’s decision to come back to the Redwoods. Perhaps she can even convince him that the sire bond is pulling the strings, and that none of this is actually my fault.*

It was worth a shot, at least.

As I made my way over to Aysel, I spotted Xavier talking to Ava. She seemed to be fully recovered from the vampire attack, and from what I knew of her, she wouldn’t be shaken up about it for long. I never had many positive things to say about Ava, but there was no arguing how strong and resilient she was.

*Now that she’s clearly feeling better, hopefully Xavier will calm down a little—at least enough that he doesn’t have any more hysterical outbursts. What was he thinking, yelling about vampires where everyone could hear? He nearly brought our packs to blows.*

It was clear, seeing that, that Xavier really did care about Ava. I always wondered how deep his feelings for her went, but based on what he’d just done… It was clear. Things between them seemed very real for Xavier.

Shifting my thoughts back to my Lucian problem, I finished walking over to Aysel and Armin.

“Hey, you two. Hope I’m not interrupting?” I said, trying to sound as light as I could.

“You are,” Aysel said with a pout before smacking a kiss on Armin’s cheek. “But that’s okay. What do you want?”

“I was hoping that I could talk to you, Aysel.” I looked at Armin. “Alone.”

Armin looked a little flustered, and I spotted a hint of annoyance in his eyes, but he didn’t act on it.

“Sure,” he said curtly, before kissing Aysel on the cheek and walking away.

Aysel’s gaze followed Armin as he left.  I cleared my throat when her hungry stare lasted just a touch too long.

“Oh, Greyson! I completely forgot you were standing there,” she said breezily. “I’m curious, Redwood Alpha—to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

I could tell that she’d been drinking a lot, and I adjusted my approach. I was going to have to be quick and to the point if I wanted to keep her attention. “Do you think that Lucian will make good on his threat to pull out of the alliance?”

Aysel’s eyes widened in what looked like shock, but she recovered quickly. “Who knows? Am I my brother’s keeper?” She smiled. “I like to think that I’m not. He’s his own man, after all.”

“Really, Aysel, this is important,” I said. “You’re the closest person to him.”

Aysel sighed. “Like I said, I don’t know. My brother is prone to making baseless claims and threats. Sometimes I think he does it for sport—and that’s his prerogative.”

Her gaze drifted back toward Armin, who was staring right back as her as he lifted a beer from one of the many coolers strewn about the yard.

*I’m losing her. If I don’t convince her to do this quickly, she might just wander off to join Armin.*

“Aysel,” I prompted.

She finally dragged her gaze back to me. “Is this about Elle or something?”

“Lucian seems to think so,” I said. “But I’m wondering if you might be able to convince him otherwise.”

Aysel smiled at me, fluttering her eyelashes. “Are you asking for my help, Greyson?”

“I am,” I admitted. “Lucian’s interest in Elle will be better served if the Vanguard pack remains in the alliance. The council’s most likely still looking for her—keeping the alliance intact will make it easier to protect her.”

Aysel eyed me knowingly, then she sighed. “None of this is my concern, really, but… I’ll see what I can do.” She placed a hand on my arm. “My brother is serious about Elle—you can’t really blame him for being jealous of someone like you, sire bond or not.” She gave my arm a squeeze. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I watched her sashay over to Armin, who quickly downed his beer and rushed up to meet her. They embraced, and I felt a vague pang of relief that Aysel had truly moved on from her obsession with me.

Armin and Aysel started kissing like they were alone and not in the middle of a yard full of people.

I wasn’t sure how effective Aysel was going to be in convincing her brother to stay in the alliance, but at this point, she was my best shot. Lucian had a definitely soft spot for his sister. Hopefully that would work to the alliance’s advantage.

I checked the time, wondering how things were going between my mother and Big Mac. My mother cared deeply for the ornery witch, and I hoped they’d be able to reconcile. My mother’s happiness meant everything to me. If there was anything that I could do to fix things, I was more than ready to do it.

*There’s a lot on my plate right now, but I suppose I should be grateful that Malakai and the Bitterfangs aren’t my problem anymore.* Well, apart from the whole “what to do with the prisoners” issue—but worrying about that was better than worrying about how to win a pack war.

Xavier was still huddled on the fringes of the party with Ava. As I glanced at him, he happened to look my way, and his expression darkened. He pulled away from Ava and stalked toward me.

I sighed.

*What now? Is he going to get on his soapbox about vampires again? I’m not the biggest fan of vampires, either—no werewolf really is—but that doesn’t mean I’m going to start trashing them in mixed company.*

“What’s up with you, now, man?” I said as Xavier stormed up to me.

Xavier grabbed me by the shoulders. “Where the hell is Cali?”

I tried to shrug out of Xavier’s hold, but he held on tight.

“Get the hell off me!” I snapped. “What’s your problem?”

He had the same crazed look in his eyes that he’d had when he was yelling about the evils of vampires.

“Didn’t you listen to a word I said? I told you to stick close to Cali, and yet here you are, wandering around the party alone, without a care in the world. Back when I was with Cali, I could barely pry you away from her side, but now that I’m encouraging you to stick to her, you can’t be *bothered*?”

“Xavier—”

“I told you to watch her like a hawk, didn’t I? How could you let her out of your sight?”

I finally managed to rip out of Xavier’s grasp. I straightened my shirt and looked him right in the eye. “Cali is *fine*. She’s right over there.” I pointed.

“Where?” Xavier hissed.

“There—” My voice dried up in my throat.

Cali was gone.

**Episode 4427**

**Xavier**

My heart was pounding so hard that I thought it might burst right out of my chest. I shoved Greyson out of my way and scanned the area for any sign of Cali.

“Watch it!” Greyson yelled.

Ignoring him, I started frantically pushing through the crowd, checking every face. After a few fruitless minutes of searching, I pulled Rishika aside. “Have you seen Cali?”

Rishika gave me a strange look. “No, sorry—”

I ran off before she could finish, unable to calm myself down.

*This is exactly what I warned Greyson about! But, of course, he didn’t listen, too busy telling me that he has things under control. How can he claim to be Cali’s mate and then allow this to happen? He had one simple task—a task that he readily agreed to undertake—and he failed!*

Ava was watching me, but I couldn’t worry about that right now. The thought that Adéluce had gotten her claws—or her fangs—into Cali was frightening and overwhelming and all I could think about.

At least when Adéluce had attacked Ava, I’d been there—as per her design—and would’ve been able to step in if she’d intended to drain Ava dry. But, as far as I knew, no one was watching out for Cali. My anger rose again as I thought about how I’d asked my brother to do just that. How had he managed to screw up this badly? Wasn’t he always trying to prove how much he cared about Cali? If that was true, then why had he allowed her to just wander off?

“Cali!” I shouted. I spun around, still searching. But she was nowhere to be found.

Finally, I reached out via mind link. *Cali, where are you?*

I was stunned by her quick reply. *I’m by the woods. I saw something—*

*Stop!* I shouted, cutting her off. *Stay right where you are. I’m coming to you.*

I started toward the woods and realized that Greyson was heading the same way. He’d obviously mind linked with her, too.

We were sprinting forward, both trying to be the first to reach her. But I already had the edge, and I wasn’t about to give it up. If Greyson had done his job, I wouldn’t even be here right now.

Finally, I spotted Cali standing at the edge of the woods, safe. A wave of relief washed through me. Adéluce hadn’t grabbed her. Thank fuck.

As Greyson and I approached, Cali gestured for us to be quiet, then pointed to the woods.

*Something was in there*, she mouthed.

I wanted nothing more than to wrap her in my arms and take her away from there, but I had to stop myself. That would be dangerous, especially if Adéluce was watching from the woods.

*Of course she’s watching. Is she ever* not *watching me? She sees all, and I need to remember that if I want to keep Cali and Ava safe.*

Greyson rushed up to Cali and wrapped her in his arms. I fought off a wave of jealousy that nearly sparked an explosive outburst that would’ve confused Greyson and Cali even more than my erratic behavior undoubtedly already had.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked, running his hands through Cali’s hair.

I couldn’t stop fantasizing about doing the same thing. A surge of desire rose up inside me. If Adéluce ever decided to punish me for all my cravings for Cali and the constant fantasies I had about her, she’d really have her work cut out for her.

“Stay with Cali,” Greyson told me. “I’m going to go take a look.”

I bit back an insult. I didn’t need him to tell me what to do when it came to Cali. He was the one who’d left her on her own.

“Be careful, Greyson,” Cali said as he took a tentative step toward the woods.

As Greyson slipped away into the woods, Cali looked at me out of the corner of her eye. “I thought I saw someone watching me,” she whispered. “But then I remembered your warning to be careful and that there might be more vampires, so I decided not to check it out alone.”

She was so close right now, just like when we’d been in the palace. All I wanted was to pull her close and kiss her and feel the connection that I missed so much it hurt.

Cali stepped back from me. “What is it? Is something wrong?” Her eyes searched mine. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I snapped out of it. “Like what? I was worried about you, and I’m glad you’re okay. That’s all.”

Cali looked like she wanted to say something, but then Greyson emerged from the woods. He shook his head, dusting leaves and branches from his hair and clothes.

“Didn’t see anything,” he said. “Didn’t even catch a scent.”

Cali looked beyond Greyson and peered into the trees. “Maybe I was wrong. I guess it could’ve been my eyes playing tricks on me. Sorry for getting you two all worked up.”

“We should get back to the house,” I said. “Greyson may not have found anything out there, but I still don’t think it’s safe.”

Greyson put an arm around Cali’s shoulders as we made our way back toward the lake house. I hated it.

After all this time, watching them from the sidelines still hadn’t gotten any easier. I about how I’d been encouraging Greyson to stick to Cali like glue only minutes ago. The whole thing was a mindfuck—and I was sure that was exactly what Adéluce wanted.

As we approached the party, I turned to my brother. “Do what you said you’d do. Don’t let Cali out of your sight—and I mean that literally.”

 Not giving Greyson a chance to respond, I headed off to find Ava. As I’d predicted, she was in a foul mood.

“Oh, you finally remembered that I exist,” she spat.

“Of course I know you exist, Ava. What’s wrong?” I knew exactly what she was upset about. I was just stalling for time to come up with a worthy excuse, because I was going to need one.

Ava grabbed me by the arm and yanked me away from everyone else, drawing a few looks.

“*What’s wrong?*” she repeated. “You’re so full of shit, Xavier! Minutes ago you said you were worried about another vampire attack and didn’t want to leave me alone, and then not even a minute later I see you racing around like a maniac looking for *her*!You left me!”

I opened my mouth to say something but then snapped it shut almost as quickly. I didn’t know what to say. “Ava—”

Ava gave me a look that stopped me cold, then she exposed her neck, showing me the healing bite marks. “*I’m* the one who was attacked. Not Cali. Me! Your mate and Luna!” She winced as she straightened her neck. “You’d better remember that next time you go running after her.” She winced again and looked away.

I was feeling guilty. There was no way around it. But my guilt was tempered by the anger I felt at the hopeless position that Adéluce had forced me into. I never could’ve imagined that I’d end up caught between the woman I cared about and felt responsible for and the woman I loved more than life itself.

Ava winced again but tried to cover it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“Headache—not that you give a fuck.”

I sighed. “Ava, don’t be like that. Of course I care.”

She looked away, but not before I saw that her eyes were moist with tears. “I want to go home.”

“Okay, but I’m going with you,” I said. “I know I fucked up, but I really don’t want to leave you alone, Ava. Not after what happened to you.”

“Whatever,” Ava said flatly.

Before we left the party, I pulled Knox aside. “We’re going home. Make sure the others get back safely, okay? I’m counting on you.”

Knox nodded. “You got it.”

I turned back to take Ava’s hand, but she avoided me.

I was going to have to do a lot of ass kissing to get back in Ava’s good graces, but at least both Ava and Cali were safe. For now.

As we reached the woods and were about to shift, I paused and took an uneasy look around. I thought back to what Cali had said about seeing a shadow. I couldn’t shake the thought that it might’ve been Adéluce, trying to lure her away.

Suddenly frantic, I looked back toward the party, searching for Cali. I relaxed when I saw her standing with Greyson, laughing at something he’d said.

Shaking off another pang of jealousy, I turned back to Ava, who was folding her clothes and putting them into her bag, preparing to shift.

She was mad at me—and she had a right to be. But I needed her to believe that I wanted nothing more than to keep her safe. And, as I peered into the darkness of the woods, I had to wonder if Adéluce was just getting started.

The sick feeling that had been circling in my stomach since Ava’s attack intensified.

Was Adéluce going to come after her again?

**Episode 4428**

I flopped down on my bed, absolutely exhausted from everything the day had brought. Greyson collapsed next to me, equally fried. He sagged against me and let out a long breath.

“It’s been a rough day,” he said. “Glad it’s over.”

I pulled his head onto my chest and stroked his hair. The day certainly hadn’t gone as planned, and I felt sorry for my mate.

“Want a shoulder massage?” I asked him.

“Please,” Greyson said, his eyes lighting up.

He rolled over, and I straddled his broad back and tunneled my hands under his shirt. I started to rub his knotted shoulder muscles, and he let out a moan of pleasure.

“That feels amazing, Cali. What can’t you do?” he joked.

“I won’t answer that,” I said primly.

There were plenty of things that I couldn’t get right—like figuring out what was going on with Xavier. But I pushed that thought away and refocused on the mate who was right where he was supposed to be.

“Really, you’ve been such a godsend today, Cali,” Greyson said. “I mean, you always are, but I really needed you today, and you were always right there.”

He groaned as I worked on a particularly tight knot, just above his left shoulder.

“As soon as I straighten out this latest drama with Lucian and make sure that Elle is safe and secure, I really do want to take you to Portland,” he said. “We deserve a break.”

“I’m game,” I said. “It would be nice to act like a normal couple for once. Last time we went away, I realized just how different it felt to be away from the pack house, just you and me—different in the best way.”

“I know. It was incredible. Think about it—we could check out some cool restaurants,” Greyson said, his voice partially muffled by the bedding, “museums…”

“We could even go see a movie, do some sightseeing,” I added. “Normal stuff.”

“Normal stuff,” Greyson repeated around a sigh.

I wasn’t sure if my life would ever be remotely normal—the potential for that had gone down the drain the moment I’d encountered my first werewolf. But I was very willing to at least *pretend* to be normal for a few amazing days.

Greyson rolled over onto his back and looked at me. “I promise that I’ll do everything I can to build a normal life for you, Cali… Or as close to normal as possible. Now that the war is really over—”

I put a finger to his lips, stopping him. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep. We already thought the war was over once before, and look how that turned out. Something else always comes up. But that’s not your fault, so don’t feel like it’s something you need to fix.”

Greyson was quiet for a few seconds as he mulled that over. “Fair enough, but I still want to *try*, at least. Is that okay?” He reached up and pushed a strand of hair out of my eye. “I want to try. I have to try. I can’t imagine us living like this when we’re older—constantly fighting to survive. I have to at least work toward making things as normal as I can for us.”

I leaned down to kiss him. “That’s fine. I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

Greyson sat up, and I climbed off of him.

“How about I return the favor?” he said, waggling his fingers.

We switched places, and I sighed as Greyson straddled me, careful not to put his entire weight on me. His warm hands found the tensest part of my lower back. Minutes later, I was drifting off to sleep.

When I opened my eyes, I was back at the edge of the woods. I could feel something watching me, just like before.

“Who’s there?” I shouted.

There was no answer.

The woods seemed to have taken on a life of their own. I watched shadows moving across the tree trunks and the fern-covered ground, figures taking shape only to fade away in the next moment. It scared me, but I stayed put—I had to find out what was out there, or I’d never be able to relax.

I took a small step forward and then hesitated, knowing that I should probably wait for Xavier or Greyson. But if I waited too long, whatever was out there might get away. I couldn’t let that happen. I had to protect the pack.

I took a cautious step into the woods and summoned my sword. It cast an eerie glow and seemed to create even more shadows, but it also gave me just enough light to see by. I considered conjuring my shield, too, but decided that the sword would do for the moment.

I walked deeper into the forest, pausing every few steps to look and listen. I could still sense a presence nearby, but I couldn’t see anything. The shadows were nothing more than the moonlight streaming through the trees, warped by passing clouds—or at least that was what I told myself.

Still, that eerie presence was undeniable. I shivered.

*Is it the vampire who attacked Ava? Or something else?*

I’d never used my sword on a vampire before. I held it out in front of me, scanning the twisting shadows.

*Will my sword even work against a vampire? What if a vampire attacks me right now, but my weapons don’t work? What will I do then?*

I turned at the sound of whispering, but I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. I stopped walking and strained to listen. It sounded like Xavier was talking to someone.

I tried to mind link with him. *Xavier, is that you?*

I waited but got no response.

I tripped over something and looked down, stifling a scream as the light from my sword revealed the bloody corpse of a deer. I stumbled back in shock, then yelped when I backed into something.

I spun around. “Xavier?” I burst out. “What are you doing out here?”

He was covered head to toe in blood, and I flinched when he clamped a hand over my mouth.

“Stay still!” he hissed. “You need to get out of here. It’s not safe. Leave now—before she finds you!”

I pulled his hand away from my mouth and stared up at him in confusion. “Before *who* finds me? Who are you talking about, Xavier?” I took a closer look at him. “And why are you covered in blood? Is it yours? Are you hurt?”

I ran my hands up and down his arms and chest, searching for wounds, but I couldn’t find any.

Xavier gripped my hands and slowly shook his head. His eyes had a vacant look that sent a shiver down my spine.

“Get out. Get out of here, Cali!” He smiled, and a stream of blood poured out of his mouth. “Get out!”

I gasped and backed away. A sound behind me drew my attention, and I whipped around, my sword at the ready. But there was nothing there. When I turned back, Xavier was gone.

“Xavier?” My voice echoed around me as Xavier’s words echoed through my head.

*Get out.*

I heard footsteps approaching. Slowly at first, but then they picked up speed. Suddenly gripped by terror, I shrieked into the night and broke into a run, weaving through the trees and tripping over raised roots as I raced to stay ahead of the quickening footsteps. No matter how fast I went, they seemed to match my speed.

I squinted into the darkness, searching for the lights of the pack house.

*I didn’t even walk that far into the woods in the first place! What’s happening? Why is it taking me so long to get out?*

I kept running, expecting to break through to the clearing surrounding the house at any moment, but the woods seemed to stretch out in front of me forever; endless rows of trees and vines and moving shadows.

All the while, the footsteps behind me grew closer and closer. Louder and louder. I was running out of breath. I panted and stumbled, stopping for a split second to brace myself against a tree before I took off again. I realized that I wasn’t going to be able to outrun whatever or whoever was following me.

I stopped and whirled around, gripping my sword. The footsteps finally slowed to a stop, but I still couldn’t see who they belonged to.

“Who—who’s there?” I demanded shakily, swallowing hard as I tried to catch my breath. My mouth was so dry, and my heart was pounding. My head swam. It felt like I was seconds from passing out. “Who’s there? Answer me!”

I strained to hear anything other than my labored breathing and pounding heart. But then I saw it. Something was moving through the trees, heading right for me.

The figure finally stepped out of the shadows, and I squinted, straining to see who it was…

**Episode 4429**

**Greyson**

A shrill cry jolted me awake. It took me a second to realize that it was Cali. I turned over and looked at her, already on high alert.

She was thrashing in the bed beside me, whimpering softly. I could see her eyes rolling around beneath her eyelids, and her hands were grasping the sheets. Her lips were moving, too, but no sound was coming out.

“Cali?” I gently shook her, and she bolted upright, inadvertently whacking me in the jaw with her head.

We groaned in unison, both grimacing from the pain. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen stars like this, and I’d just come out of a pack war.

“You must’ve been having a nightmare,” I said as I rolled my jaw, trying to make sure it wasn’t broken.

Cali looked frustrated. “I almost saw who it was!” She slapped the mattress. “Dammit!”

I shook my head, still rubbing my jaw. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I was being stalked by someone in my dream, and I can’t shake the feeling that it’s someone I know,” she said. “If only I hadn’t woken up… I just needed one more second!”

Cali pinched the bridge of her nose and then rubbed her forehead, where a red mark was already spreading.

“Sorry,” I said. “It just seemed like you were really freaking out. Would you have preferred it if I let you suffer?”

“Of course not,” Cali said. “But whoever it was is important—I know that much. I wish I could’ve seen their face.”

Not wanting to make light of it, I spoke carefully. “But it was just a dream. More often than not, dreams have no basis in reality.”

Cali side-eyed me. “Really, Greyson? After all the dreams, nightmares, visions, and everything in between that we’ve both endured, you’re going to dismiss my dream, just like that? Please.”

I put my hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine, fair enough. So tell me about it. What happened? Give me some details. Maybe I can help you decipher it.”

Cali shook her head, frowning in exasperation. “I wish I could, but the further I get from it the less I can recall. You know how it is with dreams—you start forgetting the moment you open your eyes. All I really remember is that Xavier was in it, along with someone else that I couldn’t quite see.”

“Well, if you ever figure it out, let me know,” I said. “But right now, I could use a shower and some coffee.”

I got out of bed with a sigh, planting a kiss on Cali’s forehead before heading to my room.

I wasn’t sure what to make of Cali’s dream, but I didn’t intend to worry about it. At least it was just a dream—unlike the very real drama from last night: Ava getting fanged, Xavier going off the rails about it, Lucian being a petulant pain in the ass like always… And then there was Ethaniel threatening to tattle on me to the council, and, last but not least, Big Mac calling off the wedding and leaving the pack.

*That was one hell of a night. Let’s hope the next party is significantly less eventful.*

As I headed into my bathroom and grabbed a towel, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror and noticed how tired I looked, even though I’d had a full night’s sleep.

After a long, hot shower, I got dressed and went to my mother’s room, where I knocked on the door and waited. I’d decided not to disturb her last night, since we’d gotten back from the lake house so late. When no one answered, I cracked open the door and looked inside. To my surprise, the room was empty.

*Maybe she went to Big Mac’s? Even if she did, I doubt she’d make it a permanent move. She seemed pretty adamant about not leaving the pack house.*

But if she *had* gone to Big Mac’s, then that meant the two of them were still talking, which was a good thing. I couldn’t even fathom the idea of my mother and Big Mac really splitting up.

*I’m sure she’ll fill me in soon—hopefully with good news. I don’t know if I have the stomach for any more bad news.*

As I turned away from her door, I ran smack into Torin, who had a travel bag dangling from his shoulder.

I stopped and looked at him. “Whoa, what’s the bag for?” I asked.

Torin shook his head. “I realized last night that I still haven’t fully recovered from my injuries—it was wishful thinking to assume that I had.”

“Yes, but Ava healed up from the vampire bite,” I pointed out. “You shouldn’t sell yourself short. We all have off days.”

Torin shook his head. “This is more than an off day. Something feels… wrong, inside me. And I had nothing to do with Ava’s recovery—that’s how I know something’s wrong. I’m happy she’s better, don’t get me wrong, but that doesn’t mean I can ignore the fact that my healing powers currently seem to be nonexistent.”

It was strange to see Torin so dejected. He was one of the most positive people I’d ever met, and seeing him so down made me feel even worse about the night before. It should’ve been different. It seemed like nothing had gone right since we’d defeated the Bitterfangs.

Artemis and Adair came walking up the stairs, stopping when they saw us. I eyed them, noticing that they were both carrying travel bags, too.

“Wait, what the hell’s going on?” I asked, trying to stave off the sliver of panic that was bubbling up inside me.

*Are they all deserting the pack? Just because last night sucked?*

As much as I’d tried to brush it off, Lucian’s comment about the alliance falling apart still rankled.

“I need to go find a special herb that will help restore my balance,” Torin said. “I’ll only be gone for a few days.”

“And we’re going with him,” Artemis said. “Fae stick together. We’re not about to let him go off on his own when he’s not at his best.”

I nodded slowly, relaxing a little. At least they weren’t just getting out of Dodge because they’d decided they hated it here.

“I hope that’s okay with you, Greyson,” Torin said. “But unfortunately, I don’t have a choice.”

“I don’t have a problem with it at all,” I said. “Now’s as good a time as any, with the war over and done with. I do wish that all three of you weren’t going, but you’re right—Torin shouldn’t go alone.”

I was trying to be understanding, but there was something about seeing Adair and Artemis with their bags that just rubbed me the wrong way. But I knew that if last night hadn’t been so rough, I probably wouldn’t have been taking it so hard.

Artemis nodded. “And it’s not like the pack will be without any Fae—you still have Cali. And we won’t be gone for more than a few days.”

“If all goes well,” Adair added, always the realist. “It could be longer than that—but it has to be done.”

I nodded. “Good luck,” I said with a sigh as I watched the three of them head downstairs.

I heard the front door slam, just as Jay came walking up with a bag slung over his back.

“Hey, Greyson, glad I ran into you,” he said. “I’m taking Lola on a little couple’s retreat. We need to get away for a bit. Lola’s still so upset about Jacs, and what Xavier said. She just needs some time to decompress.”

I winced. “I’m not too keen on that, I have to admit. I don’t know if you overheard, but Torin, Artemis, and Adair are going on a trip, too. I know Lola’s upset, but… Do you think you two could postpone?”

Jay shook his head. “Please, Greyson. Lola means the world to me, and she needs a break from all of this.” Jay waved his hand around at the pack house. “Self-care is important—you know that. She has to put herself before the pack, for once.”

I wanted to be able to rebuild things between the pack and myself. If everyone was heading off… How was I going to do that? I knew everyone needed some time, and that was something I had to grant, even if it wasn’t what I wanted.

I sighed. “Fine, but I’ll be honest, I’m not happy about it.”

“I know, I get it, but I appreciate you letting us do it,” he said. “I’ll see you soon. We shouldn’t be gone long.” With that, Jay turned and left.

I headed downstairs to the kitchen and was all too aware of how empty it felt. Normally I wouldn’t have cared, but my mom and Big Mac were gone, Torin, Adair, and Artemis had taken off, and now Jay and Lola were leaving, too.

What if the war had been the glue holding the Redwoods together, and now that it was over, the pack was falling apart?

**Episode 4430**

**Xavier**

I woke up from a fitful sleep with a stiff back and a pounding pain behind my eyes. The couch in the den wasn’t nearly as comfortable as my bed, but it had been my only option. Ava had been so pissed at me last night, I hadn’t even dared to *attempt* getting into bed with her.

*Hopefully spending the night apart has cooled her jets. I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle it, if she’s still mad at me this morning. Not after the night I just had.*

Knox walked into the den and stopped when he saw me on the couch, pulling on my jeans. He smirked. “Whoa, what happened? Did my cousin throw you in the doghouse?”

“Shut up and go make some coffee. I’m not in the mood,” I growled, standing up and buttoning my jeans.

“Fine, fine. But whatever it is, I have no doubt that it’s all your fault,” Knox said, ducking the cushion that I hurled at him.

Knox headed off, and I finished getting dressed. Irritatingly enough, the shrimp wasn’t wrong—the trouble between Ava and me *was* all my fault. But what else could I have done? I’d had every reason to believe that Adéluce was going to go after Cali, but it wasn’t like I could explain that to anybody.

Frustrated, I threw another cushion, and it smacked into the wall, knocking a picture to the floor.

My inability to tell anyone anything was part of the reason why I’d had such a sleepless night. Every time I shut my eyes, I saw Adéluce tearing into Ava’s neck. I’d been *so* close to grabbing her. And whenever my eyes were open, I’d been busy trying to formulate an apology to Ava that made sense, given the limitations that Adéluce had placed on me. It was going to have to be a good one if I was going to get Ava to forgive me, and I still didn’t have the slightest idea what I was going to say to her.

I shuffled into the kitchen, expecting coffee but instead getting a nose full of the foul-smelling smoothie that Knox was concocting.

“Nut, berry, durian smoothie?” he asked, lifting up a pitcher of sludge. “I might have just enough for you to get a full serving—”

“Hell no. I need some air,” I grunted. “I’m going out on patrol.”

Knox stared after me as I left. “Why? The war’s over. Relax, old man.”

I ignored him. I didn’t care if the war was over—I needed some time to clear my head, far away from my responsibilities as Samara Alpha.

I slammed through the front door, then stretched a bit and peeled off my clothes. The cold air felt good against my skin as I shifted and sprinted off into the woods.

But instead of finding the peace I was seeking, I was only reminded of all the dangers that I couldn’t outrun.

Adéluce knew exactly how to push me. How to punish me. And as far as I could see, there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

I stopped, panting puffs of steam into the cold morning air. I took a slow look around.

*Is she watching me right now? I bet she is. Watching me, loving how tortured and miserable I am. I can’t even take pleasure in one of the only things that’s always made me feel good—shifting and running through the woods.*

I listened to make sure there were no other wolves around, then I shifted back to human.

“Adéluce!” I shouted. “Show yourself! I dare you! Quit creeping around and come out here and talk to me!”

I wanted to confront her, say whatever I could to keep her away from Ava and Cali. If she wanted to torment me and cause me pain, that was fine—as long as she left them out of it.

“Adéluce! Come out here, you coward! Always hiding and sneaking around because you know that if I get my hands on you…”

I let my words trail off, my frustration growing. She wasn’t going to come out just because I wanted her to. That wasn’t how this worked.

And now, on top of everything else, she had me out in the woods screaming at nothing, like a maniac. Brilliant.

“Adéluce!” I bellowed.

The only reply was the sound of my own voice echoing back at me, which only made me angrier. She was toying with me, as usual.

*Where is she when she’s not here ruining my life, anyway? Does she live under a bridge like a troll or something?*

I laughed to myself, imagining it.

*Now I’ve really lost it. I’m out here laughing by myself. Laughing at something that isn’t even fucking funny.*

I let my laughter die away and stood there in silence, suddenly aware that Adéluce was probably loving the show I was putting on for her.

*Screw her. I’m not going to give her the satisfaction of watching me come apart at the seams.*

I shifted and headed back toward the pack house, even more angry and frustrated than before.

When I walked back inside, the rest of the pack was up and about. The day had officially started. Thankfully, someone had finally had the decency to make coffee. Knox’s funky smoothie was nowhere to be found.

*Ava’s not here, either. Where is she? She can’t still be sleeping… Or maybe she’s still avoiding me. She can’t stand to go without coffee first thing in the morning, so there’s no way she’ll stay away for long.*

I got Marissa’s attention. “Hey, morning—where’s Ava?”

Marissa shrugged, still groggy as she cradled her own cup of coffee. “Don’t know. Haven’t seen her yet this morning. I thought she was out running with you.”

I turned to Blaine, who’d overheard my question to Marissa.

“Don’t look at me; I have no clue,” he grunted. “Haven’t seen her all morning.”

He turned and left.

“She’s probably still in her room, hiding from you,” Knox said cheerily as he came walking in, still sipping from his cup of rancid green goo. “Who could blame her? Everyone saw you running after Cali like a dog in heat.”

I glared at him.

“Oh, so that *is* why she’s mad.” He chuckled and downed the rest of his smoothie, leaving a lumpy green mustache across his top lip.

I wished I had another cushion to throw at the pipsqueak, even though he was probably right. Ava had to be pouting in our room because she was trying to avoid me.

I left the kitchen and started up the stairs, only to turn back. I had to bring a peace offering. There was no way I could go to see her empty-handed. Since I didn’t have any flowers, a cup of coffee would have to do.

I mentally went over a few of the excuses I’d come up with as I poured her a cup, adding a dash of cream and sugar, just the way she liked it.

Feeling just a little optimistic that I might be able to pull her out of her bad mood, I trotted upstairs and made a beeline for our room. I wasn’t surprised to discover that the door was shut. I was about to open it, but then I reconsidered and knocked instead. I wanted her to know I was coming to her, but not that I was going to force anything on her. She didn’t have to let me back in, I just hoped that she would. Literally and emotionally.

When the door didn’t open, I called her name. “Ava?”

Still no answer.

*Shit*,I thought. *She’s really going to make me work for this, isn’t she? Fine.*

I twisted the knob and swung the door open to find Ava still sleeping. It looked like she’d simply passed out and hadn’t moved a muscle all night. She hadn’t even bothered to undress.

*Weird. Ava’s usually meticulous about following her bedtime ritual…*

I put the coffee down and gently shook her. She didn’t move a muscle.

“Ava?” I said. When she didn’t answer, I said it louder. “Ava? Ava! What the fuck?”

I shook her harder, but she still wouldn’t wake up. I was starting to freak out.

“Ava!” I shouted. “Ava! Wake up! Ava!”

Marissa came running in, her eyes wide. “Xavier, what the—”

She spotted Ava, still unconscious on the bed, even as I shook her harder than anyone should’ve been able to sleep through.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sounding almost as panicked as I felt.

“She won’t wake up!” I burst out, still shaking her.

“What?” Marissa demanded, taking a step toward us.

My entire body was shaking with anxiety, and it felt like the world was spinning around me, but I kept shaking her, waiting for her to open her eyes. But she didn’t.

I whirled around to look at Marissa. “Don’t just stand there! Go get Torin! Something’s wrong!”

**Episode 4431**

Once Greyson was gone, I threw the covers off and mentally prepared to get up. I was feeling groggy and still uneasy about my nightmare, but I didn’t want it to derail my entire day.

I went to my dresser and pulled out some comfortable clothes. I wanted to find Artemis and Adair as soon as I could—just because the war was over didn’t mean I wanted our training to end. I still wanted to get better and stronger and continue discovering all the ins and outs of my Fae powers.

The Bitterfang war had proven that training with Artemis and Adair had improved my fighting skills—dramatically. I’d never felt so sure of myself as I had during that final battle, and I was eager to get even better.

Once I was dressed, I went downstairs and was surprised to hear more voices than I would’ve expected so early in the morning. When I reached the landing, I spotted Torin, Adair, and Artemis lingering by the front door. There were bags hanging from their shoulders, and Artemis even had her bow and quiver strapped to her back. It looked like they were about to head out on a trip.

“Hey, what are you all doing?’ I asked. I caught Artemis’s eye. “I was actually coming to find you, to see if you wanted to train…” I trailed off. Something was going on here that I obviously wasn’t privy to.

Artemis broke away from the others to come talk to me. “Torin needs some kind of herb to regain his magical balance, and Adair and I are going to help him find it. We wanted to get an early start.”

I nodded. “Okay. It’s really great that you’re doing all you can to help him, and if this is about Torin getting his healing powers back up to snuff, I should help, too. Besides, this looks like a Fae adventure, and we don’t get to have those very often. So… shouldn’t I join you? I can be ready in two minutes.”

I started toward the stairs, but Artemis reached out and placed a gentle hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Cali, wait.” She looked surprised. “Don’t you need to stay with the pack? Everyone’s still recovering from the war… It seems like you’re needed here.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little hurt. “You’re not wrong, but I’m Fae, too, and I care about Torin. I want to be part of whatever you’re doing to get him back to normal.”

I paused, looking between Adair, Torin, and Artemis, who were all exchanging glances that I couldn’t read.

“Although I’m starting to wonder if you would’ve told me about this at all, if I hadn’t run into you,” I said flatly.

Adair sighed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Cali. This is barely a mission—we’ll collect the herbs and come right back. It’s not some big adventure that requires all”—he waved his hand at me—“this.” He softened his words with a smile. “Besides, just because we’re gone doesn’t mean that you should slack off on your training.”

“But I was coming down to train with *you!*” I said, still feeling mildly indignant. “And I have no intention of slacking off, but obviously you’re not going to be around, so… I guess I’ll just train by myself,” I finished lamely.

“Good,” Adair said. “Training alone has its benefits, too. In fact, I did a lot of my training on my own when I was first getting a handle on my powers.”

*Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me. I bet Adair would do everything alone if he could.*

 I didn’t know why I was so upset, but I was. The three Fae heading out together for an excursion—without me—was a tough pill to swallow.

Torin came over and gave me a hug. “You’ve already done so much for me, Cali. And I appreciate how you were ready to drop everything and come with me—you know that I’d love to have you along—but you’re an almost-Luna now. That means that you have to think of the pack first.”

I hugged him back, trying to tamp down the hurt I was still feeling. Deep down, I knew they were right. I had responsibilities here, and acting as the Redwood Luna meant that I couldn’t just run off without notice.

I was sure that Greyson would rather I stay close, too, even though I was sure he would’ve supported me if I’d decided to leave with them.

“Okay, well, just don’t have too much fun without me,” I said.

*Or at least don’t* tell *me about all the fun you had when you get back*, I thought to myself.

Torin laughed as he pulled away. “I’ll make sure that it’s as boring as possible—and hopefully as quick as possible, too. I just want to get this over with, then come back to the pack house and cook and hang out and help out wherever I can… And just feel like myself again.”

“I want that for you, too,” I said. I glanced at Adair and Artemis. “And you’re in good hands. Call me if you need me?”

Adair nodded. “We will.”

Artemis squeezed my shoulder. “We’ll be back before you know it, Cali. Hold down the fort, and we’ll see you soon.”

They all streamed out the front door, and I followed them out onto the porch and waved them off, trying to put on a happy face. “Good luck!”

“Thanks!” they called out in near unison before they disappeared into the woods.

I turned, went back into the house, and found my way to the kitchen. I was trying to stay upbeat, but the house already felt a tad emptier now that they were gone. I’d never liked feeling left out, and that was definitely how I felt right now.

*They could’ve at least asked and let me turn them down, but that clearly didn’t even cross their minds. They didn’t even think to ask me to go. Maybe I would’ve been a burden to them, or maybe they just wanted to hang out without me. Who knows?*

I stopped myself before I could fall too deep into that train of thought. If they’d already assumed that I’d need to stay with the pack, it made perfect sense that they hadn’t asked in the first place.

Logically, I knew that I belonged here at the pack house. We were fresh out of the pack war, and I wanted to be here to help ensure that morale didn’t dip after the losses we’d suffered. I’d wanted to be Luna more than anything, and now I was going to have to make the sacrifices that came along with that role.

*Sometimes it’s like I have to choose between the pack and being Fae. I get so wrapped up in werewolf politics that I’m really feeling the need to do something that speaks to my Fae side. Maybe when they get back, I’ll see if the four of us can spend some quality Fae time together… That is, if they even want to do that with me.*

I wondered if Rowena felt like she’d been forced to sacrifice a bit of her witchy self for the good of the Cobalt pack. I made a mental note to reach out and see if she had any tips for coping with being trapped between two worlds. I also wanted to check in with her and make sure that the Cobalts had all gotten home okay after last night’s party.

Greyson came walking into the kitchen. He took one look at me and asked, “Are you okay?”

Feeling a rush of affection for him, I stepped into his arms, craving his closeness. I laid my head against his chest, and, for the first time, I felt good about staying back while the other Fae went off without me. Greyson needed me here.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just sad to see Artemis, Adair, and Torin go. It kind of feels like a Fae trip that I wasn’t invited on.”

Greyson stroked my hair. “Cali, I really don’t think—”

“I know, I know. It’s not a rational reaction,” I interrupted. “And I’ll be okay in a bit. I’m just a little bummed about it. Guess I’m feeling a little Fae-FOMO.”

Greyson grinned. “Fae-FOMO, I like that. You should trademark it.”

I smiled. “Maybe I will.”

*At least that way,* something *will come out of my being left behind…*

Greyson leaned in to kiss me. “I think a little distraction might be just what you need.” He pressed a trail of kisses down my neck. “Something to take your mind off the Fae, the war, and everything else we’ve been dealing with lately.”

I moaned and kissed him back, looping my arms around his neck and pressing my body against his. “That sounds wonderful.”

“I agree,” he said. “And since we basically have the house to ourselves for a while, let’s take advantage. How about a staycation?”

**Episode 4432**

**Xavier**

Ava was lying on the bed, motionless. Her beautiful face was expressionless, and her long, silky hair was fanned out around her head. It looked like she was sleeping, but that wasn’t the reality of her situation. Far from it.

*This is a nightmare.*

I was really starting to freak out. What if she never woke up? What if this was how things were going to end between us? Ava in a coma for a century like Sleeping Beauty, all because I’d failed to protect her.

*I really thought she was okay! It seemed like she was back to normal, and I assumed that she’d recovered from Adéluce’s bite, so what’s going on right now? Why won’t she wake up? Why is this happening?*

I pushed at Ava’s shoulder again. “Ava? Ava? Can you hear me?”

Marissa’s hand landed heavily on my shoulder, and she pulled me back. I jerked out of her hold and had to stop myself from lashing out at her. I felt like a live wire, ready to strike out at anyone, just to have somewhere to channel all the panic circling in the pit of my stomach.

Marissa took a step back. “Xavier, calm down, okay? Take a breath. We’ve already tried asking the Redwood Fae for help, and that was a bust. His magic didn’t work. We’ll have to think of something else—we have to keep it together if we want to help her.”

She was right, and I knew it, but my heart was still pounding, and I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what else Adéluce might do.

*This is all her fault. She’s the reason why Ava’s lying here like this. And why would she stop here? For all I know, she’s preparing to deliver the killing blow to Ava just so I’m forced to stand by and watch her die.*

“You’re right,” I told Marissa, trying my best to shake off my negative thoughts. “I do need to keep my shit together. This is just so messed up.”

“I know, but Ava’s strong. She’ll get through this,” Marissa said.

I turned back to Ava. She looked so calm. Peaceful, even. The pain I felt, seeing her like this… It was all too real. I would’ve done anything to bring her back to herself, and I knew it. This wasn’t right. Ava wasn’t meant to be lying in bed like this, cut off from the world around her.

*Ava’s all energy and movement. She’s vibrant. Vital. This isn’t right! I don’t want her to die because of me. Not again. Not like this.*

Last time, I’d truly meant for Ava to die—I’d literally made it happen with my own two hands. It was hard to believe that things between us had ever come to that. But everything was so different now, and I couldn’t imagine ever feeling that way about her again. I wanted her to be okay, I wanted her to live, and most of all, I didn’t want to be the reason for any of her suffering.

Grasping at straws, I tried to mind link with her.

*Ava, can you hear me? Answer me if you can. Please wake up! I’m here right beside you. If you come back to me, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you’re really okay this time. I took the vampire attack for granted, and I won’t do that again.*

There was no answer. The live connection I always felt crackling between us was muted. It was infuriating and terrifying, all at once. I thought back to all the times I’d been annoyed to hear the sound of her voice in my mind, and now it was the only thing I wanted.

I turned back to Marissa, who was hovering by my shoulder. “Go get Knox, Gabe, and Mikah. They’ll be able to help her. They’ll know what to do.”

Marissa gave me a short nod before rushing off to find them.

I leaned over and cupped Ava’s cheek. I was glad that her skin was warm, at least. If her heart was still beating and she was still breathing, that meant I had time to fix this. I assured myself that we’d figure it all out as soon as the others got here. We’d put our heads together and figure out how to pull her out of Adéluce’s hold.

“I’m sorry, Ava,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry I let this happen to you. I’m sorry that I haven’t killed the person responsible for this.” I glanced toward the door, willing the others to hurry up.

“I never should’ve put you in this position… But I like being Samara Alpha. I like having a strong, capable Luna at my side. I like having *you* at my side. I shouldn’t like it, but I do. I don’t want to lose this. I don’t want to lose *you*.”

I dropped my head onto Ava’s chest and kept it there, inhaling her scent and praying that she would just open her eyes and get up. My only comfort was the feeling of her heartbeat thumping against my ear.

*She’s not Cali, and she never will be. I know that. But she doesn’t* have *to be Cali. She’s Ava, and she matters to me. She really fucking matters. More than I ever thought she’d matter again. She matters enough for me to sacrifice whatever I have to sacrifice in order to bring her back.*

I lifted my head and took in the sight of her serene face before reaching out to softly stroke her cheek.

“I’m going to get you back,” I said, my voice louder now. “I’m going to get you out of this. Trust me, Ava. I’ll bring you back. Just give me a little time. If you can just hold on, I’ll fix this.”

Before too long, Marissa came running in with the others.

Knox pushed past Marissa, his eyes wide as he studied Ava’s motionless form.

“What the hell happened to my cousin?” he demanded. Then he turned to Marissa. “You didn’t tell us anything, just made us all come here. Why didn’t you tell me she was… What *is* she? Is she… She’s not dead, right?”

“Be quiet!” I hissed at him. “She’s not dead, okay? We don’t know yet what’s going on with her, but we think she’s in some kind of coma or something. The only thing I can think of is that it’s some sort of residual effect from the vampire attack.”

Knox frowned. “What? A residual effect? What kind of residual effect? I’ve never—”

I put a hand up to stop him and turned to Mikah. “Have you ever heard of anything like this before?”

I held my breath, hoping like hell that he was about to say that he had and knew a list of remedies for it.

But Mikah looked uncertain. “There are all kinds of reasons why someone might slip into a coma. And it’s not unheard of for a vampire bite to result in something like this… But it’s definitely not common.”

“Well, do you know how to cure it?” Gabe asked. “If this has happened before, then that must mean that someone, somewhere, has come up with a way to counteract it.”

Mikah shrugged uncomfortably. “The people who told me about it aren’t the type to bend over backward to find a cure for *anything*, so honestly, I’m not sure.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “There has to be something we can do. We can’t just leave her like this.”

I looked at Ava again. She still hadn’t moved a muscle, and her breathing was so faint that her chest was barely rising and falling.

“It’s too bad we don’t have our witch anymore,” Marissa said. “She probably could’ve cast a spell to fix this—or at least to figure out what the hell’s going on.”

I shot her a glare, and she immediately threw up her hands in apology.

“Sorry, Xavier,” she said. “Just saying.”

“Well, ‘just saying’ isn’t helping!” Knox snapped. “Ava’s lying here, close to death for all we know, and you’re saying shit that isn’t helping in the least. Typical!”

“Butt out!” Marissa snapped at him before looking back at me. “All I’m saying is that it would help to have the perspective of someone who’s seen a lot more than we have, and who might have some idea about how to fix it.”

She wasn’t wrong. And there *was* someone I could ask. Someone I trusted just as much as I’d trusted Kira.

“I have to go talk to Big Mac. She’s probably our only hope, and there isn’t much she hasn’t seen,” I said, already starting toward the door.

“Oh… But I thought she was gone?” Gabe said. “I heard some of the Redwoods talking about it. Apparently, she took off. Said she was done with werewolf drama—for good, this time.”

I scoffed. “She might’ve left the Redwoods, but I know exactly where she will have gone.”

**Episode 4433**

**Greyson**

Cali pulled away. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean exactly what I said—a staycation,” I replied earnestly. “Now’s not the right time to go to Portland, but that doesn’t mean we can’t escape for a little while. It’s not often that we get this much alone time.”

Cali looked thoughtful. “So basically, we won’t have any responsibilities, and we can just do whatever we want? Just relax and be with each other? No worrying about the pack, or Lucian pulling out of the alliance, or anything else?”

As much as I wished things were different, I knew that wasn’t something that I could promise her. My being Alpha meant that my time was never really my own, and I had to be available for the pack at a moment’s notice. Even my staycations had to be taken with the understanding that I would never truly be off the clock. It was a hard truth, but it was the path I’d chosen.

If the rest of the pack was going to take some much-needed time, why couldn’t I try to do the same? At least while they were, too. Was that too selfish, though?

“Just humor me for a while,” I said, smoothing a hand through Cali’s hair.

It occurred to me that we might only really be able to manage a half-staycation. We could order in and stay in our bathrobes and eat and drink and binge TV shows… But I’d still have to keep one ear open for trouble.

I wished that I could give Cali a truly stress-free, unencumbered vacation—especially since we both deserved it—but there were still so many things going on, and still so many balls in the air.

Off the top of my head, there was the vampire attack against Ava, my mom and Big Mac calling off the wedding and Big Mac leaving, Elle, and Lucian’s rift with the alliance. Not to mention how so many pack members had just up and left to do whatever they needed to do, which I supposed wasn’t really such a bad thing—as long as they all came back.

I sighed as I thought about the losses we’d suffered… Kira and Jacqueline were gone, and it hurt to even think about that. It seemed like the wrong time to relax, if I was really being honest with myself.

*And then there’s my brother acting all strange and pushing me to stay glued to Cali’s side, along with the rest of his weird… Well, everything, really.*

Cali reached out and cupped my cheek, startling me out of my thoughts. She smiled at me. “I can see your thoughts going a mile a minute.” She kissed me. “And I’d love to humor you.”

She grabbed my hand and led me upstairs to her room. I was happy to fall into this with her and take a break from worrying, even if it was a short one. It was time to relish our victory—for real this time. We’d finally beaten the Bitterfangs, and while we were a little worse for wear, I felt like the Redwoods were stronger than ever.

I took in a deep breath and tried to push all the issues hanging around in my head to the side. Even with everything else going on, I would always make time for this. For her. After all, if I couldn’t spend quality time with my mate, what was I even fighting for?

As soon as she closed the bedroom door, Cali was on me, her warm lips sliding against mine and her soft tongue gently twirling into the depths of my mouth. I moaned and backed her up against the wall. I aligned my body with hers, enjoying the soft press of her breasts against my chest. Unable to help myself, I reached down to grip her ass, giving it a tight squeeze.

“Mm, this is a good start to our staycation,” Cali moaned between kisses. She lifted a leg and looped it around my waist, pulling me close.

“And it’s about to get even better,” I said against her mouth as I walked her over to the bed.

We collapsed onto it, our bodies entwining as the heat of the kiss kept building, our hands roaming over each other’s bodies. Cali let out a strained sigh when her hand glanced across my crotch, pausing when she felt my hardness.

“You feel that? That’s what you do to me,” I whispered.

I threaded my fingers into her hair and gently tugged her head back so that I could run the tip of my tongue along her neck. I pulled her shirt away and dragged kisses across her shoulder. Her shirt slipped off, exposing her breasts. I sighed in pleasure as Cali arched against me.

She twisted onto her stomach, and I ground my growing erection into the soft rise of her ass.

Just as I was about to unbutton my fly, something caught my eye, and I stopped moving.

“What happened?” Cali asked. She started to twist back toward me, but I stopped her.

“Wait a second,” I said. “The fake Luna mark that Kira gave you… It’s different.”

I leaned closer to get a better look, scanning the design and confirming that it had indeed changed.

Cali’s head snapped up, and she looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes wide with sudden fear. “What? How do you mean? What’s wrong with it?”

She started to squirm under my weight, clearly panicking.

“Calm down,” I said, gently sliding off her. “It’s nothing like that, it’s just…”

I trailed off, not entirely sure how to describe it without freaking her out. There was a faded quality to the mark that hadn’t been there before—almost like a tattoo that had been washed out by too much sun exposure. There was even a little bruising around it.

I prodded it gently. “Does that hurt?”

Cali shook her head. “No, I don’t feel anything abnormal—pain or otherwise.” She pushed away from me and started to get up. “This is just what I need, another weird mark stressing me out.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as she all but leapt off the bed and sprinted across the room.

“I want to see it for myself.”

She made a beeline for the bathroom, and I got up and followed her. “Cali, I don’t want you to get all worked up. Maybe it’s nothing.”

Cali was already freaked out, and she wasn’t wrong to be, but deep down, I knew it was probably nothing. Kira had made the mark, and I trusted her.

Cali grabbed a hand mirror from under the sink and then faced away from the mirrored medicine cabinet, slowly shifting the hand mirror so that she could see the Luna mark.

“Are you sure you don’t feel anything?” I asked her. “No pain? Nothing?”

The bruising, though slight, was a little strange. I hadn’t heard Cali mention any pain or aches associated with the mark, so I hoped that was a good sign.

“I don’t know…” Cali said, her eyes glued to her reflection. “There might be something different about it, but I can’t quite put my finger on what. And no, it doesn’t hurt.”

“So it looks different, but it’s still nothing like the Seluna mark, right?”

“No, nothing like that,” she said. “It couldn’t be more different from that. It almost feels like it’s tickling or something, but that could just be in my head. It’s such a slight sensation that I might be imagining it. I didn’t feel anything at all before you mentioned it.”

Cali shivered, and I threw an arm around her. “It’ll be fine, Cali. You’re right—there’s no reason to think that this is anything like the Seluna mark. Maybe it just has something to do with the fact that Kira’s magic is still around, even though she’s gone.”

*What happens to a witch’s spells after she’s gone, anyway? Does the magic stay the same, or does it fade away? Is the mark all that’s left? That might be something to ask Big Mac… One day.*

Cali turned around and buried her face in my chest. I stroked her back and held her, my eyes on the Luna mark’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. I was relieved that it wasn’t causing Cali any pain, though it was a little troubling to see that it had changed so much.

Cali said something into my chest that I didn’t catch.

I pushed her back lightly. “Say that again? I didn’t hear you.”

Cali hesitated and for a second, and I wondered if she was going to ask me to drop this. We’d both been excited to take it easy and push all our problems to the back burner, at least for a little while, but now there was something else for us to worry about.

Cali laid the mirror on the counter and took a deep breath before she finally repeated the words I hadn’t heard before. “I said, what if something *has* changed with my Luna mark, and the only person who could’ve fixed it is Kira?”

**Episode 4434**

My heart was pounding like crazy. I knew this wasn’t the same as the Seluna stuff, but I couldn’t help but equate the two problems. The Seluna nightmare had been completely out of my control, and once again, there was a magical mark on my body that I was powerless to do anything about.

I was starting to shake, and a sheen of sweat broke out across my forehead.

*What if Kira’s death left magic inside of me… What if it’s…* haunted *or something? What will happen to me now that I have the mark of a deceased witch on my shoulder?*

Looking back, I wished I’d thought to ask Kira to remove the mark. It wasn’t like I really needed it anymore… And now that she *was* gone, would it be there forever? And what if it interfered with things if I ever got a real Luna mark?

My breathing sped up as all sorts of horrible worst-case scenarios blazed through my mind. The Seluna mark had taken over my life not all that long ago. How was I going to deal with having another life altering mark on my body if this one *did* turn into a problem?

Greyson stooped down to look me in the eye. “Don’t lose it, Cali.” He placed his warm hands on my shoulders, clearly trying to ground me. “Breathe. I don’t want you to hyperventilate. Not over this. Like I said, it’s probably nothing. You didn’t even notice anything strange until I pointed it out.”

I listened to the steady cadence of Greyson’s voice and counted my breaths, trying to calm myself down. After a few seconds of that, I finally felt like I was starting to breathe normally again. I closed my eyes and worked hard to push all the random, catastrophic thoughts out of my head. Kira hadn’t used dark magic. She’d been a good witch, and she never would’ve done anything to put me in danger. I had to trust that.

“I’m okay,” I said around a sigh. “I know that no matter what happens, we’ll handle it together.”

“You’re exactly right. You’re not alone. I’m here, Cali, and I’m going to be right by your side no matter what. But truly, I don’t think there’s any reason to worry about this too much. You’re not feeling bad; you’re not hurt. Technically, other than the mark looking a little funky, it’s a non-issue. You said you didn’t even feel it. That already sets it apart from the Seluna mark.”

“You’re right,” I said. “And it really doesn’t even look bad or anything, and the bruising is slight. Maybe it’s just some kind of reaction to Kira’s death, like you said. Nothing to worry about.”

“Exactly,” he said firmly. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t ask around to make sure. It makes sense that a witch’s passing might affect any magic she left behind. It should be simple enough to find out if that’s a thing.”

“But Big Mac’s gone,” I said, a little bitterly. “I bet she’d know what was going on.”

“Yes, Big Mac’s gone,” I said. “And probably not too keen on helping us right now. But luckily for us, Big Mac isn’t the only witch in existence. I will get answers for you, Cali. I promise.”

“I’m so glad I have you on my side,” I said.

Greyson flashed me a wolfish grin just before he kissed me. “Always. Now, where were we?” He pulled me close and lifted me into his arms. “I think I remember….”

“Greyson!” I giggled, planting a kiss on his neck and inhaling his earthy scent.

He nuzzled my neck and spun me around as he moved back into the bedroom. “Well, let’s pick up right where we left off. We were trying to kick off a little abbreviated staycation a second ago, right? Let’s get back to it.”

“I’m ready,” I said. “There’s no one else I’d rather staycation with.”

Just before he dropped me on the bed, there was a knock on my door. We both stopped cold.

There was another flurry of knocks before Lola’s voice filtered through from the other side of the door. “Cali? Are you decent? I hope so, because I’m coming in!”

Greyson put me down, and I scrambled to put my shirt back on. I pulled it down over my breasts just as the door slammed open and Lola stepped inside.

She looked between me and Greyson. “So, you told her?”

I looked at her, confused. “Tell me what? What’s she talking about, Greyson?”

“Told her?” Greyson looked confused, too.

Lola narrowed her eyes at Greyson. “What you were *supposed* to tell her!”

Greyson shook his head. “Oh, that. No, I haven’t had a chance to say anything.” Greyson shrugged. “A lot going on.”

Lola rolled her eyes at Greyson before she turned to me. “Jay and I have to leave. I need to get away from here for a while, but I wanted to say goodbye first.”

“Really?” I said, my voice small. I couldn’t believe that *more* of my friends were leaving. Greyson had been right about us having the pack house almost to ourselves for the next couple of days. “Why is everyone leaving? I want us all to be here together!”

Greyson kissed me on the side of my head. “I’m going to let you two talk. Come find me after?” Greyson moved past Lola and hovered in the doorway. “And Lola—stay in touch and stay safe. See you in a few days.”

Once Greyson had left and closed the door behind him, I whirled on my friend. I was more than ready to rake her over the coals, like she would’ve done me if the tables were turned. “Why do you have to go anywhere at all right now? Everything just calmed down.”

“Has it, though? It still feels so heavy here. I just need a break from the pack,” Lola said. “I feel like I keep seeing Jacqueline everywhere. I want to remember my friend without all the baggage of the pack house.” Lola hesitated, pushing the hair out of her face. “I want a chance to think about her outside of the role she played here.”

I noticed that Lola was wearing Jacqueline’s daylight bracelet. I hoped that it was bringing her at least a little comfort.

Lola sighed and frowned. “But if you’re that torn up about it, I suppose Jay and I can delay our trip. I mean, if you really need me to stay.”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that. It’s not like I’ll be alone—I have Greyson. No… I don’t want you to change your plans. I guess I was just surprised to hear that you were leaving, because Torin, Adair, and Artemis all headed out this morning, too. I was feeling a little left behind, but I completely understand why you need this time away.”

“Thanks, Cali,” Lola said. “Losing Jacs was just so unexpected, and like I said, everywhere I go in this house, I’m reminded of her. I also feel a little guilty. She wouldn’t even have ended up here if it weren’t for me, which means she might still be alive if we’d never met.”

I stepped toward my friend and pulled her into a hug. “Don’t think like that, Lola. Jacs did what she wanted. She lived on her own terms—she chose to be here, and she chose to fight with us. She wouldn’t have had things any other way. Her death isn’t your fault.”

Lola sighed and nodded. “I know that, which is another reason why I need to go. All I’m doing here is ruminating and coming up with new ways to feel bad about everything that happened.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And that’s why I understand that you need to go. I’m sorry for making you feel bad about it at first. I want you to do whatever you have to do to grieve. I get it.”

Lola hugged me tighter. “Thanks. I love that you said that… But I have to admit, I’m a little worried about you, too.”

She wiped a single tear from her eye as she stepped back and looked at me.

I frowned. “What? Worried about me? Why?”

I thought about the changed Luna mark on my back, but I hadn’t told Lola about that—so why was she so worried about me? Before the scare with the mark, I’d felt pretty good about how things were going. The war was over, and Greyson and I were in a great place. But if Lola was worried, then maybe I was missing something.

“That vampire who went after Ava out of nowhere…” Lola said. “Why did they choose her? And it’s not like they just attacked some random person—they attacked a Luna. And that made me start to think…” She hesitated again.

“What, Lola? What are you thinking?”

“Well, what if that vampire is out to attack Lunas?”

**Episode 4435**

**Xavier**

“Do you want us to come with you?” Marissa asked me. “For moral support?”

I shook my head. “No, I can handle Big Mac on my own. She’d probably be more annoyed if I brought a bunch of people she doesn’t know. It’s better if I do this on my own.”

Besides, I didn’t want an audience if Big Mac turned me away, which was a very real possibility.

I looked back down at Ava and softened my tone. “Just take care of her while I’m gone, okay? Make sure no one touches her.”

Marissa nodded. “No one will get near her. You have my word.”

“Thanks, Marissa,” I said. “I’m glad that Ava has someone like you watching her back.”

Marissa and I had experienced our share of disagreements, but her loyalty to the pack and to Ava was ironclad.

Marissa waved me off. “I don’t need your gratitude. Ava’s my friend—I want to protect her as much as you do.”

I nodded and quickly packed a go-bag, then I left the room with Gabe and Mikah on my heels.

“You sure you don’t need backup?” Gabe asked. “Big Mac can be a little… difficult.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said. “Big Mac probably won’t be happy to see me, but she’s not going to attack me or anything. I’ll be able to handle her. But while I’m gone, if you two can get in touch with your vampire contacts and see if they know what’s going on with Ava and how to fix it, I’d appreciate it.”

Mikah nodded. “We’ll make some calls.”

He didn’t sound too confident about how useful that would be, but at least he was willing to try.

I went downstairs and was about to head out when I heard Knox’s voice from behind me.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked, rushing to catch up with me. “She’s my cousin, I want to help her.”

I turned to look at him, suddenly struck by the burgeoning strength of the pack—a pack I’d rebuilt pretty much from the ground up. I’d made great strides in gaining the trust and support of even the most skeptical of my pack members. That was real compassion in Knox’s eyes, and it was a welcome sight. Even a month ago, I wouldn’t have trusted Knox to shine my shoes, but now…

“While I’m away, you’ll be running point,” I told Knox. “I know we mentioned heightening the patrols after the vampire attack, so if you could handle scheduling those and keeping track of anything you guys find out there, that would be a huge help.”

Knox arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes, really. That wasn’t clear?” I didn’t have time to deal with Knox’s surprise at being asked to do something for the pack, though I understood it. He was apparently just as surprised by how far we’d come as I was.

“Fine, that’s great,” he said excitedly. “You got it. I’ll call you if we find anything.”

“Thanks, I’m counting on you,” I said distractedly as I turned and headed out the door.

Finally, I was on my way to Big Mac. I was confident that she would know exactly what was wrong with Ava, though I was a little anxious about not being able to tell the witch exactly who—and what—had attacked her. Hopefully I’d be able to get the information I needed, even though there were limits on what I could share with her about the attack.

*If Ava’s state has more to do with what Adéluce is and less to do with the possible side effects of a vampire bite, we could be shit out of luck. It’s not like I can tell anyone that the vampire who bit her isn’t just a vampire, but a witch, too.*

I was just going to have to hope for the best and work with what I had. Hopefully Big Mac would easily be able to pinpoint what was wrong without my having to give her a bunch of incomplete information.

I stepped off the porch and shifted, picked up my bag with my teeth, and took off into the woods.

I followed a familiar trail, and before I knew it, I was already approaching the hot springs. I increased my speed, and not long after, I reached the witch’s shack. It was exactly as I remembered it—a ramshackle building made of gnarled, broken wood.

*Only a witch could live here. There’s no way this structure would still be standing without magical intervention.*

I shifted back to human and quickly got dressed in the jeans and T-shirt I’d brought as I walked up the overgrown path that led up to the shack.

I’d just lifted my hand to knock on the warped wooden door when it was flung open. Big Mac stood in the doorway, scowling.

“You thought I’d let a werewolf sneak up to my house? Think again! I might’ve left the pack house behind, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to catch you lot in the act!” Big Mac said.

“I was literally about to knock on your door,” I said, putting my hands up. “I’m just a normal visitor, no sneaking required.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and turned around. “Which is a problem in and of itself. I don’t want any visitors—especially of the werewolf variety. What are you even doing here? I don’t have anything to say to you. I’m out. You all need to leave me alone for once. I want peace and quiet—something none of you would let me have in the pack house. And now you’re invading my privacy by showing up here unannounced? Stalker, much?”

Despite her rant, I couldn’t help but notice that she hadn’t shut the door in my face. That had to count for something.

Slowly and carefully, I followed her inside.

I remembered all too clearly what Big Mac’s place looked like, but I couldn’t help but be mind fucked by it all over again. The interior of the house was so different from the outside—high ceilings, shining hardwood floors, expensive cabinetry and furniture, modern fixtures, paintings, sculptures, Persian rugs… There was nothing to hint at the exterior, which looked like it belonged to an abandoned shed.

For all the great décor, the place *was* pretty messy, though. Big Mac was obviously in some sort of reorganization or cleaning phase.

*I’m going to have to tread lightly, here. I’m all too familiar with Big Mac’s temper, so I can’t just order her to help me. I’m going to have to appeal to her softer side… If it’s even in the building, today.*

“Looks like you’re in… transition,” I said carefully. “Is Mrs. Smith around to help you out with the cleaning?” I gestured vaguely at the chaos.

Somehow, Big Mac’s scowl deepened. “Is that why you came here? To discuss who’s helping me *clean my house*? You have to be kidding me. I’m not discussing that with *you*, of all people. Enough with the small talk. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Fine,” I said. “If that’s how you want it to go, then—”

“How I *want* it to go is you turning around and taking your ass back to where it came from, but since that doesn’t seem to be happening, I suggest you get to the point before I throw you out.”

For the first time, Big Mac’s frown disappeared, replaced by a too-sweet smile that was somehow more off-putting than the scowl.

“I need your help,” I said simply. I knew it was the four little words she didn’t want to hear.

“Shocker,” Big Mac said as she flounced down into an armchair. “What is it now?”

“It’s Ava,” I said, plowing ahead. I’d expected Big Mac to be less than welcoming, but she was in rare form today. “She was, uh, bitten by a vampire the other night, and now she won’t wake up. I’ve tried everything to get her to come to, but I think she’s in some kind of coma.”

Big Mac stared at me for a long while before she finally asked, “And why would I do anything to help you? If it wasn’t for you and your damn werewolves, Kira would still be alive. And now you have the audacity to come here and ask for my help? Have you learned *nothing* from Kira’s death? To leave witches out of your drama, perhaps? If you’d shown that courtesy to Kira, she might still be alive.”

I clenched my fists. “That’s nothing I haven’t thought of myself,” I said. “I agree with you completely. It’s my fault that Kira’s gone. I should’ve…” My voice broke, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to calm myself. “I should’ve protected her, but I couldn’t. Believe me, I know the role I played in her death, and I’ll be atoning for it for the rest of my life. But, please, will you help me?”

**Episode 4436**

**Greyson**

After leaving Cali’s room, I made my way back downstairs. I hadn’t told Cali about Lola leaving like I’d been supposed to, but I was happy that she’d ended up coming to tell Cali herself. Cali had already had a hard time saying goodbye to Artemis and the other Fae, so I could only imagine how she would’ve felt to learn from someone else that Lola was leaving, too.

Lola and Jay leaving for a few days wasn’t such a big deal, really, but between the Fae heading out, Lola and Jay leaving for their couple’s retreat, and Big Mac going back to her shack in the woods, the house was already starting to feel a lot emptier than I was comfortable with.

A pack house was supposed to feel full, and, despite my comfort with being on my own, I’d really grown to like the hustle and bustle of the place—the feeling that there was always someone around to talk to, that I’d always be able to find Torin in the kitchen cooking, or Artemis out back doing target practice.

Sage, Zainab, Rishika, and a few others were still around, but in a house this big, it would be easy for Cali and me to go days without running into anyone. Especially if everyone was sort of lying low, keeping to themselves. That definitely felt strange.

I found Jay by the front door, kneeling next to their bags.

“Got everything you need for the trip?” I asked him.

“I think so,” Jay said. He unzipped a bag and rummaged around in it before zipping it back up and moving on to the next. “Just making sure we’re not forgetting anything.”

“So… Couple’s retreat, huh?” I asked. “What does that mean, exactly? Activities and stuff, or…?”

“Some activities, but nothing too strenuous,” he said. “It’s a chance to relax. I’ve made plans for days of pampering, fun, and… Well, you know the rest. I found this amazing spa that will get Lola’s mind off everything in no time. And it’ll help us reconnect with each other, too.”

I nodded. “Glad that you’re so excited about this. Sounds like it’s going to be fun.”

I hoped that the slight bitterness I felt wasn’t coming through in my voice… Or showing on my face.

I wished that Cali and I could just take off for a few days, too, but at the rate we were going, we were barely able to kick off our semi-staycation. I’d never even consider giving up on leading the Redwoods—I was the best Alpha for the job, and I knew it. But sometimes I did wish that I could drop the weight of the responsibility that came with the position, just for a little while.

*It’d be nice to take Cali on a trip*, I thought. *Portland would be great, and the easiest to manage, but going somewhere tropical and making love to Cali on a beach would be amazing. She deserves to enjoy what the world has to offer… And I hate that she’s sacrificing those types of experiences to be with me.*

I quickly pushed those thoughts away, realizing there was no point in moaning about something I couldn’t change. And it wasn’t like Cali was complaining, after all. I’d chosen my role, and I was happy with it—and that meant I had to be okay with the sacrifices I had to make in order to be the Alpha my pack deserved.

“Yup, I’m pretty stoked. And our room is gorgeous,” Jay said. “I showed Lola pictures and everything, but I took a virtual tour of the place before I booked it, and Lola’s going to flip when she sees it in person. It’s the penthouse suite of this amazing boutique hotel. Room service to die for, great views, close to a bunch of attractions—it’s going to be great.”

“Good man,” I said. “I’m happy for you two.”

I really was happy for them. I hoped that their trip was so good that Lola would feel a lot better by the time she got back. The ache of losing Jacs would be hard for her for a while, but hopefully some time away would take the edge off her grief.

Jay paused, and his expression grew serious. “Will everything be fine here while we’re gone?”

I knew that Jay was giving me an opportunity to ask him to stay back, but I didn’t take it. I wanted my pack to be happy, and if getting away for a few days would make him and Lola happy, it would be stupid for me to stand in the way of that.

“Sure, everything’s going to be great,” I said. “It’s not like the vampire attacked a Redwood, so at least we know our pack isn’t being targeted.”

I didn’t add that I knew that could change in the blink of an eye. Jay already knew that, anyway. I was just trying to make him feel better about leaving.

*It’s not like we ever have a dull moment around here. If Jay and Lola waited for things to calm down before taking their trip, they’d never leave.*

Jay frowned. “Yeah… I texted Xavier to check in about what happened, but I didn’t get a reply. Not that Xavier and I are on the best terms. We haven’t talked much lately. But reaching out seemed like the right thing to do. Ava getting attacked was really messed up. Xavier seemed really torn up about it.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” I said. “It’s a complicated situation, but I’m not going to tell you who to be friends with—least of all when it comes to my brother. He needs someone in his corner… And that can’t be me, for obvious reasons.”

Xavier was going through something, and it had driven a wedge between him and every member of the Redwood pack. I didn’t know if we’d ever find out what was behind it, but for now, I was happy that people were still trying to support him.

“What I’m saying is, I don’t have a problem with it, and I wouldn’t have a problem with it if you and Xavier ever got back on better terms,” I said.

A strange look passed across Jay’s face. “I appreciate that, but I still can’t forgive Xavier for what he did to Cali. It just doesn’t sit right with me, no matter how I look at it.”

I was surprised. I’d never realized that Jay had that kind of loyalty to Cali. But I was pleased, too.

“Aside from all that, he’s just been so weird lately,” Jay said. “I used to get him—at least I thought I did—but now he might as well be a stranger.” With that, Jay shrugged and turned back to his bags. “But I guess that’s not really our problem anymore.”

“It’s not,” I said. “Just focus on your couple’s retreat.”

“Will do,” Jay said, laughing. “And I have to say, that won’t be hard to do.”

I left Jay to focus on his packing, hoping that despite his efforts to distance himself from what was going on with Xavier, he wouldn’t be bogged down by it while he and Lola were gone.

*What* is *going on with my brother, anyway? Does he know what Kira suspected about the spell? Everyone else can sense that something’s off with him, but the weirdest thing about it is that Xavier’s acting like everything’s normal. He totally blew up his entire life, and he’s acting like nothing happened. I don’t get it.*

I saw the way Xavier had reacted when Ava had been attacked. His fear for his Luna, for Ava… That had been real. It was obvious that he and Ava had a very real connection, despite whatever else might be going on with him. I just wished I knew what that meant for the *due destini*.

*Cali didn’t choose any of this. Xavier made the choice for her, which means it wasn’t actually a choice at all. But I’ll take all I can get of Cali, and I won’t feel the least bit guilty for having her all to myself.*

Still, our relationship still didn’t feel as solid as I would’ve liked. Even with Xavier out of the picture—kind of—I still wanted more.

Still, there was something good about seeing Xavier as a strong Alpha for the Samara pack and working with a Luna who complemented him so well. I had plenty of opinions about Ava, and she was far from my favorite person in the world, but she was a strong fighter, and she knew what it meant to be a Luna. She took the job seriously, and I could tell that she loved it.

*If we weren’t locked in this fucked-up situation with Cali, I’d be damn proud of my little brother. I wish that it wasn’t tainted, that Xavier’s success as Alpha wasn’t tied to my love for Cali. That it wasn’t tied to me finally being able to have Cali all to myself.*

Someone knocked at the front door, and I heard Jay open it. “Yeah?” he grunted.

I turned and headed back toward the foyer, where I saw Armin from the Vanguard pack standing in the doorway, his posture ramrod straight and his face expressionless.

“Please inform your Alpha, Greyson Evers, that he’s been served,” Armin told Jay.

I frowned. “What the hell?”

**Episode 4437**

“Do you really think that the vampire could be targeting Lunas?” I asked Lola. “I don’t know… I mean, you know Ava. She easily could’ve just pissed off some random vampire who chose that moment to get their revenge. Stranger things have happened.”

Lola cocked her head to the side. “You have a point there. There have been times when I’ve wanted to bury my fangs in her neck myself.”

We both laughed.

“Wait, it wasn’t you, was it?” I said with faux seriousness.

We both guffawed, falling all over each other.

I wiped a tear from my eye. “Okay, we should stop. That isn’t nice.”

I felt a little guilty about talking about Ava like this when she’d just been attacked, but Ava hadn’t exactly been nice to me when I’d approached her to ask about helping Xavier. In fact, she’d been downright rude to me on multiple occasions, and had made it her life’s mission to keep me away from Xavier… Though given the kisses and other heated moments we’d shared when left to our own devices, I guessed I couldn’t really blame her.

*Still… Xavier’s my* *mate, ultimately. She can’t expect us to never interact ever again, especially with our packs being allied. She definitely took every opportunity to interact with him when we were together.*

“All jokes aside, you’re probably right. The vampire attack was probably either entirely random or Ava-specific.” Lola sighed. “You’ll be totally fine. Sorry for even putting that thought in your head. I’m just being paranoid. I guess that’s just something I’ll have to shake after going through all those battles.”

“All the more reason for you to take this trip with Jay,” I said firmly. “It’ll be a huge help. You need a perspective shift. The Redwoods have experienced so many random, vicious attacks—I bet we all think the world’s out to get us, right now. And to be fair, that’s actually true, most of the time—but I have a feeling that the vampire attack really was random. So go on your trip and enjoy yourself. I’ll be waiting when you get back.”

“Thanks, girl!” Lola said, pulling me into a tight hug. “I’m really glad you’re okay. Keep it that way while I’m gone?”

I waved her off. “Of course I’ll be okay. I’ll be with Greyson, and he’s promised me a staycation.”

“Ooh, sounds like fun,” Lola said. “Sounds sexy, too.”

I blushed. “Stop! Mostly, I think it just means that we’re not allowed to get into any trouble. There’s probably some staycation rule about that. We’re just going to relax and enjoy having a half empty house for a while.”

“Well, I support any rule that keeps you two out of trouble—at least until everyone’s back and ready to help kick ass alongside you,” Lola said.

We both laughed.

“Lola!” Jay called from downstairs. “Let’s get a move on! We have dinner reservations at six o’clock, and we’ve got a bit of a drive ahead of us!”

“I guess I’d better get going,” Lola said, heading for the door.

“I’ll walk you two out.”

Lola and I linked arms as we went down the stairs. I was going to miss my friend, but I knew that giving everyone some time to recharge was definitely the right move. I’d made Lola feel guilty about leaving at first, but she deserved to be pampered after losing Jacqueline.

*I hope she’ll actually be able to take her mind off things enough to enjoy herself. Lola deserves a little chill time, and so does Jay.*

Greyson and Jay were standing together in the foyer when we came downstairs. Jay had some kind of large, golden envelope in his hands that he was right in the middle of passing to Greyson. I spotted a couple lines of calligraphy on the front.

*Uh-oh. There’s only one person who sends mail that gaudy, and he’s the last person Greyson wants to hear from right now. Or ever.*

“What’s that?” I asked as we joined the two men at the door.

“Armin dropped it off,” Jay said. “It was actually super weird—but can you still call normal Vanguard behavior weird? I’m actually kind of getting used to all their stunts.”

“Yes,” Lola said with an eye roll. “You can still call it weird. Normal for them is still weird for everyone else.”

I could sense my mate’s annoyance as he tore the envelope open. Up close, I saw that the envelope was even fancier than I’d thought. Once again, I had to wonder if Lucian had bought stock in a stationery company.

“Is this another damn party invitation? How many parties can one man throw?” I grumbled. “Also, he was literally just trying to fight you—that would’ve made most people put you on their party blacklist.”

Greyson pulled a single piece of cardstock out of the envelope and scanned it. His polite disinterest quickly transformed into a full-blown scowl. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What? What is it?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head and let out a dry chuckle. “The bastard actuallydid it. I can’t believe this.”

“What are you talking about?” Lola asked. “Did he finally invite us to something you actually want to go to? Is that why you’re so shocked?”

“No,” I said evenly. “That’s not it.”

I knew what the letter said without having to read it. Lucian must have made good on his threat. I reached for the letter and Greyson handed it to me.

“He’s officially pulled the Vanguard pack out of the alliance,” Greyson told Lola and Jay. “I wish I could say good riddance, but…”

I scanned the note. I was surprised at how short it was, given what I knew of Lucian. For a stunt like this, I would’ve expected an entire treatise.

*To the Redwood pack and their Alpha, Greyson Evers; from the Vanguard pack, victors of the Vanguard Incursion and saviors of the Pacific Northwest.*

*Due to irreconcilable differences, the Vanguard pack is hereby formally withdrawing from the alliance. There will be no appeal. Good day.*

*Signed,*

*He who slayed the Bitterfang Alpha, Malakai, Prince Lucian Excelsior, Alpha of the Vanguards, victors of the Bitterfang Incursion and saviors of the Pacific Northwest*

“I know this is serious, but… *Seriously?*”I snorted. “Lucian is really something else.”

Lola grabbed the letter and immediately started cracking up. “His last name’s Excelsior? Oh, give me a break! Is he really this out of touch with reality? This can’t be real.”

Lola turned the paper over, almost like she was looking for the punchline.

Greyson let out an exasperated sigh. “I know this whole thing seems just as ridiculous as usual, but this could actually be a problem for us down the line.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jay, Lola, you should head out.”

“You sure, Greyson?” Jay asked. “We can stick around if you think this might blow up or something.”

I threw open the door and started pushing Lola and Jay toward it. “No, no, no. We’ve got this. Lucian throwing a temper tantrum with tacky stationary is not a valid reason for you two to skip out on what sounds like an amazing getaway.”

“Cali’s right. We can handle this,” Greyson said.

“Okay, well, call us if you need us, and we’ll race right back. I’m excited about this trip, but not enough to leave you hanging if you need us,” Jay told Greyson.

“But the place looks amazing, so don’t call us unless you *really* need us, okay?” Lola added.

I smirked at my friend as she and Jay grabbed their bags and stepped out onto the porch. “You got it. We won’t call unless we’re under siege.”

I went out onto the porch to wave goodbye as they climbed into Jay’s truck. It wasn’t lost on me that this was the second group of people I was waving off today, and it was still only the morning.

“We’re going to have to call some of the other alliance packs to find out if this is real, or if Lucian just sent this to piss us off,” Greyson said, once Jay and Lola were gone.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and find out that Lucian’s just bluffing.”

Greyson suddenly looked exhausted, and it saddened me that yet another issue had just fallen into his lap. He’d wanted us to spend some quality time together, but it looked like we were going to have to press pause on that.

*I can help by keeping the pack house running while he figures everything out. So, what comes first? Breakfast?*

I started toward the kitchen, but then my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw that I had a notification for a new email. My eyes widened as I read the subject line.

*We’re looking forward to seeing you at orientation!*

“*What?*” I shouted, my mind racing.

Had Lola *actually* enrolled me at Central Cascades University?

**Episode 4438**

**Xavier**

I stood in silence with Big Mac, waiting for her answer. I didn’t know what my next move would be if she refused to help me. I was starting to think that was the most likely scenario when the witch finally softened.

“I have to admit, knowing you, I was expecting a fight,” she said, then met my eyes. “But maybe you’re growing up after all. Fine, I’ll come help you with your Luna.”

I sighed in relief. “Thank you, Big Mac. Thank you.”

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Soon I was sprinting back to the Samara pack house with Big Mac clinging to my back, her bag of spell ingredients jangling with every step. Just having her with me gave me hope. I needed to feel like I was doing something, and bringing Big Mac here to help Ava was literally the best thing I could’ve done.

I let Big Mac get down once we got to the yard, then shifted as I sprinted up onto the porch. I threw the door open and rushed inside, but Big Mac stalled at the entrance and took a deep breath. She let her bag drop to the ground and covered her face with her hands, like she was trying to hide her distress.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she noticed me watching her. “It’s just… I can feel Kira everywhere. I didn’t think I’d react like this, but it’s so damn strong.”

I turned around and joined her at the door, knowing that this had to be hard for her.

“What does it feel like?” I asked her. “When we came back here after she was killed, the house felt deflated, somehow—like all the life had gone out of it.”

I hadn’t realized how alive the place had felt before until we’d returned to find that it had lost some of its vitality.

“You’re right,” Big Mac said. “It’s almost like its magic is sad.”

My stomach twisted. “That’s exactly what it feels like. I wish there was something I could do to change what happened.”

I shook away the image of Kira lying motionless under the fallen rocks. I saw it almost every time I closed my eyes. Sometimes I even saw it when my eyes were wide open.

“Maybe someday we’ll circle back to that,” Big Mac told me distractedly. Coming back to herself, she gestured inside. “Now get to it. Show me where your Luna is, and I’ll see if there’s anything I can do. But I’m telling you now, I can’t make any promises.”

“I get that,” I said. “It means a lot that you’re even trying—that’s all I can really ask for. I know Ava would appreciate it, too.”

“I hope I’m able to wake her up so that I can prove you wrong about that one,” Big Mac said. “There’s never been any love lost between me and your Luna.”

I led the witch upstairs to our room to find Marissa sitting on the bed beside Ava. She jumped up as Big Mac followed me in.

“Can you help her?” Marissa asked Big Mac.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Big Mac snapped. She pushed Marissa and me aside. “Now give me some room to work.”

Marissa grimaced but scurried out of the room, leaving me alone with the witch and my mate, who hadn’t moved an inch since I’d left.

“Should I leave, too?” I asked. I didn’t *want* to leave, but if that was what it took for Big Mac to work her magic, I’d make myself scarce.

“No, you stay put. I should be able to use your Alpha connection to Ava to energize my magic while I figure out what’s going on with her.”

Big Mac was focused in on Ava as she circled the bed, looking her over from head to toe and stopping to hover her hands over certain places on Ava’s body.

“Strange,” Big Mac muttered as she dropped her heavy bag at the foot of the bed.

Her brow wrinkled in concentration, she moved around to position herself at the side of the bed, then she took Ava’s hand.

“You grab her other hand,” Big Mac said. “I need the connection to be both physical and metaphysical.”

“Of course,” I said, quickly taking Ava’s hand. I squeezed it and lifted it to my lips to place a kiss on her knuckles.

Big Mac’s eyes followed my movements. “You really care about her, don’t you?” she asked. “No need to answer—I can see it. Feel it, too.”

Big Mac reached into her bag and pulled out a tangle of herbs that she held to Ava’s nose, then she closed her eyes and started chanting something that I could barely hear.

I held my breath, hoping it would work.

*Come on, Ava. Come back. You can do this. Pull through. Pull through for me. For your pack. Come on. Please let this work!*

Ava’s hand was still warm, and that gave me hope. I decided to try to reach out to her via mind link one more time. I didn’t expect her to reply, but maybe the sound of my voice would soothe her, wherever she was.

*Ava, if you can hear me, please say something. Just let me know that you’re okay. Big Mac’s here, and we’re going to do everything we can to wake you up. Just hang in there until we do.*

Once again, I got no response.

After a while, Big Mac pulled her herbs away from Ava’s nose with a big sigh. I started to ask her what had happened, but—as if she’d realized what was coming—she shot me a silencing look. Then she went rummaging around in her bag again and pulled out what looked like a pouch of dust.

*How the hell is that going to be useful? It looks like something you’d find in the bottom of your dustpan. But what do I know? She’s a witch. They have all sorts of strange, mundane looking ingredients that can do amazing things. And Big Mac knows what she’s doing. I just have to trust her. Just please, whatever it is, let it work.*

I felt like another stone landed in my gut every time I looked at Ava. The sight of her lying there dead to the world sent me plunging into a deep sadness that I knew I wouldn’t escape until Ava’s eyes opened and I could speak to her again.

*This shouldn’t be happening. It’s just wrong on so many levels. This is all Adéluce’s fault, and there’s not a thing I can do about it. I’m completely at her mercy, and so are Ava and Cali and everyone else I care about.*

My anger flared, which brought on a corresponding wave of frustration. It was almost like I couldn’t work myself up enough to be as mad as I used to be about the havoc Adéluce was wreaking on my life.

I was getting so tired of constantly feeling this way. I was filled with so much anger—anger that hadn’t done a thing for me so far. It was starting to feel like a useless emotion when it came to Adéluce.

Big Mac took a pinch of dust and blew it across Ava’s body. I watched as the fine particles settled over Ava like a film, and then the room went quiet.

The witch stared at Ava for a few long minutes. I resisted the urge to interrupt and ask what was happening—Big Mac would tell me in due time. I was just so antsy to find out if she knew what was going on, and better yet, if she could do anything about it.

*I just have to fix this. I’ll do anything. If Big Mac can just bring Ava back to me, I’ll be in her debt forever. I can’t stand to see Ava like this.*

No matter how useless my anger felt, I was still filled with it. I gritted my teeth and pictured wrapping my hands around Adéluce’s neck.

*If it weren’t for that fucking bitch, this wouldn’t be happening. And the one person who was trying to figure it out and could have helped us beat her is gone now, too. And that’s on me. Kira didn’t deserve to die, and Ava doesn’t deserve to be lying here like this. It seems like almost everyone I care about is suffering because of me.*

Big Mac finally stepped back from the bed and let go of Ava’s hand, but I kept holding the other one. I didn’t want to let go. Not until I’d heard what Big Mac had to say.

“What happened? What did you find out? Anything?” I asked, unable to help myself.

Big Mac shook her head. “I wish I had better news, Xavier. I truly do. But I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I searched and searched, but all I can see is a sheen of intense magic. There are traces of it literally all over her, but it’s not familiar to me. I’m sorry to say it, but I don’t know what it means.”

I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell and punch a hole in the wall. I wanted to find Adéluce and kill her a million times—but that wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t even get close enough to kill her once. She’d made a mess of my entire life, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

“Is there anything else you can tell me?” I asked calmly, resisting every urge to act out.

Before I could answer, Mikah opened the door and walked in. “I’ve found someone who’s seen this before.”

“What? Really? That’s amazing!” I replied, relief and hope flooding through me.

Mikah nodded. “Yes, and they’re willing to meet, but we have to go right now.”

**Episode 4439**

**Greyson**

I pulled up Mace’s contact information on my phone and hit dial. It rang a few times before Mace finally answered.

“I’m guessing you got a note from that Vanguard asshole, too?” Mace said. “Has he lost it, or what?”

I laughed, but there was no humor in it. “I guess that answers my question. I was calling to see if he’d only sent it to me, just to piss me off.”

“Nope. I’ve got mine right here,” Mace said darkly. “I can’t believe the guy has the audacity to pull something like this, and then to sign it the way he did—the ‘victors’ of the war? Like every pack in the alliance didn’t do their part to fight and sacrifice to earn that victory.” He chuckled, but his laugh was as dry as mine. “I can’t believe we ever thought we could trust him. He doesn’t care about anything or anyone but himself. That much is clear.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” I said. “But I don’t want this to turn into a bitch session. What I want is to know what you think about it.”

Mace was one of the most levelheaded Alphas I knew, and his opinion mattered to me more than that of maybe any other Alpha in the alliance. If he had a different outlook on Lucian’s decision, then there was a chance I’d be able to view it differently.

Mace snorted. “I think it’s ridiculous. The whole alliance thing was Lucian’s idea in the first place. He begged us to join. Damn near pleaded. And now he’s throwing a tantrum and leaving it? Fuck him,” Mace said. “What do we even need an alliance for right now, anyway? The war’s over—for real, this time. And as much as Lucian wants to take credit for ending it, it came down to all of us.”

“You’re right.” I sighed. “Still, I don’t feel good about going back to the days of Lucian being an enemy. He’s a little loopy, but he was definitely a force to be reckoned with when he was working against my pack.”

I shook my head, remembering the constant clashes we’d had when he’d first shown up. It had been a pain in the ass more than anything, but I definitely wasn’t interested in reliving that time.

Now that the Bitterfangs were nothing but a bad memory, I wanted to enjoy as much peace as I could for as long as I could. If Lucian was pulling out of the alliance, I had to wonder what would stop him from doing something else rash—like declaring war on the alliance packs, for example. It seemed like a long shot, but when it came to Lucian, anything was possible.

“I really thought that winning the war would’ve softened him up, but it’s clear that he’s hell-bent on being an annoying thorn in my side—all our sides—for the foreseeable future,” I said. “Every time I think I might be starting to understand the guy, he pulls something like this.”

Mace sighed. “As far as I can tell, finding his mate actually made him worse.”

“You bring up a good point, though,” I said. “We don’t really need the alliance anymore, at least not officially. I’ll always trust the Blue Blood pack, and you’ve always had our backs, just like we’ve always had yours. We don’t need some stupid alliance to be sure of that.”

I thought back to how hesitant we’d all been to join the alliance in the first place. Xavier and I hadn’t seen eye to eye on it, but the one thing we’d agreed on was that joining up with Lucian was risky. And with the way Lucian was acting now, it was clear why we’d had so many misgivings.

“You can say that again,” Mace said. “We survived just fine before the alliance, and that isn’t going to change. I’ll get in touch with Porter and see if Lucian sent the Cobalts a love letter, too. The Aspens probably didn’t get one, seeing as Duke and Lucian are such good friends.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll call Xavier to see if he got one and let you know how it goes. Lucian might have forced us all into this alliance, but he’s really screwing himself by leaving it like this. I wonder if he realizes that. The rest of us have no reason to turn on each other.”

“But he’s giving us every reason to turn on him,” Mace said. “Though hopefully it won’t come to that.”

After we ended the call, I left my study to look for Cali and tell her how my chat with Mace had gone. But as soon as I stepped out into the hall, I ran smack into Elle. I couldn’t deny the warmth that flowed through my body at the sight of her—it was almost as if she’d been waiting for me. But then I noticed that her gaze was unfocused and distant, like she was looking right through me.

“Whoa, Elle, is everything okay?” I asked. I waved a hand in front of her face, and her head jerked like I’d snapped her out of a trance.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, though she still seemed distracted. “I’m not even really sure why I’m standing here. That’s so… weird.” She jabbed her fingers into her temples and rubbed them in a circular motion. “I feel okay, but a little off at the same time.”

*It has to be the sire bond*, I thought. *It’s got both of us acting strangely, and it looked like she was under some kind of spell, just now. Clearly, it’s getting to a point where it’s affecting both of us way more than we’d like to admit.*

Deciding not to dwell on it, I changed the subject.

“How was your first night sleeping back here at the Redwood pack house?” I asked.

We’d moved her things in and tried not to make too big a deal out of it. I could sense, too, that Elle didn’t want that. We moved the things she’d brought from the Vanguard palace in, and I’d let her be. I wasn’t sure if I wanted her to say how happy she was to be back, or if I wanted her to say how much she hated it. I couldn’t shake the feeling that things would probably be a lot easier if she just went back to Lucian and the Vanguard pack—though I’d never tell her that.

I wanted her here, that wasn’t the issue. The problem was the way we were acting around each other, and how angry Lucian was about her being here.

*We’re both being tossed around by the sire bond. I can still feel the crunch of Ethaniel’s bones under my fists. I haven’t been that angry in a long time, and I hope I won’t get to that point again any time soon. I just felt so out of control.*

I looked at Elle, wondering how she was being impacted by the bond. She’d apparently wandered to my study without having decided to do it, which was definitely a problem. Was that going to start happening to me? Would the sire bond start taking over and end up sending me to her without my knowledge or permission?

*That could potentially cause a LOT of problems between Cali and me…*

“It was fine, I guess, though I did miss Lucian,” Elle said. “I was a little lonely. But on the other hand, it actually felt great to be near you again. Really great.”

I let her praise wash over me, all too aware of how good it was making me feel. I liked hearing it, and I knew I’d like hearing it even more if it weren’t for the sire bond. Elle was a part of my pack, the new addition I’d never thought to seek out. It was good to have her back under the Redwood roof, sire bond notwithstanding.

“It’s good to have you here,” I said. “The pack house would’ve felt even emptier without you.”

Elle smiled. “I’m glad to hear you say that. I knew this was the right decision.”

I smiled back. “And don’t worry too much about the sire bond stuff. I know it’s strange and a little scary to feel like something else is… controlling our emotions, but I know we can figure it out. You, me, and Cali.”

Elle let out a deep growl at the mention of Cali’s name. She suddenly looked absolutely furious.

*What the hell? Why is she reacting like that?*

“Elle? What the hell was that?” I demanded, almost afraid to hear her answer.

Her gaze was unfocused again.

“Elle, did you just growl because I said Cali’s name?”

Elle’s face scrunched up into an angry scowl, and she growled again, even baring her teeth this time.

*I don’t like this. It’s one thing for the sire bond to bring Elle to a place she didn’t mean to go, or for it to strengthen our connection, but it’s quite another for her to growl like she wants to tear my mate apart just at the mention of her name.*

I’d just told Elle not to worry about the sire bond, but I was already thinking that had been a mistake. What if the sire bond drove Elle to hurt Cali?

**Episode 4440**

I quickly read through the email, my eyes getting progressively wider.

The university was expecting me to be at orientation the following week! How had this even happened? I hadn’t given my consent to anyone there to enroll me… Wasn’t that kind *necessary*?

*How can someone be enrolled in college without sending in a single application? Without talking to one admissions counselor? I don’t get it!*

I scrolled through my inbox and noticed that I hadn’t received any other information from the school.

*Weird. Did Lola sign me up for classes? And who’s paying for this? What the hell is going on here?*

I closed my email and called Lola, but she didn’t answer.

*Figures. She must have known that this email would be coming sometime soon—she’s probably dodging me. Well, I’m not going to let her off the hook that easily…*

I quickly went back into my inbox, took a screenshot of the email, and texted it to her—along with a message demanding an explanation.

A speech bubble popped up along with a trio of pulsing ellipses, but nothing came though.

I shot off another text.

*Don’t ignore me, Lola. What did you do?? You can’t just sign me up for college without telling me! What am I supposed to do now?? They’re expecting me to be there next week, and I don’t even know what my major is!*

The ellipses were gone. She was officially avoiding me—and for good reason. I was going to let her have it as soon as I caught up with her, and she knew it.

*Not only did Lola enroll me in college, but she’s going to make a murderer out of me, too, because I’m going to kill my best friend. I have to. There’s no other way to deal with her taking these kinds of liberties with my life!*

I got another notification and opened it to see that it was an email with my student login information. This was all happening so quickly.

*I don’t even know if I* want *to go back to school, and now I have to figure that out within a* week*?*

I took a seat at the kitchen island, my mind racing. I dropped my head into my hands and rubbed my face as the near-overwhelming urge to scream settled over me.

I wished I could’ve felt more certain about my future, and it just wasn’t fair that Lola was basically forcing me to answer such a big question before I was ready.

*What do* *I even want?*

My first instinct was to call the school and disenroll as soon as possible. I wasn’t about to let Lola strongarm me into higher education. She’d officially gone too far.

I opened the welcome email and scrolled down to find the number for admissions.

*I can do this. I’m not doing anything wrong. I never enrolled in the first place, and honestly, this is the school’s fault for letting someone enroll ON MY BEHALF. All it’ll take is one quick phone call, and then I’ll be done with this.*

I typed the phone number in, but then I just sat there looking at it, unable to take the leap and press “call.”

*Maybe I’ll see if I can just send an email. That would be way easier. And I can explain the situation in better detail if I don’t have to do it on the spot.*

I hadn’t seen an email address in the original email, and I wasn’t able to find one on the school’s website, either.

*So it looks like I’m going to have to call. No big deal. I have to do whatever’s necessary to get out of this. It’s not like I can never enroll again after I disenroll. I’ll just get to do it on my own time, rather than being forced.*

I pressed send on the call and listened as it rang, fighting to get my nerves in check the entire time.

A bright voice answered on the fourth ring. “Central Cascades University! Admissions Office! Dawn speaking! How may I help you today?”

“Hi, uh, Dawn. Thanks,” I said. “Um. Can you tell me what the process is to disenroll? I can’t attend this fall.”

“Disenroll? What? Whatever for? School is starting in a few days! Did something happen?”

 I shook my head and winced.

*She can’t see me shaking my head! What’s wrong with me?*

“No, nothing’s wrong,” I said. “I’d just like to disenroll. Please.”

“Oh… I’m so sorry to hear that. I can get the process started, but I just hate the thought of someone missing out on becoming one of the Fighting Kangaroo Rats!”

“The fighting what?” I heard myself asking. “Anyway, yes, it’s unfortunate that I won’t be… one of those. But I have to disenroll anyway. Sorry!”

“Okay, I’ll just need your name, and then I can get you all fixed up,” Dawn said.

I couldn’t help but grin at Dawn’s enthusiasm. “My name is Caliana Hart.”

Dawn yelped.

“Are you okay?” I asked, alarmed. It sounded like she’d just been punched in the stomach.

“Oh, yes—so sorry for my outburst,” she said. “I just can’t believe it’s you! Me and the other guys and gals here in the office have been wondering who you were. We were asking each other, ‘who could’ve gotten that scholarship?’ And it’s a great one, too. One of the best that the school has to offer. Now it’s even *more* of a bummer that you’re disenrolling.”

I was confused. “What are you talking about? What scholarship? I didn’t get a note about any scholarship.”

“What? Really? Well… Maybe they sent the letter to the wrong address. But I see it right here in your file. You were awarded the prestigious Lacey M. Dullins Scholarship for outstanding work in athleticism. It’s quite the honor!”

*I’m seriously going to kill Lola. I can’t believe she would do this! Not only did she enroll me in college without telling me, but she also applied for a scholarship—that I* won*?*

“That sounds… That’s amazing,” I said. “Thank you to you and Cascade—it’s an honor. Tell me, is there any way I can pass the scholarship along to someone who might need it more? Especially since I’m disenrolling and everything.”

“Oh, Cali,” Dawn said. “I’m really sorry, but I can’t actually do anything to help you disenroll right now. You’re going to have to get in touch with the athletic director first—but I’d be happy to transfer you! It’ll only take a minute. He usually picks up pretty quick. And when I tell him it’s you, he’ll pick up doubly fast—probably on the first or second ring!”

“No, that’s fine,” I said, resigned. “I’ll just call back later. Thank you for your time.”

I ended the call and threw my phone onto the counter. I couldn’t believe that Lola had done this! What *sport* had I even gotten a scholarship for?

I scrambled to pick up my phone when it started ringing. I was hoping it was Lola—mainly so that I could give her an earful—but it was my mother.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Cali!” she said. “Hi, honey! How are you?”

For the first time since I’d seen the email from Cascade, I began to relax. I was so happy to hear her voice.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“You’re sure?” she asked. “We haven’t heard from you in a while, and we started to worry.”

“Sorry, Mom—I should’ve called and given you both an update. We won!” I said, trying to sound excited. “We’re done with the Bitterfangs, and everything’s fine.”

*Except that my best friend just enrolled me in college, and I’m going to go to jail for scamming a scholarship that I don’t deserve.*

“And you? You’re not hurt or anything?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” I said. I updated her on Artemis—alive and well—and told her what had happened with Kira and Jacqueline. My heart felt so heavy even recounting it. It wasn’t news I wanted to give, and it wasn’t something I’d even wanted to happen. “I’m feeling okay. Taking everything a step at a time. Greyson and I are thinking of trying to do a staycation or something, but that feels… strange.”

“Oh, honey, I know. You went through so much. I’m so happy to hear that you made it through.”

I hesitated, and my mom pounced.

“Cali?” she said sharply. “What is it? I can tell you’re holding something back. I’m your mom—you know I can sense these things.”

I sighed, wondering whether or not I should tell her what had happened. I didn’t want to worry her. But I was okay now, so I figured that it wouldn’t hurt to tell her the truth.

“Well… There was this moment when I got knocked out or something.”

“What?” My mother gasped. “I thought you said you were okay!”

“I am, Mom, I am,” I rushed to assure her. “But I did lose consciousness for a while, and I ended up in the Fae limbo—the same place where I met Grandpa.”

My mother gasped again.

“What?” I demanded.

“Cali…” She hesitated for a moment. “Sweetheart, if you ended up in that place without drinking any of my tea, that means you *died*.”

**Episode 4441**

**Xavier**

“I found someone who’s seen this before,” Mikah said. “They’re willing to meet, but we have to go now.”

Big Mac hadn’t answered my question, and Mikah’s words barely registered. I raised a hand, shaking my head.

“Give me a sec,” I told him, then I turned to Big Mac again. Right now, she was my sole focus. “What do you mean you can’t do anything? What happens next?”

“There’s nothing more I can tell you, Xavier,” Big Mac said quietly. She looked subdued, and alarm bells blared inside my head. This wasn’t the Big Mac I knew. She always—*always*—fixed everything. All the fucking time.

I scoffed. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re Big Mac! You’re a problem-solver, all-powerful, whatever the hell. Fixing shit is what you *do*.”

Big Mac stood up, scowling. “I’m not going to sit here and watch you throw a temper tantrum, Xavier.”

My voice was bitter and loud. “Are you kidding me? This is serious! Ava’s—”

“I’m sorry about the situation you’re in,” Big Mac interrupted. Her expression was serious, not mocking, so it felt like she meant it. “But you werewolves aren’t my problem anymore. I hope the girl wakes up.” She glanced at Ava. “For your sake, if nothing else.”

I was about to protest when Mikah spoke up again.

“*I* might have a solution, Xavier.” This time, he walked right into the room and stared me down. “I know someone who might be able to help, but we need to leave right now if we’re going to catch him.”

Ignoring Mikah, Big Mac gathered the equipment she’d used to test Ava. I realized I was panting like a damn stressed-out dog as I watched her. Hope was slipping through my fingers. Since Big Mac hadn’t been able to work her usual literal magic, I could only assume that treating Ava was going to be really hard. But it wasn’t like I had a lot of options.

“Okay,” I told Mikah. “I’m coming with you.”

I didn’t stand up, though. I couldn’t bring myself to let go of Ava’s hand.

Mikah eyed me. “We don’t have the time for you to freak out, Xavier.”

“Fuck,” I breathed, squeezing Ava’s hand one more time before I let it drop to the mattress.

I stood up just as Big Mac picked up her coat and bag. My throat felt funny when she turned her back on me and walked toward the exit.

“Big Mac,” I said, “you’re sure you—”

“I came out of respect for someone you care about,” she said, pausing by the door. “But I can’t fix this. If I could, you know I would.”

My shoulders slumped. I knew that much was true. “Thank you for taking the time to come here.”

She nodded and vanished down the hallway.

“We really need to go, Xavier—”

“I can’t just fucking leave her here by herself!” I snapped, cutting Mikah off. I felt tethered to Ava’s side.

Mikah’s expression was impassive. When he spoke, his voice was a cold whisper. “Get someone else to watch over her. You’re the Alpha, Xavier. Deal with this.”

*You’re the Alpha.*

*Deal with this.*

Mikah was right.

Finally, I got a fucking grip. Sticking my head out the bedroom door, I yelled for Marissa. She’d do. They were friends—she was loyal to Ava. She’d protect her. She wouldn’t be able to fend off Adéluce if the vampire-witch decided to come over and finish what she’d started, but she’d try.

Fuck this shit.

“Who are we meeting, then?” I asked Mikah. “Who’s powerful enough to help us with this if Big Mac can’t do it?”

Mikah’s face remained blank. “There’s an ancient vampire I heard about through the grapevine. This guy has supposedly seen this exact thing happen before—he likes to tell a story about a Luna who went into a coma after she was bitten by a vampire. And in his account, the werewolf woke up. She survived.”

My ears started ringing. Was it from excitement, or anxiety? Anxious excitement? Either way, this was exactly what I needed to hear. An ancient vampire would have all sorts of stories to tell. There had to be other examples—there had to be information out there that I could use.

“Where do we need to go?” I asked.

“How do you feel about skiing?” Mikah asked.

I scowled. “Is that a joke?”

Mikah’s flat expression told me that the only joke in play was the fact that I thought he would joke about anything. Right now or ever. “The vampire we’re meeting lives on Mount Bachelor. We’ll need equipment to get through the snow there.”

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever it takes to get to him.”

“Xavier! What’s going on?”

Marissa had just walked in. I quickly filled her in.

She paled. “I can’t believe Big Mac couldn’t help.”

I wasn’t going to linger on that. There was no point—at least not right now.

“Mikah found another angle,” I said, grabbing the vampire by the arm to pull him out of the room. “We have to go right now. If you need anything, ask Knox. He’ll—”

“I need to ask you something before you go,” Marissa blurted out.

I paused by the doorway.

“Don’t take too long,” Mikah grumbled before walking off.

“What?” I asked impatiently.

Marissa rubbed her forehead, taking a deep breath. “I’m not sure how to ask this…”

“I don’t have all day, Marissa,” I said curtly. “Anything you have to say, just spit it out.”

She winced at my tone. I regretted speaking so harshly, but I felt like a volcano about to erupt. Marissa stared at me full-on, her expression more determined now.

“What if this isn’t happening because of the vampire bite?” she asked. “What if it’s the result of something Kira did?”

I froze.

“I know Ava and Kira never really got along,” Marissa added, “so I thought—”

I shut her the hell down. “Kira would *never* have done something like that. She wasn’t that kind of person.”

Marissa’s question had brought up something acidic inside me, though—not because she thought badly of Kira, but because she was right about one thing. Whatever was happening to Ava was connected to a witch we already knew. Marissa was just thinking of the wrong witch.

To everybody else, Adéluce was dead.

“Xavier!” Mikah called from down the hallway. “We *really* need to go.”

I didn’t think I’d ever heard him yell before.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to Marissa. Her expression was dark, troubled, and I reminded myself that snapping at her wasn’t the way to go. It used to be my way, but it wasn’t going to work right now. I needed to get my shit together.

“We all want answers,” I told Marissa, resting a hand on her shoulder. “But Kira didn’t do this. I promise. She cared about the pack.”

Marissa looked away, but she nodded.

“Mikah, Gabe, and I need to leave right now,” I told her. “I need you to keep watching over Ava, and let the rest of the pack know what’s going on. I’ll be back soon.”

Marissa nodded again, her gaze still downcast. I didn’t dare look at Ava. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to leave. Once I got to the doorway, though, I heard Marissa’s voice.

“Xavier?”

I turned to glance back at her. Marissa’s eyes were glistening. She glanced at Ava. “You need to save our Luna. The pack is counting on you.”

Her words landed heavily. I didn’t speak, but I allowed myself one last thing to keep me going. I walked up to Ava and leaned down to kiss her forehead. Her skin was cool. Her body was unmoving. But I could still hear her slow breathing, her heartbeat.

*Hang in there, Ava*, I mind linked*. I’ve got you.*

Even though I knew she couldn’t hear me, I needed to say the words.

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“Gabe’s waiting out front in the car,” Mikah said once I got downstairs.

We headed outside. Once we stepped out onto the porch, I spotted an ornate envelope shoved into the wiring of the screen door. It was almost definitely some stupid invitation from Lucian, so I ignored it.

A moment later, Mikah and I were in the car.

Gabe met my eyes in the mirror. “We’re going to fix this, Xavier.”

I recalled Marissa’s words.

*Save our Luna. The pack is counting on you.*

Saving Ava was the only option. My pack was depending on me, and my wolf was demanding that I make this right. He’d left me the first time Ava had died, and right now, he was pacing inside me like a monster in a cage—teeth bared, rage brewing. I only hoped that Adéluce wouldn’t attack while I was away with Mikah and Gabe. But there was still a part of me that was hoping she’d slip and reveal herself to someone other than me. With a little luck, she might just get cocky enough to make that mistake.

“All right,” I said gruffly, looking between Mikah and Gabe. “Are we ready to get the hell out of here?”

**Episode 4442**

“Cali, if you ended up on that plane without my tea…” My mother paused. “That means you *died*.”

Dread flooded me.

*I… died? I was almost stuck in Fae limbo* forever?

Forever was permanent. Forever meant never seeing Greyson again. Never kissing him again, never touching him, or seeing him smile. It meant him sobbing over my lifeless body, broken by grief and guilt. He would’ve seen my death as something far heavier, far more poisonous than a horrible accident, though. He would’ve seen it as a personal failure, and that would’ve torn his soul apart.

What would he have become, then?

What would *I* have become, if I’d died and stayed dead?

My stomach was in knots.

“… sweetheart? Are you there? Cali?” My mother’s voice echoed through the phone. “Are you okay? Cali, can you hear me?”

I pulled in a shuddering breath, shaking my head as if my mom could see me. “I’m right here. Just… processing.”

*Calm down, Cali! You’re alive, right? You’re right here! No need for a literal existential crisis!*

Easier said than done.

“Are you feeling okay?” Mom asked, sounding worried. “Does it hurt anywhere, or—”

“I’m okay physically,” I said. That wasn’t a lie. “I made it out. I’m fine. I guess…” I let out a broken little laugh. *Shit*. “I guess this is just one more thing I’ve survived.”

I sounded jaded, even to my own ears.

*Where are the jokes? Why aren’t I mocking death right now?*

I didn’t know.

I didn’t know who I was becoming, or if I liked this version of myself.

Mom went quiet. I didn’t speak either, my hand coming up to rest on my throat. I wrapped a hand around it, feeling my racing pulse.

“This is a terrifying thing to hear as a mother, Cali,” she whispered. “This isn’t the life I wanted you to lead, honey. The supernatural world—”

“I’m exactly where I’m meant to be,” I told her. “You know that, right?”

Mom sighed. “I get what you mean. It’s just that this is a lot to process. Especially because when a Fae has a near-death experience—”

“*Please* don’t tell me I need to worry about horrible side effects, here.”

Mom stopped talking. Bad sign.

“Good god, *what* is it?” I burst out. “Is my hair going to turn white? Will my teeth fall out of my mouth, come to life, and start dancing ballet?”

“Cali, please try to calm down.”

“I *am* calm!”

Mom sighed.

I groaned, rubbing my forehead. “Fine, maybe I’m not calm. What gave it away? Was it the dancing teeth?”

“Sweetheart, please take a deep breath for me,” she said. “Okay?”

I took a deep breath.

“The thing is,” she began, “a Fae who winds up in limbo and then comes back to life *can* experience side effects—on anything from their behavior to their magic. But again, it’s only a possibility. Not a certainty.”

“So it could be literally anything at all?” I asked anxiously.

“Apart from the dancing teeth.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said. My joke fell flat, which was pretty devastating, all on its own.

“Have you noticed anything strange?” Mom asked. “How’s your magic?”

“I used it during the battle, and nothing seemed off,” I said.

“That’s a great sign.” Mom sounded relieved. So at least there was that. “I just want you to be aware of the possibilities and pay attention to any anomalies. The sooner we catch anything, the more time we’ll have to…” She trailed off.

“What?” I demanded.

“Well. To fix it, I suppose. To fix *you*.”

Oh, *wow*.

“You think I’ll need to be *fixed*?Like I’m one of Dad’s broken blenders? Oh my god, am I a broken blender?”

“Cali—”

“Dad never repairs his blenders, Mom!” I burst out. “He just throws them out and buys new ones! This isn’t how things are supposed to be!”

“Cali, listen to me,” Mom said loudly. “Are you listening?”

“I actually think I can hear a blender in the distance,” I said.

She ignored my comment. “You are not broken, Cali. You do not need to be repaired. I just want us all to be prepared for the worst-case scenario.”

I took in her words, raking my hands through my hair. “You really think so?”

“It sounds like you came back totally unscathed,” she said. “I don’t want you to worry about something that hasn’t even happened yet—or that might not happen at all.”

“What about my magic?”

“You said there were no issues with it during the battle, and that’s the most effective stress test you could’ve asked for,” Mom said. “I feel like that’s all the proof we need to say that you’re totally fine.” Her voice cracked. “You’re okay, sweetheart.”

There was a lump in my throat. I wished she were really here. I wished I could hug her.

“I love you, Mom,” I whispered.

“You too, sweetie. Love you so much.”

“Cali!” My dad’s voice echoed from the background. “What are you two talking about?”

“Just mother-daughter things,” Mom lied smoothly.

“Tell Cali I’m thinking of her and want to say hi, but I’ve got my hands full with a soufflé!”

I caught myself smiling. Then chuckling. “I *knew* I heard a blender in the distance.”

Mom snorted. “He’s always tinkering with that thing.”

“Give him my love, okay?” I said. “I’ll talk to you both later.”

Before we ended the call, Mom quietly asked, “Do you want me to come for a visit, honey? Would that make you feel better? I just don’t want to impose and cause you more stress right now.”

“No,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “I’ll let you know if anything changes, but I think you’re right. I’ll be fine.”

Of course, the moment our phone call ended, my anxiety attacked.

*Maybe I should go check my magic really quickly*, I thought. *Just for some peace of mind.*

Decision made, I headed outside.

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Out in the front yard, it was just me, the trees, and the squirrels. I wished Artemis and Adair hadn’t left. I was sure they both would’ve had some advice about this situation. But I could do this on my own—I’d be okay.

*But maybe I’ll call Artemis later…*

For now, though, it was show time.

Taking a deep breath, I brought my right hand forward, palm up. My sword appeared with the tiniest push. Summoning it didn’t feel any different than usual, or any more difficult. I raised my left hand and repeated the process with my shield.

Everything felt normal.

I repeated the process a few times, just to make sure that the sword and shield didn’t start glitching. I waved them around and attacked an imaginary enemy, thrusting the sword forward. Nothing changed.

*Seems like it’s all in working order.*

This time, when my pulse started racing, it was with excitement. I dared to start feeling hopeful. I’d died and come back intact. At least for now. And I would take for now. My mom had sounded optimistic about the fact that no problems had presented themselves so far, which made sense. If my magic hadn’t glitched during the most high-stress situation possible, a.k.a. an actual battle, then things were looking pretty good.

Still, I knew I’d rest easier if I checked my magic blasts, too.

*Just to be sure…*

I walked a little deeper into the woods and found a tree to blast. A moment later, the tree was shaking, and several of its branches dropped. My ball of magic had hit it with ease, no hiccups in sight. Everything felt normal.

*So my magic doesn’t seem to have been affected by my death, at least. Hah!*

Okay, that sounded macabre. My death? My semi-death. My brush with death, perhaps. I needed to work on my phrasing before I let Greyson know about this whole debacle. I could just imagine him turning green if I said the “D” word. Still, my mom *had* said that my behavior could’ve been affected by my Fae afterlife visit, too.

Did I feel any different?

I didn’t think so. I was still restless, stressed, and not sleeping well, but that was a given after the war. I was glad I wasn’t feeling worse, actually, considering the horrors we’d faced on that battlefield.

*I’m okay*, I thought. *As okay as I can be.*

But then another thought struck me. It wasn’t just my own magic that I needed to be worried about, here. The *due destini* was a curse, and therefore magical. It was *my* curse, attached to me, but it didn’t affect only me—Greyson and Xavier were victims of it as well.

I sucked in a breath, my thoughts starting to race.

*Could dying and coming back to life have affected the* due destini*? Could this be why the fake Luna mark is fading? Or is that happening because Kira created it, and now she’s gone? How much freaking magic am I carrying around here? What if something happens to Greyson or Xavier because of this not-dying mess?*

My chest tightened. I needed to talk to someone. No, not just “someone.” I needed to talk to a person who knew things about the ancient curse with the potential to kill me along with my mates.

I needed to talk to a witch.

**Episode 4443**

**Greyson**

I grabbed Elle by the shoulders, shaking her. “Elle!”

She looked up at me, her eyes wide and her teeth still bared. Her anger radiated, reaching out to me like a jarring current. And that anger was for Cali. The moment I’d said my mate’s name, Elle had started growling. That realization had landed on me like a goddamn ton of bricks.

“Elle, stop!” I held her tighter when she tried to free herself from my grasp. “Stop right *now*,” I said sharply, gripping her chin to force her to meet my eyes. Whatever she saw there made her shut her mouth. Her growl stopped abruptly. She was panting, now, staring up at me.

She was trembling all over.

I fought to keep my voice even. “I need you to promise that you’ll never hurt Cali. No matter what.”

Elle flinched at my words. She pulled out of my grip, and this time I let her go. She shook her head, hugging herself.

“What?” Her eyes were narrowed, confusion and shock written all over her. “I’d never hurt Cali!”

“You bared your teeth when I said her name,” I said in a low, even voice.

Elle froze, as if she’d only just realized what had happened. Her hands fell to her sides. Shock and confusion lingered on her face, but now, when she spoke, the words came out shaky.

“I’d never hurt my Alpha’s mate,” she said, shaking her head. “I know how important Cali is to you.”

My throat hurt when I swallowed. “She’s also important to you. She’s part of the Redwood pack, and she’s your friend. Right?”

Elle paused, pressing her lips together. Her arms came up to hug her torso again. She suddenly looked so small and lost that my heart ached for her. “Of course she’s my friend. She takes care of me all the time. I don’t know why… I don’t know why I didn’t remember that before.” Her eyes flickered up to me. “It was like I suddenly got so mad that I couldn’t… *think*.”

My question was careful. “You couldn’t think?”

“It felt like I was stuck somewhere,” she whispered. “In my head? I don’t know how to explain it.”

It sounded like what I’d experienced with Ethaniel, but on a smaller scale.

A *much* smaller scale, thank god.

“It’s the sire bond,” I said. I didn’t doubt it for a goddamn minute.

Elle swallowed audibly, her nails digging into her arms. “Helix and Dayton. The way Helix—”

“No,” I said. “We won’t reach that point. That was an extreme situation.”

Her voice was shaky. “But what if it gets worse?”

She was right to ask the question. We didn’t know how this thing between us could evolve, and I wasn’t willing to risk letting our dynamic go unchecked. I knew we couldn’t afford to let the sire bond fester. The Ethaniel incident was suddenly fresh in my mind, and I could almost smell the scent of his blood. I had to wonder if I would’ve done things any differently if I’d been able to turn back time.

The answer was a daunting and definite *no*.

“We need to figure out how to break the sire bond,” I said quietly.

“Yes!” Elle’s head snapped up, her eyes wide. “I don’t want to hurt Cali. I don’t want to hurt anyone, even if it’s by accident.”

I reached for her shoulder again, squeezing it. She let me, leaning into the touch. My fingers tingled at the contact, and I bit the inside of my cheek. Why did this bond have to be so intense?

“Do you know how to do it?” Elle asked quietly. “How to break it?”

I chose my next words carefully.

“I haven’t done enough research yet,” I said. “Regardless, I know it’s a very difficult thing to do—but I hope we can find a way to do it.”

She pressed her lips together. “What if we don’t?”

“We have to,” I said. “I can feel it changing me. My behavior.”

Elle swallowed roughly. “Like with Ethaniel?”

“Yes.”

She paused. “I’d never seen you so angry.”

“I know,” I said. It sounded incredulous. Bitter. “I didn’t feel like myself.”

She pressed her lips together. “This is all my fault. I wanted to become a werewolf, and now—”

“No.” I spoke firmly, pulling her closer. “I chose to turn you. We’re in this together. Okay?”

She looked to the side, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Elle.”

She looked up at me, her lips parting.

“You’re not alone,” I said firmly. “I got you. Remember that.”

She sniffed, nodding. She looked vulnerable—so unlike her usual fearless, scrappy self. Without thinking, I pulled her in for a hug. She wrapped her arms around me, letting out a shaky breath against my chest.

She held me so tight, I could feel bruises starting to form.

I let it happen.

“If you ever start feeling angry or out of control, come see me,” I said against her hair. “I’ll be able to stop you.”

Elle shivered. She let out another trembling breath, then nodded against my shoulder. She was still holding me so tight it should’ve felt claustrophobic—it was like she wanted to fuse herself with me.

My stomach clenched at the thought.

Still, I didn’t let go.

I needed to let go. I knew I needed to.

Breathing hurt right now. I was light-headed, and I needed to look at her. Peeling one arm away from her back, I brought my hand to her chin, tipping her head up so that she met my eyes.

I shouldn’t have been doing this. It was wrong.

But I didn’t stop.

“I’ll take care of everything,” I said. “Do you trust me?”

When our eyes locked, her voice was soft. “I trust you.”

Her words did something to me. If I could’ve roared with pride in that moment, I would have. I wanted to drown in this feeling and—

*What the fuck.*

What. The. Fuck.

I let her go. I pulled away. The movement was quick and forceful enough that she stumbled, her hands still stretched out toward me. She was breathing so hard that her chest was visibly moving. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she shut her eyes before she turned away from me.

I hated that tearing myself from her embrace had actually hurt.

This was wrong.

*Wrong*.

There was only one person I was supposed to feel this close to.

Cali.

My mate.

My woman.

This connection between Elle and me—the sire bond… It had to stop.

Right the hell now.

“Is there…” I cleared my throat. “Is there anything else?”

I needed to get away from Elle and find Cali. But before I could leave, Elle spoke up again.

“I do have a question.”

“What?”

“Will you promise not to hurt Lucian?”

With a pang of guilt, I realized I hadn’t even thought about Elle’s feelings surrounding her own mate. Probably because that mate was Lucian, and I’d thought about killing him at least once a week long before I’d met Elle. And, given Lucian’s antics this morning, I had no idea if I could make Elle that promise.

“What do you think about Lucian’s latest behavior?” I asked, in lieu of an answer. I was redirecting. “He sent an official letter announcing the Vanguard pack’s withdrawal from the alliance.”

Elle paused. She opened her mouth and then closed it, looking like she was having trouble finding what to say. “He is the Vanguard Alpha,” she said after a moment, her voice shaking. “If that’s what the Alpha wants to do, then it’s right for his pack.”

Elle’s answer was laced with loyalty to Lucian. She’d always been loyal to him. But she was loyal to me as well. She would likely continue to be pulled between the two packs because of it.

“Will you promise not to hurt Lucian?” Elle asked again.

“I can promise I won’t attack him,” I told her honestly. “But if I need to defend myself, all bets are off.”

Elle nodded slowly. “That makes sense. You need to protect your pack. I will protect the Redwoods, too.”

I couldn’t help but ask. “Does Lucian know that?”

“He does,” she said. “I will not lie to him. If the Vanguard pack fights the Redwood pack, I will fight with you.” There was an intense decisiveness in her expression… But then it faltered. “Though I hope it won’t ever come to that.”

“I don’t want you to worry,” I said. “We’re done with big wars, for now. Lucian and I will be figuring things out in a way that doesn’t involve fighting.”

My first urge had been to reassure her.

Fucking hell.

Elle looked up at me, nodding. “Okay. That’s good.”

No. It wasn’t good. Because Elle was still looking at me, and I was feeling the urge to hug her again, to feel her vise-like, bone-crushing grip on me.

I forced myself not to move.

This was fucking wrong.

The sire bond was all wrong.

Come hell or high water, I had to find a way to break it.

**Episode 4444**

The moment I thought about looking into the *due destini* again, my stomach clenched. Was I *really* going to go down this road again? Would I ever catch a break? Seeing as I’d just died and come back to life, I had to assume that the answer to that question was a resounding, capital-lettered NOPE.

I paced back and forth in the trees, bouncing a ball of magic on my palm as I thought things through. Avoiding my problems and hoping they would go away was my favorite thing to do—ten out of ten, would recommend—but it did have a tendency to come and bite me in the ass.

Really, not checking up on the status of the *due destini* would be naïve. And kind of stupid.

*Or would it be asking for trouble when there is none right now?*

Unfortunately, I knew that there was a high possibility that the *due destini* had been affected by something as dramatic as my freaking *death*. The curse had a history of acting like a moody, potentially murderous, teenager.

Only a few months ago, we’d been trapped in a version of the curse that would’ve killed all three of us if I’d refused to make a choice. We’d managed to break that iteration of the curse, but there was no guarantee that there weren’t plenty of other horrible caveats, just waiting to spring into action if I did the wrong thing.

*You have to be proactive, Cali*, I told myself. *Check on the* due destini *and make sure everything’s fine. Do it before it tries to kill you all again.*

Of course, being proactive wouldn’t guarantee anything.

Nothing guaranteed anything.

Ever.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Coming to a halt, I bounced the energy ball between my hands, then hurled it at the poor tree I’d de-branched earlier. I didn’t feel any better. Bottom line—as much as it stressed me the hell out to admit, the curse was delicate and temperamental and easily affected by external factors. I had to look into it, which meant I was back to square one.

I needed to talk to a witch.

*Who, though? Kira’s gone. Big Mac is off somewhere and generally gives off a very go-away-Cali vibe. Who would actually be happy to talk to me? Who is my—*

Friend.

I had a kind-of witch friend. Rowena. We were in the very early stages of our friendship, though. We’d been busy fighting for our lives, basically from the moment we’d met, so I hadn’t had a chance to attack her with attention and affection yet, which was my usual method of operation. But perhaps that was a good thing. Rowena didn’t know me yet—not that well—which allowed for an infinite number of friendship possibilities.

*She has no idea that I can be a pretty clingy friend! This is great!*

The one hitch in my plan was that I had no idea how much Rowena might know about the *due destini*. But regardless, she might know *something* that could help me.

I sat down on a stump and pulled out my phone. Taking a deep breath, I scrolled through my contacts and tapped on Rowena’s name.

As the phone rang, I really fucking hoped she would answer. I doubted I’d be able to focus on anything else until I got some kind of answer about this. I’d already worked myself up into a slight frenzy, which was always *great* for my mental health and the people around me.

“Cali!” When Rowena finally answered, her voice was cheerful. “Nice to hear from you.”

I was a little startled by how excited she sounded. Pleasantly surprised, too.

Smiling slightly, I said, “Hi. How’s everything?”

“I know we only left you guys a few hours ago, but I’m already missing the excitement of being surrounded by so many people,” she said with a chuckle.

“So you had fun?”

“For sure! I had an amazing time. And I thought the Cobalts knew how to party…” She chuckled, and my tiny smile turned into a grin.

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said. I meant it.

“So, how’s everything with you?” Rowena asked. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

My smile faded, and I sighed. “I wish I was calling just to call, or to invite you to another party, but I actually have a question for you.”

“Oh?” Rowena sounded intrigued. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Chewing on my thumbnail, I said, “I was wondering… How much do you know about the *due destini* curse?”

Rowena didn’t answer. My pulse accelerated.

“Rowena? Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” she said quickly. “You just caught me off-guard. I wasn’t expecting that particular question.”

“Of course. I know this is random.” I swallowed roughly. “If you don’t feel comfortable with me asking you about this—”

“No, of course not,” she said. “It’s all good.”

I exhaled in relief as she kept talking.

“I don’t know how much you know about my mother,” she said, “but she was a very powerful witch. She spent years learning and collecting magical information.”

“That’s impressive.”

“She was something else,” Rowena said, her tone indiscernible. It sounded like there was a lot of history there between the two of them. “In some ways, I guess I was lucky to be her apprentice—though the luck ended there. All the same, I did pick up knowledge from her, and that, luckily for you, includes a few bits and pieces about the *due destini* curse.”

She paused.

“And?” I prompted.

“*And* I know you’re one of its victims.”

I let out a resigned chuckle. “Yes. That hasn’t been a secret for a really long time.”

“What did you want to ask me?” Rowena asked. She sounded curious.

I quickly filled her in on the river, and how I’d ended up in Fae afterlife, and how I’d come back afterward. I ignored the way narrating the entire thing made my chest ache with the memory of Greyson’s devastation. And the fear I’d felt.

“I died,” I said bluntly. “I died and came back, and now I want to make sure that my resurrection didn’t do anything to the *due destini*. We’ve had some issues with it in the past.”

“What kind of issues?” Rowena asked.

“The life-threatening kind,” I said. “Those are pretty standard when it comes to curses, right?”

Rowena paused, humming thoughtfully. Then she said, “Give me a minute.”

Before I could reply, she hung up.

Gaping, I stared at my phone.

*Um, did she just HANG UP on me? What did I do? I thought this was going well! Was it not going well? Did I annoy her with my problems? God, did I annoy her with my* friendship*?*

I was seconds away from yet another existential crisis—one that fortunately did not arrive. Mainly because Rowena arrived instead, popping into existence directly in front of me.

“Hi!”

“Holy shit!” I shouted, almost falling off the stump.

Laughing, Rowena grabbed me by the forearm and pulled me up. “Sorry about that. I just thought it’d be easier to have this conversation in person.”

I blinked at her. The thing about Rowena was that she didn’t have the usual angsty, and/or broody, and/or arrogant, and/or serious vibe that I associated with most witches. She was just… nice? Bubbly, almost.

“Hi,” I said, smiling as I pulled her into a hug. “Thanks for coming.”

She nodded, her cheery expression fading. “This might get a little intense. I’ll have to run some magical tests to see what’s going on. Does that sound okay?”

My stomach dropped. “So you do think that something could’ve happened while I was dead?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. But the *due destini* is a very sensitive curse.”

I scoffed. “That’s what I said! To myself!” I shook my head. “But then I tried to talk myself out of reaching out to you, because I was scared, and I didn’t want to bother you anyway, and—”

“You’re not bothering me at all,” Rowena said, cutting me off. “I hope I’ll be able to help. This is important. The danger attached to the *due destini* may fluctuate during your lifetime, but that doesn’t mean anything unless you know where you’re at right now.”

I cringed. “You make it sound like some sort of disease that I have to learn how to manage and exist with.”

She sighed. “Shit, you’re right. I didn’t want to alarm you, or—”

“Oh, I’m already plenty alarmed,” I said, eyebrows arched. “I’m constantly alarmed anyway, and I’ve seen firsthand what the *due destini* can do. It can be unstable, so figuring out where it’s at after my death experience is the only thing that might make me *less* alarmed. I’ll do anything to get some answers.”

Rowena paused, scrutinizing my face. “You sure about that?”

“Positive.” I nodded. “I’m trying to prevent a potential catastrophe here, so hit me with your best spells.”

Rowena took a deep breath, offering me a nod in return. “Okay. Let’s get started.”

**Episode 4445**

**Xavier**

The drive to Mount Bachelor was quiet. Even Gabe kept his mouth shut—though he still shot me worried glances here and there. I ignored them. I wasn’t there to talk about my feelings. I just needed to get to Mount Bachelor, talk to this vampire, and find a way to fix Ava. I sure as hell hoped that Mikah was right, and I’d be able to get some real answers here.

Half an hour later, we finally arrived.

I looked out the window and scowled. “Are we at a *ski lodge*?”

Mikah shrugged. “I told you, he lives at Mount Bachelor.”

I stared at him. “You didn’t say he lived at a fucking ski lodge. What kind of bougie bullshit is this?”

Gabe sighed deeply, turning to Mikah. “I guess you only decided to tell Xavier half of the truth, huh?”

Mikah huffed, grabbing his bag. “He didn’t have to know everything to come with us. The whole truth sounds absurd, anyway.”

I glared at him. “I need you to tell me what the fuck is going on right—”

“*Right now*,” Mikah interrupted, opening the car door, “we need to get going. We have to meet the guy in the next five minutes. I had to pull a lot of strings to get us this appointment, so we’d better not miss it.”

Still feeling grumpy, I followed Gabe and Mikah to the resort’s entrance. There were people and kids everywhere, all dressed up in their ski gear. The ground was covered in thick snow. Naturally.

I found this entire situation not only absurd, but also fucking ridiculous and irritating. The only kind of person that I could imagine taking appointments at a ski lodge was a pretentious asshole. Kind of like Lucian. I was sure the princeling would’ve loved this place. The thought made my jaw clench, but I didn’t say anything to Mikah or Gabe. If this was where I’d get the information I needed to help Ava, I’d play along and keep my mouth shut.

We entered the lodge, but before we could reach the reception area, Mikah took a hard left. Gabe followed, and I did, too, frowning all the while. We entered a gear room that had a few other occupants who paid us no mind. Before I could ask any questions, Gabe shoved a bunch of ski stuff into my arms—ski boots, poles, and a whole ski suit thing for me to wear. Or whatever the fuck it was called.

“What the hell is going on right now?” I asked Gabe. I was both confused and pissed off, and I was sure it showed. “Where does this guy live? Are you saying you actually meant it when you said we’d have to *ski* there?”

Mikah didn’t answer. He barely looked at me as he quickly geared up.

Gabe did the same, but he deigned to speak to me as he got dressed. “Get your ass ready before Mikah leaves you behind, dude.”

Sure enough, Mikah was good to go in seconds, speeding to the front of the line for the chairlift.

“Hey, not fair!” someone shouted. “Don’t cut in line!”

“*Mind your damn business*,” Gabe growled.

Even *I* flinched in surprise, so it was safe to say that nobody else dared to utter another word.

When Gabe and I caught up with Mikah, I heard the end of his conversation with the chairlift operators.

“Like I already told you,” Mikah said pointedly, “we’re here for Boris, and our appointment starts in two minutes. We need to get up there right now.”

The operators glanced between us before exchanging a look. Moments later, they let us pass. They didn’t say a word the entire time, and the whole thing was so fucking weird that I could just feel myself losing hope and getting angry. *Angrier*.

“Sit your ass down and stop it with that face, X,” Gabe told me as he and Mikah crammed themselves into a single seat. I ended up on the chair behind them, glaring at the backs of their heads.

I was going to kill them both if this ended up being some kind of prank.

The chairlift started moving, and a moment later, we were out in the open. I took a deep breath, taking in the cold air, though I knew I wasn’t going to relax enough to enjoy the view. I told myself to chill, anyway, because this *wasn’t* a prank. Gabe would never do that—not when it came to something so serious. As for Mikah, I didn’t think he had it in him to pull pranks. The man only ever smiled when Gabe was involved. Logically, I knew that he’d rather eat carrots than waste brain cells on playing a prank on anyone.

But this whole situation still made no sense, and I was still so fucking pissed off that I was gnawing the inside of my cheek bloody.

Finally, we made it to the top of the mountain.

“This is it, dude!” Gabe called back to me. “We’re getting off!”

I watched as Mikah dropped and landed in the snow at the top of the mountain. Gabe followed. They weren’t alone, I realized. A young man was there already, waiting for them, dressed to the nines in fancy skiwear. His outfit made him look like he belonged in the X Games.

This kept getting worse and worse.

When my chair caught up, I dropped to the ground. At least the height was manageable, and I didn’t lose my balance in the damn skis attached to my feet. Finally, I managed to slide over to the others like an oversized reindeer or some shit. Skidding to a stop, I eyed the guy. What in the Abercrombie & Fitch fuckery was happening with his face? How the hell was this guy supposed to be *ancient*?

“Hey,” I said warily.

“This is Boris,” Mikah said.

I did not shake the vampire’s hand. “I imagined someone…”

Boris laughed. “Older?”

I frowned. This really wasn’t funny. “As a matter of fact, yeah.”

“I know I don’t look it, but I’ve been around for a very long time, young wolf,” he said. “I have the answers you seek.”

He sure spoke like someone ancient.

“Well? What do you have to say to me?” I asked impatiently.

He was wearing ski goggles, and I could see my own glower reflected in them. He grinned. “All in good time. First, we should respect the mountain.”

My face started getting hot—definitely with fury. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Shh…” Boris brought his gloved hand to his mouth. “Be good, young wolf. And if you do, you shall receive what you came for.”

I turned to see Gabe trying not to laugh. Mikah looked intense, and sort of like he’d fight me if I embarrassed him in front of his… friend? Elder? Godfather? I had no idea how vampire relationships worked.

“This is bullshit,” I snapped. “Just give me—”

“Uh-uh, that is not how things work,” Boris chided. “We must ski together to the bottom, and then I will share what I know.”

By this point, my head felt hot enough that I suspected my brain was boiling inside my skull. I was vibrating with anger, and contemplating murdering this asshole vampire before he could actually say anything.

I opened my mouth, either to cuss him out or fully shift and rip his head off, but then I felt Gabe’s hand on my shoulder. He squeezed so hard I was sure he was leaving bruises.

“Xavier,” Gabe said sharply. “Trust the process, dude.”

I knew that he really meant “Trust Mikah and me.” So I took a deep breath, fighting to rein in the rage. In the meantime, Boris smiled and took off down the mountain, showing off while he was at it. Mikah shot me one last glare before following Boris, and Gabe squeezed my shoulder again.

“Mikah says this guy is for real, X,” he told me. “I know this is weird, but these old vamps are big on ceremony, I guess.”

I didn’t trust myself to say anything without sounding furious or like a shitty friend. In the end, I just nodded and watched as Gabe followed Mikah and Boris. After taking a few more breaths, I pushed off and started gliding down the mountain.

Skiing sucked balls.

I had none of the control I usually had when I was moving through the wilderness at high speed. I felt too big and heavy for skiing, anyway—like I might crash at any moment.

When I fucking *finally* glided to a stop at the bottom of the mountain, I did my very best not to tip over. There was no easy way to get up once you fell down in skis. Not to mention the humiliation aspect. If I fell, Gabe would give me shit about it until the end of time. Fighting not to grumble under my breath, I slid over, stayed upright, and skidded to a stop next to him, Mikah, and Boris.

“… you look so familiar,” Gabe was saying, eyeing Boris. The vampire had just taken off his ski goggles. “I know I’ve seen you somewhere.”

Boris looked like he was about to answer to Gabe, but then I stepped into the circle, and he turned his attention to me. He gave me a pleased nod. “I’m glad we could share this, young wolf.”

I was seconds away from imploding.

“I did your stupid mountain thing,” I snapped. “So tell me—how do I save my Luna?”

Boris looked between us. Then, seriously, he told me, “There is only one way to bring her back.”

**Episode 4446**

**Greyson**

Elle suddenly looked around the yard, like she was making sure we were alone. Was she thinking about Lucian? Was the princeling approaching? Would I bring out the red carpet to welcome him, or a glass of poisoned brandy?

No.

What came out of Elle’s mouth next reminded me of another issue I’d shoved to the back of my mind.

“Sometimes, when I’m talking to you, I feel like someone’s watching,” she said in a low voice. “Like someone from the council will pop up at any minute and realize what’s going on between us.”

My throat dried up at Elle’s words.

The council had decided it was sacrilegious to turn a real wolf into a werewolf, and that decision seemed to have a lot to do with the intensity of the sire bond. They thought it went against the laws of nature, and they were afraid of it. Or they were afraid of it exactly *because* it created this twisted dynamic between the sire and the new werewolf. No matter the council’s motivations, though, one fact remained: if the council learned how Elle had come to be, we would both be in trouble. The life-threatening kind.

The life-*ending* kind.

Dayton turning Helix—and Helix killing people in Dayton’s honor—had set a precedent. Turning a wolf into a werewolf had always been considered taboo, but now the council had vehemently voted against the act. They wanted to avoid another Dayton-Helix clusterfuck. It was an official ruling, but I’d turned Elle *before* they’d made their decision.

What difference would that technicality make, though? The only way I could see the council not threatening to kill us was if the sire bond was broken before they learned the truth about me and Elle… That had to be possible, right?

“Greyson,” Elle whispered, breaking through my thoughts. “What are you thinking?”

She was hugging herself again. She still seemed so vulnerable, and I hated it. I hated that the bond was doing this to her—to us both. I was determined to break it, but I had no idea how. Feeling such intense emotions toward Elle when I had a mate I adored seemed like a particularly cruel twist of fate.

The thought of fate reminded me of the three witches whose lives I’d saved a few months back. The sisters always spoke about the past, the present, and the many possible futures. But if Big Mac was occasionally confusing, those three took being cryptic to another level.

They always acted like they were paid to be evasive and vague, and I doubted it would be a good idea to trust them with the sire bond situation. Besides, their favorite thing was talking about actions and their consequences, so I had no idea what kind of domino effect contacting them would set off.

No. I’d leave them as a last resort.

“It’s going to be fine,” I told Elle gruffly. “I *will* figure out a way to fix this.”

“Okay.” She nodded, glancing over her shoulder again. “I’m going for a run.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” I asked without thinking.

The instinct to follow her was automatic.

Fucking hell.

Elle paused for a moment, staring at me. Then she said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I need some time to myself.”

“You’re right,” I said, taking a few steps back. I needed the distance, too. “I’ll see you later.”

Nodding, Elle walked off. I looked away from her, turning back to the house. The gears in my head were turning; I needed to start my bond-breaking research somewhere. Normally, I would’ve gone to Big Mac, but I was certain my mother would be upset to learn that I’d asked for Big Mac’s help after everything that had happened between them.

Actually, maybe my mom knew something herself. I had to check on her again, anyway. She’d seemed fragile and worn ever since Big Mac had left. I needed to remind her that I had her back, no matter what. We were family and had made it back to each other after all these years; I wasn’t about to abandon her now.

I walked into the eerily quiet house and headed upstairs. When I got to the room my mom used to share with Big Mac, I knocked on the door. But there was no answer.

Had she left? Where would she have gone?

Pressing an ear to the wood, I checked for any movement inside. I heard nothing, but just to make sure, I opened the door to peek my head in. The room was still a bizarre mix of Big Mac’s absence and my mom’s presence. Big Mac had always had an array of different ingredients and magical-looking items lying around, and now it looked so bare. But the spaces they’d occupied were still empty, as if my mom was expecting Big Mac to come back at any time.

I stepped inside. “Mom?” I called, still not seeing her.

“Greyson?”

I whirled around to see my mom standing in the doorway. It was obvious that she’d come from outside.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you doing?” I didn’t ask if she’d gone to see Big Mac.

“I… I needed to get out of the house,” she said quietly, glancing over my shoulder. Her smile was sad. “Too many reminders.”

“I get it.” I joined her in the hall and shut the door behind me. “Why don’t we go to my room? I need to talk to you about something.”

She nodded, and we both headed off down the hallway. I’d never seen her so subdued, and it was messing me up. It was weirdly *wrong* to see her without Big Mac hovering and buzzing around her like an angry, caring bee.

“If you want to talk about anything,” I said, “I’m here to listen. You know that, right?”

Her smile was sad. She squeezed my hand. “I know. I think I might take you up on that.”

Once we reached my room, she walked in first and sat on the bed. I closed the door behind me and rested against it.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked her.

She raked her hands through her hair before bringing them to her mouth. Her chuckle was bitter. “I just can’t believe I’m even here…”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I’d be on my honeymoon right now. I was supposed to marry the love of my life.”

I winced. It felt like she wasn’t done talking, though, so I waited.

Hanging her head, she whispered, “There’s all this stuff going on in the world around us—things that I can’t control. Things that have taken my relationship from me.”

My stomach dropped. “So… It’s over? For good?”

She glanced up at me, taking a deep breath. “It’s not. But… MacKenzie says she needs time. I asked her why, but she didn’t know how to answer me…” She brought her hand to her eyes, wiping the tears that had started falling. Her voice cracked when she said, “I just don’t know what to do except wait for her.”

My mother’s quiet crying hit me like a train. I moved to sit down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Big Mac is grieving,” I said quietly. “I think that’s why she needs time. She saw so much death during the battle that it’s probably stirred up some unpleasant things inside her.”

“I know,” my mom whispered, hugging me back.

“I’ll help you stay distracted while you wait for her,” I offered. “If that’s what you need.”

She sniffled. “Thank you.”

“You know she loves you, though, right?” I asked, handing her a tissue. “Feelings that strong don’t just go away. They can’t.”

My mom nodded, wiping her cheeks. “I believe in my heart that the wedding will still happen. MacKenzie and I have faced far too much for our connection to just… die. But that doesn’t mean what’s happening right now doesn’t hurt.”

I squeezed her arm and offered her another tissue.

“I get what you mean,” I said. I fully meant that, because I could relate to her predicament. It felt like the universe kept stopping me from just being happy with Cali. I knew we could be amazing together, and I believed we would be, but I just didn’t know *when*.

When would anything between us be resolved?

When would Cali choose for good?

*When*.

A buzzing in my pocket brought me back to the present. I pulled my phone out and saw a text from Mace.

*I checked in with the other Alphas, and they also got letters. Have you talked to Xavier?*

Below Mace’s text, I was surprised to find one from Mikah. It had arrived much earlier, but I must’ve missed the alert. It made no sense—why would the vampire have contacted *me*, of all people?

But when I read the text, my eyes widened.

*Xavier needs your help. Sending location pin. Join asap.*

**Episode 4447**

“Your brush with death happened in the water. Right?” Rowena asked.

“Right,” I said nervously.

Rowena eyed me. “I know this is going to sound scary, and I’m sorry to ask it of you, but the spell I need to do requires a recreation of the scene of your almost-death.”

*Well, then. That sounds great. NOT!*

“What kind of spell is it?” I asked, wringing my hands. “What does it have to do with the *due destini*?”

“I need to see how the curse reacts while you’re in a state similar to the one that made you enter the Fae afterlife.”

My voice got high-pitched. “But I *died*—”

“You wouldn’t actually be dying, of course,” Rowena rushed to add. “But the feelings the scene would bring up for you would hopefully be enough for me to catch anything weird in the *due destini*. Do you get what I mean?”

I blinked at her.

*Not fully, but what choice do I have but to go along with this? Better to try whatever this is than do nothing at all.*

“Will this affect the *due destini*, all on its own?” I asked Rowena.

Dread grew inside me as I recalled the last time we’d tried to cast a spell to affect the *due destini*. When we’d tried to get rid of the black veins that were appearing because I wasn’t choosing, but we ended up shifting the curse so that if I chose, the other would die.

*Good times.*

“It should be fine,” Rowena said confidently. “I won’t actually be coming into contact with the *due destini* at all—I’ll only be looking at it.”

I took a deep, steadying breath. “Okay.”

Rowena scrutinized my expression for a moment. “Did something happen last time you interacted with the curse using magic? You seem upset.”

“I was refusing to make a choice,” I said, “and black veins appeared on Greyson and Xavier’s chests. We tried a spell to get rid of them, and the curse… shifted.”

“How so?”

“If I chose one, the other would die,” I muttered.

Rowena winced. “Damn.”

“But the killing part of the curse is over now,” I said.

She nodded. “And I’ll be checking now to see if anything else has changed about it, after your death experience. But…”

I stared at her. “But what?”

“I’ve never heard of any magic with the ability to break the *due destini* curse, Cali,” she said. “I don’t think you could even be unmated from either of your mates under these circumstances. The only thing you can do is… choose.”

“I know that,” I said. My chuckle was bitter. “I’m not choosing, though. I can’t.”

Rowena crossed her arms. “Didn’t Xavier—”

“Xavier left me. He’s the one who chose, not me,” I said. I hated how sad and sour I sounded. How lost. The next words rushed out of my mouth, unfiltered. “I know it sounds like I’m a weak dumbass who’s been dumped and won’t move on, and I know that Greyson doesn’t deserve to be stuck in this fucked-up situation, but I just—”

“Hey,” Rowena said, gripping my shoulder. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I’m here to help, not judge. Okay?”

Her calm, sweet expression made me breathe more easily. “Okay. Thank you.”

Rowena looked around. I was relieved for the change of topic when she said, “To cast the spell, we need a body of water. Is there a lake or a river around here?”

“What? But it’s freezing out here!” I sputtered, shaking my head. “Not to mention the fact that I’m not ready to get back into any kind of river after literally dying in one, Rowena.”

She shook her head, looking sympathetic. “I need to recreate some part of your death for this to work, Cali. It’s not an easy spell.”

*Of course it’s not an easy spell! But diving into a river days after* dying *in a river isn’t easy, either! But we need a body of water, so—*

A lightbulb switched on in my head.

“Would a bathtub work?” I asked.

Rowena hummed thoughtfully. “We might be able to swing it. I’ll probably only have a short time to scan the *due destini*, but I think we could make it work.”

“Perfect!” With a relieved exhale and a smile, I pulled Rowena into a hug.

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“Okay, are we thinking a bikini or a one-piece for this operation?” I asked, showing Rowena my bathing suit options. “Is that important?”

She pressed her lips, fighting a smile. “The spell doesn’t care about fashion. You’ll be fine with either.”

I paused, eyeing my suits. “One-piece it is, then. I feel more protected in it. More fabric, less danger of a nip-slip.”

Rowena chuckled, heading into my bathroom. “Go ahead and change. I’ll fill up the tub.”

A moment later, I heard water running and the low murmur of Rowena singing something in a language I didn’t understand. Her voice was soothing and smooth, and I felt more grateful than ever to have her here with me. Big Mac would’ve helped me after some light begging, but she probably would’ve bitten my head off in the process.

*Beep!*

I heard the sound of a text just as I finished putting on my suit. It was a message from Greyson.

*Hey, love. I have to head out. Mikah asked me to meet up with him somewhere. Not sure what’s happening, so I’m going to find out and fill you in later.*

I frowned at my screen. What could Mikah possibly want with Greyson? Did this have something to do with Gabriel? Xavier? I doubted Mikah had ever texted Greyson before in his life.

As if he could sense my stress, another text from Greyson arrived.

*Don’t worry, okay? I’ll be fine.*

The sad thing was that all I ever *did* was worry. Greyson and I had new problems to deal with every day, and there was no fun left in our lives. For god’s sake, I actually *missed* Torin’s *Bachelorette* shenanigans*.* I missed normal petty fights between pack members, and Lola’s scheming. I missed romance as it used to be—bantering, making out, and going on dangerous but exciting adventures with my mate. My *mates*. I used to be able to cling to the positives in every situation, even when I was surrounded by chaos.

But right now, there was no silver lining to be found. You know, other than the fact that I’d survived the war.

So far, though, it felt like I’d done exactly that, and nothing more—I’d survived, but I wasn’t *living*.

For a very long time, we’d been stuck in a worry-infused bleakness that was so constant, it had become normal.

Sighing, I picked up my phone and typed out a response to Greyson.

*I’ll be here, hanging with Rowena. Love you. Please be safe.*

Greyson replied immediately.

*Love you, too.*

When I walked into the bathroom, the tub was almost full. Rowena turned to me, still quietly chanting. She gestured for me to get in. Without a word, I stepped in and lay back. I ignored the shiver that ran down my spine when I felt the porcelain against my bare skin, even though the water was warm.

Rowena’s chanting was soft and repetitive, and my eyelids started to get heavy. I closed my eyes entirely when Rowena pressed her hand against my forehead. Her touch was comforting, even as she gently started to push me down.

When I slipped beneath the surface of the water, my heart started pounding.

*I’m alive. I’m alive. I didn’t die, I didn’t—*

My eyes shot open, and I gasped for air.

I wasn’t underwater, though.

*What’s going on?*

I was in a cozy cabin that smelled like eucalyptus and freshly cut firewood. It was beautiful. It made me smile. There was a flannel throw on the couch in front of the fireplace. It reminded me of the cabin Xavier and I had stayed in, back when things were simpler.

*This can’t be the same place… Can it?*

Then I saw the coat rack by the door, and I gasped.

*That’s Xavier’s jacket!*

I ran to it and grabbed it, pressing my nose to the leather. I inhaled his scent—that amazing scent I’d missed so much—and my heart ached with longing. Xavier had to be here. Why else would I have ended up at this place?

“Hello?” I called. “Is anyone here?”

The ceiling creaked with the sound of footsteps on the second floor.

I paused, holding my breath.

*Someone’s here!*

And then I heard Xavier’s voice. “Cali? Where are you?”

He didn’t sound mad at me. He didn’t sound worried, or cold, or angry. He sounded like himself; like Xavier. The Xavier he’d grown into for me, the good person who was rough around the edges, but who would’ve done anything to see me smile. I was about ready to burst into tears with how much I wanted to see him right now. To kiss him, to hold him.

“I’m right here!” I shouted. “Come downstairs!”

The footsteps picked up speed, and they moved down the stairs. I let the leather jacket go, rushing out into the hallway. My heart racing, I turned to face the bottom of the stairs.

“Xavier?” I called.

But it wasn’t Xavier standing there.

It was Greyson.

He stared at me. “Did you just call for my brother?”

**Episode 4448**

**Xavier**

“There’s only one way to bring her back,” Boris said.

Naturally, this announcement was followed by a dramatic pause.

“*What* way?” I demanded. “Tell me! Right now! We don’t have all fucking day, here!”

Boris huffed, shooting Mikah a look. “This is why I don’t consort with werewolves. There’s no respect for the process, no respect for the story, no elegance or tact.”

Mikah pressed his lips together. “I understand this is upsetting to you—”

“Upsetting?” Boris snorted. “The idiot boy wants to skip to the end!”

I took a step forward, my fists clenched. “I’ll show you a fucking end.”

Gabe grabbed me by the collar of my gigantic ski jacket. “Dude, just relax. He’ll tell us what to do.”

Boris glared at me. “Not with this attitude, I won’t!”

My wolf’s growl echoed through my head. I was going to tear this man into pieces. “Listen here, you—”

Gabe grabbed me by the arm while Mikah stepped in.

“Forgive our friend,” Mikah told Boris seriously. “He’s under a lot of pressure. He may not have more than three working brain cells, or any respect for the process—”

Fuck Mikah, seriously. This wasn’t just a pressure-filled situation. Ava’s life was at stake, and it was at stake because of me. Because of this fucked-up, twisted shit I’d gotten into because of Adéluce.

“—but his heart is breaking for his Luna. Please try to be understanding.”

Boris glared at the three of us before his gaze landed on me. I was running on fury and worry, but Gabe’s grip on me was so tight I wasn’t actually sure I’d be able to get away. Before I could try, though, Boris spoke up.

“Very well, then,” he said. “I will share my story.”

Gabe’s grip had gotten even tighter. I turned to look at him, and I hadn’t seen him so serious in a while. His thoughts were written all over his face. *Don’t fuck this up. We came this far—we need to at least hear the damn story.*

He was right, annoyingly enough. Also, it was pretty disturbing that *Gabe* was telling *me* to calm down. Depressing, too.

“Okay,” I said tersely. “Start at the beginning. But be fast about it.”

Boris nodded. Then he stared into the distance, a faraway look on his face. “Many, many moons ago, there was a young wolf. She was mated to the Alpha of a great pack. She was his Luna. But unfortunately, there was another who loved him. A vampire. But not just any vampire. This was a hybrid—”

Gabe gasped. “Oh shit! What kind of hybrid?”

Boris rounded on Gabe, giving him a death glare. “Do not interrupt.” He turned to Mikah. “Werewolves! No manners.”

“Sorry, sorry, of course. I—wait!” Gabe gasped again. “I knew I’d seen that glare before! You’re that Olympic ski coach—the one who made his skier cry for getting a silver medal!”

Boris preened. “I’ll give you an autograph later.”

I ignored the pair of them, still stuck on the fact that there was a hybrid vampire involved in this story. There was no love between Adéluce and me—she actively and vengefully despised me—and yet the result had been the same. A Luna bitten, falling into a coma.

“What kind of hybrid was the attacker?” I asked, fighting to keep my voice even.

Boris shook his head. “The nature of the hybrid has been lost. At some point, someone might have known, but no more. What we do know is that the hybrid attacked the Luna. Bit her. The Luna collapsed and did not wake. Her Alpha was beside himself. He could not live without her.” Boris paused dramatically, looking in the distance once more. “But the power to wake her was within him all along.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Is this a fucking joke?”

“I never joke!” Boris declared.

“Then what are you saying? I can’t help her,” I snapped. “I don’t know how—that’s why I came to you!”

Grinning wide, Boris flourished his hands. “Oh, young wolf, don’t you see?”

Mikah, Gabe, and I looked at each other. At least the other two seemed just as lost as I was. What the fuck was happening here? Seriously?

Gabe nudged Mikah, and Mikah cleared his throat. “Apologies for interrupting the narrative, but if you could explain that last part about the power lying within the Alpha, I’d be grateful.”

“But the answer is obvious, my friends!” Boris said, flailing his hands.

“It would help if we could hear it out loud,” I snapped.

Boris rolled his eyes, still laughing. “You silly, thankless boy—it’s true love’s kiss!”

True love’s *what*? Surely he wasn’t talking about the shit that happened in Disney movies? *Snow White*? *Sleeping Beauty*? The other one with the hot redhead mermaid and the even hotter sea witch?

This couldn’t be real. This guy had to be fucking with us.

For a moment, all I heard was the ringing in my ears. My heart was beating so fast I thought it was about to jump up my throat. If I’d been angry before, I’d just leveled up.

“I’m gonna kill him,” I hissed, charging forward.

I was going to rip this dipshit’s throat out. We’d just wasted an entire motherfucking afternoon when I could’ve been working to save Ava. For real, without any of this mumbo jumbo.

I closed in on Boris. His eyes widened, and my hands half-shifted, claws growing—

Boris vanished.

He moved so quickly that I almost fell flat on my face in the snow.

“A tout à l’heure!” he called, taking off down another slope.

*This motherfucker did not just speak French to me. Or was it Italian?*

I was going to kill him.

“Come back, you goddamn coward!” I screamed, seething as I started after him. “You wasted my time! My Luna is in danger! Why did you bring us here for that bullshit story?”

Boris landed at the bottom of the hill, expertly whirling around to face me. He *cackled*. “You disrespectful beast. It wasn’t bullshit! Everything I said was true. That’s how you’ll wake the girl up!”

And then Boris skied off into the sunset.

I slowed to a stop, panting, shaking, and seething. I wasn’t sure if I was angry at the ridiculous simplicity of the solution he’d offered, or because deep down, I knew it probably wouldn’t work. I wasn’t in love with Ava.

There were feelings between us, and I cared for her deeply. I probably even loved her, in a way, but being *in* *love*, or, as Boris would’ve said, *true love*… There was only one person I’d ever have those feelings for. Cali. It would always be Cali. No matter what Adéluce said or did to me, she’d never be able to take away how I felt about Cali.

To make matters worse, Boris was too far ahead of me now. I was forced to abandon my mission to kill him.

This whole thing was horrible.

“Well, that was an experience,” Mikah said. Both he and Gabe had slid to a stop near me. I turned to glare at him, and he shrugged. “But at least now we know. We just have to get back. You’ll kiss her, and everything will be fine.”

Everything would not be fucking fine—and Gabe knew that as well as I did. I avoided the level look he sent me and unclasped my skis to walk back to the lodge. The entire time, I tried desperately to think of another solution. I couldn’t rely on this bullshit fable. Ava’s life depended on it.

“You go drop our things inside,” Gabe said to Mikah once we got to the main area. “Xavier and I will go grab the car. Sound good?”

Mikah paused, eyeing me sharply. “You don’t look like someone who’s excited to have found a solution, Xavier.”

My jaw clenched. But I swallowed down the worry. “Thanks for bringing me here. You tried your best.”

Mikah frowned. “I didn’t do it to get a thank-you. I do think this was useful.”

“Right,” I said bitterly.

“Mikey, baby?” Gabe said, flinging his ski gear into Mikah’s hands. “How about you go do what we said?”

Mikah glared at Gabe, but didn’t say anything. As he walked off, carrying all our stuff back to the gear room, I heard him grumble, “*Never* call me Mikey.”

The moment his mate was gone, Gabe turned to me. His teasing smile vanished. He pinned me to the spot with a stare so serious, it suddenly felt like I wasn’t looking at a friend. I steeled myself for what was coming.

“This isn’t fixed, Xavier. We have a serious fucking problem,” Gabe said gruffly.

“What do you—”

“Cut the bullshit,” Gabe said, waving a hand. “True love and Ava? No. For my money, you’re still in love with Cali. So what are you going to do when kissing Ava doesn’t work?”

**Episode 4449**

**Greyson**

Dialing Mikah’s number again, I opened the car door and got in. My call went straight to voicemail, but I didn’t leave a message. This felt like an emergency. It made no sense that Mikah would send me that text and then dip out.

Starting the car, I dialed again, and finally, Mikah answered.

“What’s happening?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“Have you left yet?”

“I’m in the car, was just about to head out.”

“Don’t,” he said. “We figured it out.”

I turned off the engine, frowning. “You do realize you need to tell me what’s going on, right?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You *never* text me,” I said. “I doubt you ever text anyone if you can help it.”

“I text people.” He sounded shifty.

I scoffed. “Why? To share cute animal videos?”

Mikah went quiet for a few seconds. “Did Gabriel tell you about that?”

I fought the urge to laugh. Or yell at him. “I’m still waiting for an explanation. What happened? Why did you need me to come help you with Xavier?”

“I got worried, I suppose,” he said. “Prematurely. But everything turned out fine. We have the answers we need.”

“Answers for what?”

“Ava’s coma, obviously.”

“*What?*”

 “You haven’t heard about what happened to Ava?” Mikah sounded surprised.

“I knew she was bitten, but everything seemed fine last night,” I said. “A *coma*?Seriously?”

Xavier had to be freaking out. Fuck.

“I assumed Xavier would’ve called you, considering how panicked he was,” Mikah said. “He was looking everywhere for answers.”

“I haven’t spoken to Xavier since yesterday,” I said. I’d intended to reach out to him to discuss the latest Lucian bullshit, but I doubted Xavier would give a damn about that right now. I wondered what kind of support I would’ve been able to give him. Big Mac was gone, so it wasn’t like I could’ve offered her services.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to do anything right now?” I asked Mikah.

“Yeah, we got it,” he said. “I only texted you in the first place because Xavier looked like he was about to lose it.”

“And you thought *I* would be able to calm him down?”

“I just attended a very important meeting with Xavier and Gabriel—that’s your worried hothead brother and my trigger-happy mate who lives for chaos,” he said. “I was outnumbered, so I thought you’d be a good addition to the group to even things out.”

He did have a point, there. “How did the appointment turn out in the end?”

“Gabe came through, actually,” Mikah said. “He helped Xavier keep his shit together. I was impressed.”

“Huh.” I was impressed as well.

“Sorry for dropping all this on you. Everything’s fine now.”

“Where did you three go, exactly?” I asked.

“We can talk about this later—I need to go now. Gabe and Xavier are waiting for me.”

“No, it’s cool. I’ll ask Xavier. There’s something else I need to talk to him about, anyway,” I said, thinking about the Vanguard bullshit.

I’d have to approach that conversation carefully, though. Xavier wouldn’t be okay until Ava was. I’d seen firsthand how attached he’d gotten to her. And it was alarming that she’d fallen into a coma at all—I’d never heard about that happening to someone after a vampire bite.

With those thoughts twisting in my head after Mikah and I hung up, I got out of the car. I locked it back up and headed toward the house. Charlie and Violet were standing on the porch.

They both looked… weird.

“Greyson, hi!” Violet’s voice came out squeaky. She cleared her throat. “I mean, hi,” she said in a deeper, more serious voice. “Can we talk?”

That did it. Now I was pretty sure something bad had happened. *Again.* I held in a sigh and hoped this wasn’t anything major. I hated the idea of dealing with a full-blown crisis so soon after the last battle.

“Sure,” I told the kids. I didn’t betray my emotions or show any anxiety. I hoped. “Do you want to talk out here, or inside?”

“Out here,” Charlie said, while Violet said, “Inside.”

I looked between them. “Does it matter where we talk?”

“Nope!” Charlie blurted out. His chuckle was awkward. “Uh, yes, let’s just—” He waved toward the house. “Go inside, like sunshine said. I mean, like Violet said. I mean—”

“Let’s get moving, then!” Violet said, grabbing Charlie’s hand. She was flailing now.

*God*. This was going to be bad, wasn’t it?

Once we were in the living room, Violet started playing with her fingers. Charlie was twiddling his thumbs. I started coming up with worst-case scenarios. Was someone from the pack sick? Abducted? Had something happened with Lilac? Were Charlie’s parents taking him away? Did they want to start a war with us just for fun?

Jesus fucking Christ, was Violet *pregnant*?

Was her being pregnant why Charlie’s parents wanted to start a war with us? What the fuck was wrong with those two? Weren’t they happy to be grandparents? Violet and Charlie were really young, though… Maybe they weren’t *ready* to be grandparents. Was I ready to be, like, an uncle type?

I’d be such a good uncle, though, like—

“The yard looks torn up!” Violet blurted out, cutting off my internal rambling.

I blinked at her. “*What?*”

“The yard,” she said nervously. “It looks so sad, it feels like we’re still in the middle of the war. Charlie and I want to do something to fix it and make it pretty again.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. *Wow*, had I just let my imagination get the best of me.

“Of course,” I said. “That’s a great idea.”

Violet and Charlie looked relieved.

“Why were you two so nervous to ask me about this?” I asked, chuckling. “You need to work on your presentation skills.”

“Well… We need money,” Charlie said. “And the last time Torin asked you for money, you got all serious about it.”

Violet nodded fervently. “We’d never seen you frown about something like that before. It was a little scary.”

The fact that Violet had spent years with Xavier shouting at everyone and found my *frown* scary said… something. I wasn’t sure what, though.

“Torin doesn’t know how human money works. He wanted to buy another kitchen knife,” I told her. “He already has ten of them, at five thousand dollars each, so that’s fifty thousand dollars for knives that he won’t touch because—according to him—they’re too pretty to use. I told him he could buy clothes instead, or jewelry. He got very excited about the jewelry when I told him he could get as many pieces as he wanted, so that was the end of the conversation.”

It had probably been a bit risky to redirect Torin’s wild spending habits to jewelry when the price tags could vary so dramatically, but he deserved the world and then some.

“Oh my god!” Violet’s eyes were wide. “He *did* show me all his jewelry, but I thought they were Fae items or something. He’s been changing his earrings every day!”

Charlie started laughing, shaking his head incredulously. Violet followed. I smiled, reaching for my wallet. I grabbed one of the credit cards and handed it to Violet.

“Get whatever you need,” I said. “Just no more kitchen knives that we can’t actually use.”

Violet grinned. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you* for taking initiative,” I said. “Both of you. This is a great idea.”

The two of them bounced out of the living room with matching grins. I couldn’t help but grin, too. Cali would get a kick out of the little debacle for sure, so I decided to hunt her down and tell her about it.

She’d mentioned Rowena in her last text. The Cobalt pack had only left yesterday, but Cali was already hanging out with the witch again. I hadn’t realized they’d gotten so close. It sounded like a good idea for Cali to make more friends, though. Especially now that Lola was off on vacation with Jay.

I decided to just go say hi and let Cali know I hadn’t actually ended up going anywhere. I wouldn’t bother them too much—just pop in and out. Jogging up the stairs, I headed to Cali’s bedroom. When I knocked on the door, there was no answer. That was weird—I could hear someone talking in there.

I opened the door, and the soft murmuring got louder. It was coming from the bathroom. The door was open, and I could see Rowena kneeling next to the tub. Her eyes were closed. My stomach clenched.

What *was* this?

I walked into the bathroom, stopping short at the sight that greeted me.

Cali was submerged in the tub. She wasn’t moving.

My heart stopped.

“Cali!” I ran to the tub, hands outstretched to grab her, pull her out, save her from drowning. This was like the river all over again. She was stuck, she couldn’t breathe, she was going to die, and I—

I was going to lose her.

I’d die if I lost her.

My fingertips were about to make contact with the water when Rowena’s voice echoed through the bathroom.

“NO!”

**Episode 4450**

I couldn’t quite process what I was seeing.

Greyson was in a leather jacket, dark jeans, and a black T-shirt.

*He looks like Greyson! But he’s dressed like Xavier!* *And he* sounds *like Xavier!*

Just as I was ready to write it all off as a figment of my imagination, he spoke again.

“Did you just say Xavier’s name?” Greyson asked in Xavier’s voice.

My heart was pounding so hard I felt like it was about to fly out of my chest. I had no idea what to say to him, so I just shook my head. Awkwardly. Greyson laughed, but it was sharp, unlike his usual laugh. He shot me a grin—the kind of wolfish, up-to-no-good grin I’d only ever seen on Xavier’s face.

He swaggered over to me, *walking like Xavier*, and reached for my hand to pull me close. I felt like a deer in headlights, but I couldn’t look away from him or ignore the shiver that ran down my spine at his touch. His grip was firm, his gaze fixed on mine, hungry and intense like he was ready to devour me. My breathing went shallow when he cupped the back of my neck and leaned down to me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered.

Greyson’s face, Xavier’s voice.

Xavier’s *touch*.

I gasped when he twisted his fingers into my hair and tugged. He tilted my head up, making my mouth fall open for him. And then he was kissing me. It was passionate, hard, overwhelming. His hands were everywhere, gliding all over my body to squeeze and stroke, eager for contact, like he couldn’t get enough. His need felt so restless and raw that I was left shaking and clinging to him, desperate for more.

He looked like Greyson, but he kissed like Xavier.

It felt so real; familiar enough that I lost myself in it. It felt like I was really with Xavier in the cabin again. I couldn’t even remember why any of this had felt strange, earlier.

My head was fuzzy, my body was on fire, and I moaned into his mouth, holding him tight. He ended the kiss, only to drag his lips down my neck. His little bites and nibbles had me squirming, arching toward him. My breathing came out sharp and shaky and I kept my eyes closed as I gripped his shoulders, pulling him closer. I wanted him. I wanted to touch his bare skin. I wanted to feel him all over me.

“Oh, Greyson…”

“I’m Xavier.”

That was Greyson’s voice.

I flinched, opening my eyes.

Xavier was staring back at me.

I gasped and slipped back, looking around. I wasn’t in the cabin anymore. Now, I was standing in a luxurious, modern apartment. It made me think of Greyson’s place in Portland, and the wonderful time Greyson and I had shared there.

But it wasn’t Greyson standing before me.

It was Xavier, looking like he was playing dress-up in Greyson’s clothes—jeans and a soft-looking Henley shirt.

*Oh my god! What’s happening? Wasn’t I just in a cabin? How did I get here?*

“I don’t know, I—*what?*” I sputtered, stumbling backward.

“Are you okay?” Xavier asked. Hearing Greyson’s voice come out of his mouth, seeing the soft, worried frown that was all Greyson… It made my head hurt.

“I need a minute,” I whispered, staggering to the couch.

My head was pounding now.

*This can’t be happening… I don’t understand what’s happening!*

I rubbed my forehead, taking deep breaths. I closed my eyes again and just lay there on the couch for I didn’t even know how long. Then the couch moved. I swallowed roughly, turning to look, apprehensive about what I’d see next. It was still Xavier.

“Are you feeling any better?” he asked in Greyson’s voice.

He reached out to me, brushing his thumb against my cheek. The touch was gentle, and I felt a lump growing in my throat. I didn’t know if I was okay, or if I *would* be okay. Sitting here with him felt right and wrong at the same time. When he stared at me, Xavier’s deep blue eyes had a kind of powerful tenderness that reminded me of Greyson.

He moved closer, and I couldn’t find the strength to move away.

He was hypnotizing.

He cupped my jaw, leaning in for a kiss. It was just a soft, feathery brush of his lips over mine, but it made me feel like I was melting. I couldn’t resist—I kissed him back, reaching for him. The moment I did, he licked the seam of my lips, and they parted.

He kissed me again, slow and sensuous, the intensity he radiated making me tremble and sigh. Sliding his palm from my jaw to the side of my neck, he pulled me closer before taking my hand and placing it on his chest. The rhythm of his heart, his thundering heartbeat, the heat of him… It was everything I needed.

His mouth never left mine, and I felt drunk on this moment, warmth spreading through me. I could sense his desire and care and the power he carried. He let it out little by little, giving me just enough to make me quiver. He kept me hooked on him, giving me kisses, feeding the sweet ache inside me. He made it grow and glow, burning bright, until I knew I’d do anything he asked—just to please him, just to feel him.

I didn’t want this to end.

Letting out a shuddery moan, I reached for his hair…

But then something started to bubble inside my chest.

When he released my mouth, I gasped for air, and I couldn’t stop the cough that burst out of me.

“Are you okay?” Xavier asked in Greyson’s voice, with Greyson’s tender tone. “What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t answer him. There was something in my lungs.

*I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe, I can’t—*

I choked, coughing again. Brown water poured out of my mouth and onto the floor. I collapsed, my throat burning as I panted for air.

“Cali! Cali, can you hear me?”

I could hear the panic in his voice, but I couldn’t look at him. My eyelids felt heavy. I was forced to shut them. The couch beneath me vanished in a heartbeat, and then I was floating, surrounded by water.

*Where am I?*

My eyes flew open. I was back in my bathroom, in the tub. I wasn’t drowning, I wasn’t choking, but I still needed to breathe. I shot up, breathing hard, taking in huge gulps of air. At the same time, Rowena screamed, “NO!”

*No?* NO?

But she wasn’t saying it to me.

Her hands were raised, her expression intense as she flung Greyson backward, slamming him into the wall. Clearly shocked, he looked between Rowena and me.

“What the *hell* is going on here?” he demanded.

“Cali!” Rowena gasped, whipping around to look at me. “You’re okay?”

I nodded, heaving. “Greyson—”

“Are you hurt? Can you breathe?” He marched toward me, dropping to his knees. His expression was desperate, rattled, and when I nodded, he looked relieved. Then he turned to Rowena. “Why the hell did you blast me? What did I do?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I just had to stop you. The spell is sensitive to interruptions, so—”

“The *spell*?” Greyson’s eyes were wide. He turned to me. “That’s what you two were doing in here? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We had to do this,” I said shakily. “We had to recreate the scene of my death for the spell to work.”

Greyson looked at a loss. “Why did you need to cast a spell in the first place?”

I winced. “I wanted to figure it all out before I let you know.”

“Figure *what* out?”

“Can we talk about this after Rowena tells me what she learned?” I asked anxiously. “Please.”

Suddenly looking exhausted, Greyson sat back on the bath mat. He sighed, shaking his head. It hurt to see him upset, but I needed answers here.

Turning to the witch, I asked, “Well?”

Rowena glanced between us. “Even though the spell was interrupted, I was able to see the *due destini*.”

Greyson’s mouth dropped open. “*What?* That was what the spell was about? To see the curse?”

My voice was shaky. “I drowned and came back to life in that river, and the *due destini* is so sensitive to any kind of change, so I just need to see if my mates are in danger. I need to know if there’s anything new happening with the *due destini*.”

“There is,” Rowena said.

I turned to her, my pulse going a mile a minute. “*What?*”

“I saw the *due destini*,” Rowena repeated, looking between Greyson and me. Then her gaze stayed pinned to me, and her voice dropped. “I saw the bonds between the three of you, but there are too many branches now.”

I held my breath. “What does that mean?”

Rowena’s expression was serious. “It means that the *due destini* is more unstable than it’s ever been before.”

**Episode 4451**

**Xavier**

“Why don’t you shut the hell up, Gabe?” I snapped. I wasn’t in the mood for any more of this bullshit.

Gabe—apparently unwilling to shut the hell up—opened his mouth to respond, but I didn’t want to hear it. I stormed away, heading for the seclusion of the trees. I was making too much noise to hear his footsteps, but I could sense that Gabe was following me into the woods.

Fury coursed through me—Gabe was full of it. He had no idea what he was talking about.

I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn’t seem to get any air. My anxiety was spiking, and I knew in my heart that Gabe wasn’t actually wrong about anything. But he *did* need to stop talking.

Right now.

This whole “true love’s kiss” bullshit was a mess, and I had no idea how Adéluce was going to react when I failed to wake Ava up. *Did she set this up to find out the truth of my feelings for Ava? Adéluce wants me to be in love with Ava… When she gets proof that I’m not, will she lash out again?* Given what had already happened to Ava—I didn’t want to find out.

“Xavier, hold up,” Gabe called, hurrying after me. “Slow down, man. I just want to talk to you.”

“I don’t need to listen—”

“Xavier, come on.” Gabe managed to get ahead of me, promptly blocking my path. “Listen,” he said, panting faintly from the burst of speed, “I have no idea what’s really going on with you, man, but I know you, and I know that this life you’ve constructed with the Samara pack—with *Ava*? It’s made out of nothing.”

I swelled. “*Nothing?* I’m the *Alpha*—”

“I know you’re the Alpha, man,” Gabe said, not waiting for me to finish, “and I know Ava’s your Luna and everything, but I also know *you*.”

My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I’d moved beyond anxiety and was now in full panic mode.

Clenching my fists so tightly my hands ached, I glared at Gabe. “Well, you’re right about one thing, Gabe—you have *no* *idea* what’s going on with me. And you shouldn’t talk about shit you don’t understand.”

Something angry flickered in Gabe’s eyes, and he shook his head. He took a step toward me, and I took a step back. I could barely breathe as it was—I couldn’t have him so close to me. Just the searching way he was looking at me made me feel exposed. I wanted to look away, but I didn’t want to do anything suspicious.

“Maybe I *don’t* know what’s going on with you,” Gabe conceded, “but I know enough to realize you’re not being honest. Not with anyone around you, and definitely not with yourself. And that’s all I’m trying to do—I’m just trying to get you to tell the truth. Think past this moment, Xavier. You can’t keep living whatever lie this is. It’s impossible. Look at yourself—you look like you’re about to blow your top. You keep going like this, and you’re going to explode.” He shook his head. “All I can tell you is that I’m getting pretty fucking tired of watching whatever performance you’re putting on.”

I tried to swallow, but my throat felt dry as a desert. I couldn’t think of anything to say to Gabe that would sound even remotely believable. All I knew was that I needed to pivot away from the point he’d just made, and fast.

“You don’t think I care about Ava?” I snapped. “You really think that? Look at me, man. Why would I be working so hard to get her to wake up if I didn’t fucking care about her?”

“That’s not what I’m saying—”

“I don’t remember asking you for your input on my life, Gabe,” I snapped. “What gives you the right to say any of this to me?”

“Someone has to!” Gabe exploded. “Someone has to say what everyone’s been thinking! Someone’s got to do it, and no one else has the stones to say it to your face!”

We stared at each other for a long moment, fury crackling between us like electricity.

After a moment, Gabe’s expression softened. “Xavier, listen to me—I’m not trying to piss you off. Just the opposite. We’ve known each other a long time. I’m just trying to be a good friend.”

I felt cold. “The only thing I need from any of my *good friends* is help to wake up my mate.”

“Xavier—”

“You and Mikah should drive back alone,” I interrupted coldly. I didn’t want to hear anything else he had to say. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle it. “Don’t share anything we learned from Boris—not yet.”

Gabe looked frustrated. “Don’t be an idiot. How are you doing to get back to the pack house?”

“I’ll run back on my own.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It’s what I want to do,” I said sharply. “I don’t want to be around anyone right now.”

Gabe opened his mouth to respond to that, but I didn’t wait around to listen. I shifted before he could say a word and spun around, taking off down the mountain, picking up speed as I ran downhill.

Snow fluttered around as I kicked it up behind me, but I barely noticed. As I ran, Gabe’s words echoed through my head. *You can’t keep living whatever lie this is.*

He was right—about everything. There was no way this kiss was going to work, because I just couldn’t give Ava the kind of kiss she needed. Whatever love and affection I felt for Ava, it wasn’t *true* love. Not the kind of love fairy tales were written about. Not the kind of love I felt for Cali.

And I had no idea what the hell I was going to do.

I was mulling this painfully thorny thought over when something moved in front of me. I looked up to see that Adéluce had appeared on the snowy path, blocking my way, and I skidded to a sudden halt.

She looked at me for a moment, then she smiled. The expression allowed her to show all her teeth. It was technically a smile, but it was cold and threatening and filled me with dread.

“Hello, Xavier,” she said. “So nice to see you. I just wanted to drop by to ask how your mate was enjoying her little nap.”

I stared at her in horror. Of course I knew that Adéluce was the one who’d bitten Ava—I’d seen it happen—but I hadn’t expected her to talk about it so shamelessly. To relish the pain she was putting Ava through.

Fury rolled through me, and my body tensed.

Adéluce’s smile widened as she tipped her head to the side, looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. “What’s this, Xavier Evers? Are you *growling* at me? Are you going to try to attack me?” She shook her head dismissively. “Do stop making that noise; it’s unbecoming. Besides, I *have* come for a purpose. Don’t you want to know what that purpose is?”

I didn’t deign to answer her question.

“We need to have a conversation about—what’s his name?” she asked, waving an airy hand up the mountain. “The one with the vampire boyfriend? Oh yes—*Gabriel*. We have a problem with Gabriel, as I think you well know.” She tsked. “I think I might have to deal with him, Xavier. You know as well as I do that he’s getting far too close to the truth of your little situation—”

That was the last straw. All of it—threatening Gabe, calling this prison of hers my *little situation*… I couldn’t listen to another word.

I launched myself forward and sank my teeth into her shoulder. I’d *finally* managed to catch her off-guard, and she flew backward with the force of my attack. We both hit the ground hard. Adéluce cried out in pain and shock, and I felt a thrill of satisfaction. Maybe this was it—maybe I was actually going to kill her, once and for all.

I reared back to attack again, but Adéluce recovered just enough to fling out her hand. I yelped as I went flying backward, thrown by the unseen force of her magic.

She staggered to her feet, looking furious. Her eyes flashed with a crazed light as she glowered at me. “Do you think this will go unpunished, Xavier Evers? Do you think I will let this pass? If you believe you can do such things and not feel my wrath, then you’re a fool! You’ll regret this!”

She slammed her fist into her palm, and I immediately felt the sensation of flying backward again. I slammed heavily to the ground and only had an instant to register the wetness of the earth beneath me before everything went black.

**Episode 4452**

Greyson glared at Rowena. “What does *that* mean?”

I blinked as I wiped water from my eyes. “What *does* that mean?” I asked, still reeling. The *due destini* was unstable? Did that mean that we were going to have even more issues with it? My heart sank at the thought. What else could it possibly throw at us?

I was just so sick of all of this. I hated that we never seemed to have any respite from this stupid curse.

“Well?” Greyson pressed Rowena. “What does it mean?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to answer your question the way you want me to,” she told him. “I told you what I saw, and I don’t have much more information to give you. All I could see was the manifestation of the *due destini*, and it was unstable.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Rowena must have noticed, because she rushed to keep talking.

“But your connection to Greyson looked fine.”

I breathed again.

“The branch joining the two of you looked solid and strong,” she added.

I couldn’t help but notice she hadn’t mentioned my connection to Xavier. There was a part of me that wanted to ask her about it, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. I was afraid of what she might say.

It didn’t matter, though, because Rowena told me anyway.

“I saw your connection to Xavier, Cali, and there does seem to be some splintering there,” she said, sounding apologetic.

“Splintering?” I asked, confused.

She nodded. “The *due destini* is all about balance. And because Xavier has a branch reaching toward something else, the *due destini* is trying to correct itself. So it’s forcing a similar splintering-off for Greyson. There’s not much known about the *due destini*, Cali, but I’m sure of one thing—it needs balance on both sides to maintain its structure.”

Rowena hadn’t said her name outright, but Ava’s presence in her explanation was undeniable—she was the one Xavier’s extra branch was reaching toward, after all.

As I thought of him, my heart began to ache. I missed him so much that it hurt, and I was still baffled about what he was feeling. He’d told me that our kiss in the palace hadn’t meant anything to him, and he was still pushing me away—but I *knew* Xavier. I knew him better than he knew himself, and something was forcing him to act this way. I just knew it.

The strange dream Rowena’s spell had sent me into might have taken my mates and mixed them up, but at least I’d gotten a chance to be with Xavier—and even a fractured version of him was better than nothing. But it had given me just enough that the ache I always felt for him had grown more intense.

“Is the connection between Cali and Xavier stable, though? Like the link between the two of us?”

Greyson’s voice cut into my thoughts. I looked up at him in surprise. His voice sounded hesitant and unsure—it was out of character. And his expression was anxious as he looked at the witch, though he was clearly trying to mask it. He didn’t look at me as he spoke, but I could see the tension in his shoulders, and I knew it had cost him to ask the question.

Rowena took her time in answering, like she knew she couldn’t give him the answer he wanted. “It looked… stable, yes.”

“Stable?” he asked.

She nodded. “It’s just as stable as the connection between the two of you,” she said, looking between Greyson and me. Then her features froze, like she was just remembering something.

“What is it?” I asked, wrapping my arms around myself as I started to shiver.

“It’s just…” Rowena sounded distracted, like she was remembering something from a long time ago. “Well, it was like there was something *around* the branch connecting you and Xavier. But I couldn’t quite see it,” she said.

She looked troubled and unsettled, but I was suddenly feeling very, very happy. “Elated” wouldn’t have been too strong a word for what I felt in my heart as Rowena trailed off. If the connection between Xavier and me looked just as strong as my connection with Greyson, then what did that mean? Could it mean that Xavier still cared for me, despite his assertions to the contrary? How would the connection manifest to Rowena if he’d truly rejected me? Would it look the same? Different? Would it have fractured? Broken off entirely?

I had a million questions swirling around in my head, and I wanted answers to all of them immediately.

Rowena shook her head, like she was coming back to herself, and looked around the bathroom, which was slick with water. “I don’t know… This has left me with a lot more questions than answers. I want to do more research on what I saw before I say anything else.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

But she shook her head again. “No, I don’t know if this is good or bad, Cali, so I don’t want to say.”

“Rowena—”

“I don’t want to cause any panic,” she insisted. “I’ve never done anything like this, or seen a *due destini* curse in person. There aren’t many who have. But I’m really intrigued by all of this.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’m glad we can be of service as your research subjects,” he said dryly.

Rowena’s face flushed. “I’m sorry, that’s not what I mean. I know you’re not test subjects and that this is your reality, but I hope you can understand. This is a brand-new magical development. It’s fascinating!”

She looked between us for a moment, like she was waiting for us to share her excitement for this incredibly perverse situation. When neither of us said anything, she cleared her throat.

“Anyway, maybe I’ll let you two talk this through. I’ll just head out.” She started to leave the bathroom, but then she stopped and glanced back at me. “Cali, I’m around if you want to talk about anything.”

I smiled at her. “Thanks. I’ll let you know.”

Rowena nodded. Then she walked out of the soaking wet bathroom and blipped away.

Alone, I turned to Greyson, who still looked tense and stiff as a block of wood. I was still feeling pretty great about what I’d just learned, but I could see how uncomfortable it had made Greyson.

I stepped toward him and put my arms around him, leaning my cheek against his chest.

He hugged me back and we stood in silence for a moment. Then he spoke, “What prompted you to ask Rowena to perform that spell, love?”

“What?” I asked, looking up at him.

He looked like he was struggling with himself. Finally he spoke again, his voice softer this time. “I just wondered if something happened with Xavier. Does this have something to do with Ava’s coma?”

I frowned, confused. “What are you talking about? What coma?”

“You haven’t heard?” he asked, clearly surprised.

I shook my head. “What’s going on with her? Can we do anything to help?”

Greyson shrugged. “I’m not sure. Whatever’s happened to her was a result of that vampire bite.”

“Oh god,” I breathed. I felt awful for Ava and hoped she was okay, but I couldn’t help but think back to Greyson’s first question. “No, this wasn’t prompted by anything to do with Xavier.”

“Then what?” Greyson asked.

I took a shaking breath. “It was actually about how I died in the river,” I admitted.

Greyson pulled back and held me at arm’s length. He stared at me. “Cali, what are you talking about?”

I bit my lip. I was nervous, but I had to tell him what I knew. “In the river, when you pulled me out—I technically died for a few minutes.”

Greyson stared at me, his eyes wild with fear and shock.

“I actually wanted to ask you if you felt anything when that happened,” I added.

He blinked, and his mind seemed to return to his body. “I—I was so panicked, love. Seeing you go under, trying to get you out… I definitely felt *something*, but I didn’t know it was your *death*.”

“It was just for a few seconds,” I assured him. I tried to smile, but my head was spinning, and I was starting to worry that I was going to pass out. “It’s all so overwhelming—everything I’ve learned.”

Greyson nodded. “You can say that again.”

I let him pull me close again, but then something else occurred to me, turning my blood to ice.

Greyson must have felt me tense up, because he pulled back to look at me again. “Cali? Are you okay?”

I stared up at him. “I just thought of something.”

“What is it?

“Rowena said the *due destini* is all about balance, right?”

Greyson nodded. “She did.”

“Then… If Xavier’s extra branch is reaching toward Ava…” I said slowly, all the pieces suddenly coming together in my mind. “Then is yours reaching toward someone else, too?”

**Episode 4453**

**Artemis**

“Anything?” I called to Torin and Adair.

I was poking around in the winter-withered foliage in the woods, the Redwood pack house long gone behind us. We could still see the house through the trees, but I was hoping we’d gone far enough that we’d be able to find the herb we were looking for. I was beginning to think that hope was misplaced, though—we’d been searching for what felt like ages and still hadn’t found it.

“Do you remember what you’re looking for?” Adair asked me tersely.

“Herb, red, grows in small bunches, always located near a circle of four pine trees with branches entangled and spiraling together,” I recited.

Adair nodded. “That’s it.” He sounded frustrated.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He sighed. “I’m not sure it’s here.”

“What?”

“I’m just not sure we’re going to find what we need in these woods,” he said, straightening.

Torin frowned. “Um, Adair, does that mean what I think it means?”

I looked between the two of them. “Wait—what do you think it means?” I asked, totally lost.

Torin glanced at Adair, and they seemed to have a silent conversation.

“I think it means that we’re going to have to go to the Fae world to find the herb,” Torin finally said.

“The *Fae world*?” I repeated.

Torin looked worried. “I *know* we’ll be able to find the herb there. I guess I’m less certain that we’re going to find it here. I’m sorry,” he added, shaking his head and looking discouraged. “I never meant to be such an inconvenience.”

“Don’t apologize, Torin,” I said quickly, remembering my own magic issues. “I get it. Being without your magic really sucks. I’ve been there, and it’s not something I’d wish on anyone. I want to do whatever I can to help you. And if that means going back to the Fae world, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Well, it might not be quite as easy as that,” Adair said quietly.

I looked over at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I probably have a bounty on my head in the Fae world,” he said sharply.

“Oh… right,” I said, remembering this a moment too late.

He sighed. “We’ll have to be very careful there if you want me to join you.”

“You don’t have to. Torin and I can handle it,” I said stoutly. “We’d be happy to watch your back if you want to come, but it’s up to you, Adair. If you don’t feel safe going, you don’t have to. It’s not a big deal.” I thought for a moment. “Though this could take kind of a long time. We have to get to Haystack Rock and have something of the Fae world to get through. We can probably borrow someone’s car, and then it’s just a matter of—”

“Stop,” Adair said, holding up a hand. “I might know of another way.”

I stared at him. “Another way to get into the Fae world?”

He nodded.

“Well?” I pressed when he didn’t go on. “What is it?”

He looked around the forest. “First, we need to find a tree that’s been struck by lightning.”

“Okay…” Torin said slowly. “It’s winter. Is finding that going to be easy?”

“He has a point,” I said. “We could take more time looking for the tree than just going to Haystack Rock.”

“Have a little more trust,” Adair said pointedly. “After we find the tree, this route stops being easy—if it were, I’d send you two on your own,” Adair said, and I could see that he looked worried.

I understood why he was saying that, to an extent. I’d spent most of my life in the Fae world—and working as a bounty hunter, at that. I knew better than anyone how treacherous that place could be. Was he planning on something being there when we arrived? Or would something else make it more difficult than usual?

“Are you sure about this?” I asked him. “If it’s so dangerous.”

“About going back?”

I nodded. “I’m just wondering if it’s a good idea for you to come along.”

We all knew that the Dark Fae court was looking for him. If he went back, he could be caught. Word traveled fast in the Fae world, and I didn’t want to do something that would fuck up Adair’s delicate situation. He was my uncle, my family, and while I wanted to have him help with this, I wouldn’t let him if it would cost him.

His jaw was set. “I’ll be fine.”

I was skeptical. “Really? You’re *sure*—”

“It’ll be a quick trip,” he said sharply. “We’ll get in, grab the herb, and leave. We’ll be back in the mortal realm before you know it.”

“Thank you, Adair,” Torin said soberly. “I really appreciate you doing this for me. I know it’s a big risk, and I know—”

“I don’t want you to thank me or to apologize,” Adair said briskly, waving off Torin’s heartfelt thanks. He started walking deeper into the trees. “We’ll get this done if you both listen to me.” We nodded. “Good. Now both of you—follow me.”

We walked through the woods, keeping close to the path. It was good that it was winter, because there were no leaves to obscure the trunks of the aspen and pine trees, and we could easily distinguish between the healthy and damaged trees.

“There.” Adair stopped in the middle of the path and pointed.

I looked over at a massive aspen that had clearly experienced some recent trauma. The white trunk was badly charred and split clean down the middle. There was just enough space between the two sides of the trunk for a person to squeeze through.

“That’s the entrance?” I asked, and even I could hear the doubt in my voice.

Adair didn’t answer me. He raised his hand, palm out, and focused on the tree.

Torin and I both stayed silent, and for a long moment, nothing happened.

Then Adair pulled a small knife from his pocket, flicked it open, and sliced his fingertip.

Torin gasped, the sound deafening in the quiet.

“Torin!” I snapped, my heart racing.

“Sorry,” he breathed, looking pale. “I just wasn’t expecting the blood.”

Adair gave him a sideways look. “Aren’t you a healer? Haven’t you been in *battle*?”

Torin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but the context is more important than people think. I expect blood on the battlefield, so I can prepare myself. I wasn’t expecting to see it here.”

Adair didn’t respond to this. He looked down at his finger and waited, watching the blood pool. After a moment, he stepped forward and raised his hand, using the dripping blood to draw a complicated pattern in the dead roots at the base of the tree.

When I looked hard, I could see the faded vestiges of another pattern in the roots, though the dried blood had turned brown and was nearly the same color as the underbrush. But it was there, like someone else had used this entry point before us.

I waited, watching Adair work, and only looked up when the air began to shimmer in the space between the split sides of the tree. When I looked back at Adair, I saw beads of sweat rolling down his face. Whatever he was doing, it clearly required immense control. Every muscle in his body looked stretched taut, and his lips were moving, like he was muttering an incantation.

This went on long enough that I was about to ask him what came next, but before I could speak, he took a step forward, striding resolutely through what had become a shimmering portal in the split tree.

Torin and I stared in shocked silence for a moment, then we exchanged wide-eyed glances.

“Should we—”

“I think we’d better,” I said.

I had no idea how long the portal would stay open, so we both hurried forward. Torin stepped through first, and I followed right after.

It was like walking through a doorway. One second we were in the mortal world—a quiet forest stripped bare by winter—and the next, we were in the Fae world. The air was milder, and the trees were covered with bright green leaves.

I took a deep breath as I looked around, surprised by how right it felt to be here again. The Bitterfang war had forced me to put all my plans on hold, but now the war was over, and I still had plans. I still wanted to find my father.

I looked around at the familiar forest. It was strangely *comfortable* to be back, to feel magic crackling in the air around me. The feeling of home settled onto my shoulders like a cozy weight, and I smiled to myself.

“Maybe after we find the herb, I’ll stay here for a while,” I said.

Torin looked over at me, surprised. “Stay here? But why?”

I shrugged. “To find my father.”

**Episode 4454**

**Greyson**

*If Xavier’s extra branch is reaching toward Ava… Is yours reaching toward someone else, too?*

Elle’s face flashed into my mind in response to Cali’s question. It was unwanted, but clear as day.

I ignored it, pushing it away. My thinking of her didn’t mean anything—it was just the sire bond at work. Elle had no place in this conversation—not when Cali and I were talking about our mate bond.

Anything that existed between Elle and me was a product of the sire bond, and nothing more. It didn’t matter what Rowena had said. This situation between me and Elle had been going on before the battle with Malakai and when Cali had died for a moment. Just the thought of that put a sour taste in my mouth.

Cali was my only mate. Now and forever. I fucking hated that I hadn’t been able to do something to help her in that moment. Maybe I could’ve somehow prevented all of this.

I looked down into her face. “I’m in love with you, Cali,” I said firmly. “No one else will ever make me feel the way I feel when I’m with you. I’m pretty sure that extra branch Rowena mentioned doesn’t lead anywhere.”

She was tense as I held her in my arms, and I wanted to do something to ease her mind—I wanted to lighten the mood. As glad as I was that Xavier was out of her life, I knew that his leaving had hurt and confused her, and I wanted to reassure her that I’d never do the same. I wanted to prove to her how connected we were, and how unbreakable that connection was. Whatever extra branches Rowena had seen sprouting from me were meaningless.

Big Mac was always talking about how unreliable that kind of magic was—things could change because people changed. You couldn’t rely on them, and they weren’t prophecies. My connection with Cali was solid, and it was going to *stay* solid. I wasn’t going to let anything get between us. Not now, and not ever.

But I wasn’t sure how to say all of that, so I figured I’d just show her.

I ducked my head and pressed my lips to hers, infusing the kiss with all my love and devotion. I wanted her to feel it all the way down her body. I wanted to help her get out of her head, where no doubt she was overanalyzing everything we’d just learned.

Luckily, Cali responded instantly, latching onto me with a desperation that stabbed at my heart. I needed her to know how much I loved her, so I pulled her toward the bed. When her legs hit the mattress, she sat, and I pushed her back until she was lying flat.

“Don’t move,” I said.

“*Greyson*…” she breathed as I hovered over her, kissing her again, running my tongue along hers. I knew that Cali needed this—this proof of our connection—and I was going to give her everything she wanted.

She was everything I wanted.

I pulled back and looked down at her, then I slowly unbuttoned her jeans. She panted as I pulled them slowly down her legs. I got rid of her shirt next, and then her bra, releasing her breasts. She was left in just her black panties, and I just looked at her for a long moment. She smiled up at me as I let my eyes rove, taking in her smooth skin, the hills and valleys of her curves, the golden color of her skin and the puckered pink of her nipples.

Then I ran my fingers along her legs to the place where her thighs met. She shivered and gasped and—like magic—her legs parted.

“Oh my god, Greyson,” she breathed, her eyes half closed.

I slid my hands back to her knees, then up again, moving along the insides of her thighs, my fingers splayed wide, grasping as much of her as I could.

“Do you want this, love?” I asked.

She whimpered. “Yes,” she said. “Oh god, *touch me*.”

With a smile, I complied. I ran my fingers along the seam of her sex and felt the heat and wetness pouring out of her, even through the fabric of her panties.

“Like this?” I teased.

She nodded, her breath coming in short gasps.

I hooked a finger around the underwear and pulled it aside, then slid a finger inside her.

She sucked in a sharp breath and fisted the sheets.

“You like that?”

“What are you doing to me?” she demanded, her eyes shut.

Letting go of the sheets, she reached for me and tugged at my jeans, pulling them down my hips. I helped her out by pushing them off and kicking them away, then I stepped forward so she could reach me.

When her hand closed around my cock, I saw stars.

“*Cali*,” I growled.

“Inside me,” she panted. “I want you inside me.”

I grinned. “That’s what I wanted to hear. Say it again. Tell me what you really want.”

“I want you inside me,” she said.

“You want me to fuck you,” I corrected.

“Y-Yes.”

I lifted her knees and hooked them over my shoulders, then slid myself into her, just like she wanted. She was slick with arousal, and she gasped and rocked against me as I pumped in and out.

I put my hands on her shoulders and slid them down, brushing her breasts with my fingertips. I cupped them in my hands and thumbed the nipples. She arched up into me, filling my hands with her hot flesh.

“Greyson,” she moaned. “I want your hands *everywhere…*”

I’d started this because I knew Cali needed to be reminded of our connection and everything we had, but as we moved together, I knew I was taking what *I* needed, too. I’d never doubted my love or the strength of our mate bond, but the last few days had been hell—strange and confusing and worrying. So I drank this moment in, reveling in the way her body fitted against mine, in the way she felt both familiar and white-hot exciting. Everything about Cali aroused me, and everything about her made me feel safe. I was home with her.

Electricity began to build inside me as she tightened around me.

“Love,” I groaned, my voice a warning. She was pushing me too hard, and I was determined to make her come first. That’s what I wanted—to hear her moans build until she couldn’t contain herself anymore. It would send me over the edge.

I dipped my head down and took one of her nipples in my mouth, swirling around the tight bud. She whimpered, tightening her grip on me. When she started to shiver, I knew she was coming.

I tore my mouth from her breast so I could kiss her as my orgasm washed over me, shaking my body with its power. This was my mate. Cali was my mate—my one and only. I loved her. Nothing would ever change this connection. We were soulmates, and we were going to be together forever.

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After she’d cleaned up in the bathroom, Cali came back into the bedroom and climbed into bed next to me. She nestled into my side, resting her head on my chest with a contented sigh.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I’d been asking about the quick shower she’d taken, but when she looked into my eyes as she answered, I knew she was answering a much deeper question.

I kissed the top of her head. “I’m glad, love.”

We lay there quietly for a while. Cali rested her hand on my chest, and I toyed idly with the ends of her hair. The house was quiet, and I let myself—for the first time in a long while—imagine a life that always felt this peaceful. Not just in stolen moments, but constantly. I assumed that was the kind of life other people led—people who *weren’t* always facing off against antagonistic werewolf packs. The pack had been my life for so long, but… lying here with Cali by my side was pretty great, too.

She sighed. “I’m glad you interrupted the spell, Greyson.”

I looked down at her in surprise. “What?”

She smiled up at me. “I’m glad you came in. I think it would’ve been hard for me to find a way to tell you about what Rowena saw, and I’m glad you already know. It’s easier when we work together to deal with things like this.”

I laughed again and pulled her closer. “You’re right about that. I’m glad I’m here, too. I was just thinking that we should—”

I was cut off by a loud cry coming from outside.

Cali froze in my arms—for just a second—then she sat up, holding the bedsheet over her breasts. She looked at me. “Did you hear that?”

“Of course I heard that,” I said, getting out of bed.

Cali’s eyes were wide as saucers. “What the hell was it?”

**Episode 4455**

I followed Greyson out of bed, grabbing for my jeans and sweatshirt and throwing them on as fast as I could. Greyson pulled on some pants, and then we hurried out the door and down the stairs.

“What the hell?” I asked. There was no one around. “Where is everyone?”

There was another shriek, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“This way,” Greyson said, running for the front door.

When we burst outside, I looked wildly around. The first thing I saw was Violet and Charlie standing on the soggy lawn near the porch. They were looking at Lilac, who’d gotten out a ride-on lawn mower—*When the hell did we get that?!*—and was driving it across the winter-wilted grass. He had his hand up in a fist and was laughing his head off, while Charlie and Violet cheered him on. *Those* were the shrieks we’d heard.

I sighed with relief, then started laughing. “Greyson, we have *got* to remember what cries of joy sound like, so we don’t freak out every time someone’s having fun.”

Greyson smiled. “Well, that’s something I wouldn’t mind working on.”

Violet and Charlie turned around, looking surprised to see us.

“Hey, Greyson. Cali. Sorry if we bothered you,” Violet said, looking a little embarrassed. “And I hope this is okay. Lilac really wanted to ride it.”

“It’s fine,” Greyson said. “Though I’m surprised you got the thing running. Usually Phil has to come service it before we start using it for the spring.”

“Well, it took some work, and we had a few mishaps before we got it going,” Charlie admitted. I noticed a streak of smeared blood on his hand, stretching up to his wrist.

“Whoa, Charlie, are you bleeding? Are you okay?” I asked.

Charlie held up his hand and flexed his fingers. “I’m good.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

He grinned. “No one’s put this on the brochure yet, but one of the added benefits of the whole werewolf thing is that there aren’t a lot of consequences for shoving your hand inside a running lawn mower.”

Violet and Greyson laughed, but I gasped.

“Super werewolf healing abilities or not, let’s not do that again,” I said sternly. I looked at Lilac, who’d stopped driving the mower in straight lines and was now doing donuts on the lawn. “Are you sure you are going to be responsible with that thing? No more traumatic injuries?”

Violet shrugged. “I think we’re going to be okay now. It was just a bit of a journey to reach this point.”

I looked around at the yard. It was soggy and damp, and sorely in need of some attention.

“Should we go back inside?” Greyson asked, touching my arm.

“I think I might stay out here and help clean up the yard,” I told him.

“You sure?” he asked, glancing warily at Lilac.

“I’m sure.” Violet and Charlie had brought out a pile of rakes and brooms and hedge clippers, and I grabbed a rake that was leaning against the wall. “It feels nice to be outside. The fresh air is good, and I’d like to clear my head.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Greyson said with a nod. “Okay, I have a few things to do myself, so I’ll see you later.”

“What do you have to do?” I asked.

“Lucian stuff to deal with,” he said with an eye roll.

“Well, if you need me to help with that, just let me know,” I said.

Greyson grinned. “Thanks, love, but hopefully this will all work itself out. I highly doubt it’ll turn into another pack war. Lucian’s just being his usual dramatic self.”

I chuckled. “Of course. Still, let me know if you need me.”

“I will,” Greyson said. He dropped a kiss on my head and then headed back inside.

I turned to look when Lilac gave a whoop as he rode across the soggy lawn. My gaze went from him to Violet and Charlie, who were still laughing as they half-heartedly raked leaves out of the rosebushes next to the house. I was struck by how joyful the younger wolves seemed to be. And why not? Violet and Charlie had found each other in the most random, magical way imaginable, and Lilac had returned from the dead to be reunited with his sister. Plus, he finally seemed to be content in his relationship with Perrie. They were all good fighters and loyal pack members, but they really didn’t have any responsibilities beyond that—why shouldn’t they be happy?

Without meaning to, my thoughts went to what Rowena had told me. And with those thoughts came doubts, creeping closer and closer.

I switched my rake for a pair of pruning shears and walked down the porch stairs to the rosebushes. As I snipped off last summer’s dead roses, I thought about what she’d told me… I’d pushed it to the back of my mind and drowned myself in Greyson moments ago, but…

Yes, he’d reassured me that nothing would ever happen, but I just couldn’t fully trust that kind of declaration anymore. Xavier used to say that kind of thing to me, too, and look at us now.

My stomach twisted at this thought. Rowena had confirmed that while Xavier and I still had a connection, Xavier’s connection to Ava existed, too, and was just as real.

I hadn’t been pleased to hear this, but I hadn’t been surprised, either. Before her death, Ava had been Xavier’s mate, and they’d been together for a long time before that. In fact, Xavier’s wolf had only been able to pick me at all because Ava had died. It wasn’t that they’d broken up or something—she’d died, and that had allowed Xavier to find another mate. Me.

My hands stilled as a dead rose fell to my feet. Did that mean that when *I* had died—even though it had only been for a few seconds—*Greyson* had been assigned a new mate?

Suddenly, my whole body felt cold, and it had nothing to do with the winter air swirling around me. My grip on the pruning shears tightened as anger and frustration replaced the paralyzing shock. The whole werewolf mate reassignment thing was a truly terrible system—and it played right into all the *due destini* crap. I hated it.

Then another thought floated through my head. What if this was all some kind of cosmic karma? I’d been mated to both Xavier and Greyson for quite some time, now. I loved them both desperately, but I knew the experience had never been easy for them. It hadn’t been easy for me, either, but of the three of us, I’d probably had the better end of the deal.

Now, I was kind of in their shoes, and I was feeling a little blindsided. Xavier had his own second mate, and now Greyson might get one, too. Just to balance the scales of the *due destini.*

I took a deep breath—my whole body was trembling, now. I almost wished I could just make my choice, and then—whomever I chose—we would only have each other. Then the *due destini* could finally be over, and it would stop plaguing me, Greyson, and Xavier altogether. But it wasn’t so easy. I loved both of them still. Did it mean to just torture me and ultimately leave me all alone?

I’d always known that ending up alone was possible, either of my own doing because I couldn’t choose, or because of other circumstances out of my control. I never expected that my mates would also have another mate of their own. It only further complicated everything between us. In the event that I chose, of course I wanted either Greyson or Xavier to choose me back. How could I not? It wasn’t as if they couldn’t reject me even if I chose them, but with both of them having other mates, there *was* a real chance my mate might not choose me back.

And that was… scary.

I swallowed, fear and anxiety creeping through my chest. I couldn’t just stand here stewing, imagining the worst possible outcomes. I had to talk to someone. It wasn’t healthy for me to just let all these fears fester inside me.

I looked around. I did need to talk to someone, but both Lola and Artemis were away—just when I needed them most. And it wouldn’t exactly be fair—or useful—to dump all this on Greyson himself.

“God,” I whispered to myself, rubbing my head, which was starting to ache. I would’ve given anything for someone to talk to.

Then my hip began to vibrate.

I jumped, but then I realized it was just my phone buzzing.

My heart sped up—had the universe just actually heard my plea? Had it sent me someone to talk to? Pretty damn good timing, if you asked me.

I dropped the shears and fumbled in my pocket for my phone. I’d been hoping to see a familiar name—maybe Lola or Artemis or my mom—but the call was from an unknown number. I was disappointed, but still hopeful, so I accepted it. Hopefully it wasn’t someone calling about my car’s extended warranty.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other end of the line was harsh, a little scary, and completely unfamiliar. “Why weren’t you at practice this morning?”

**Episode 4456**

**Xavier**

My head pulsed with pain. I pressed my hand to it, but I didn’t feel any blood. When I finally opened my eyes, I was confused. Everything around me was blurry and out of focus. I blinked once, then again, and then the world sharpened back to normal.

I took a deep breath and tried to push past the pain coursing through my body—I had to think, to remember where I was. The space around me was dark and damp and silent. The only noise was the faint dripping of water. After a moment, my confusion began to clear, and I looked all around—I was surrounded on all sides by wet stone, and a small amount of light filtered down on me. It was dim, but light enough to see that I was in some kind of deep, narrow pit. The top was as least thirty feet above my head.

I stared up at the distant sky as panic flowed over me. Where was I? How had I gotten here? And—most importantly—how the hell was I going to get out of this? No one knew I was here—*I* didn’t even know where I was. Which meant that I was on my own. No one was coming to help me.

“Dammit,” I muttered, furious with myself. “DAMMIT!” I bellowed, my voice echoing against the stone walls.

This was all my fault. I was here because of what had happened with Adéluce. If I’d just kept my cool and stayed with Gabe, the vampire-witch would never have appeared. She typically never showed herself in front of anyone else, appearing only to me, so if I hadn’t run off in a huff, this wouldn’t have happened. She wouldn’t have physically been there to put me in this position.

But then I remembered what *else* hadhappened, and I felt a rush of ferocious joy. Adéluce might have gotten back at me by throwing me into a pit, but I’d actually managed to get a hit in. I’d sunk my teeth into her shoulder, and she’d cried out in pain.

I felt my hands close into tight fists as I remembered the sound. Wherever she was, I hoped the bitch was hurting. In spite of everything else, it felt massive that I’d actually been able to hurt her. If she hadn’t moved at the last second, I wouldn’t have gotten her damn shoulder—I would’ve gotten her throat.

Taking a deep breath, I looked down at myself, wondering how I was still alive. I hadn’t killed Adéluce, but I was a little surprised that she hadn’t killed me in revenge for what I’d pulled. And a fall like the one I’d taken should’ve severely hurt me.

Adéluce must have saved me—but why?

Well, the answer to that was clear enough—she wasn’t done torturing me.

I shook my head. I couldn’t stay down here forever, and I knew no one was coming to look for me.

I took a proper look at the walls on either side of me. They went straight up, but as my eyes adjusted to the low light, I realized they weren’t as smooth as I’d first thought. There were small but perceptible divots I could use as handholds scattered across the surface, and I felt like I might be able to use them to climb up the wall.

“Only one way to find out,” I muttered to myself.

I fitted my fingers into the first tiny crack in the rock and pulled, then slid my foot along the wall until I found a spot that fit my toes. It was agonizingly slow going, but it was progress, nonetheless. Now that my brain had had a chance to calm down, I finally realized where I was. Adéluce had dumped me into some kind of cavern. It was a deep, well-like shaft.

I’d never been inside of something like this, and I didn’t love the feeling of stone all around me. It made me feel claustrophobic, and it reminded me of the rockslide that had killed Kira. Was this what it had felt like to her? When all the rocks had closed in? Why hadn’t she just let me take her away from there? Seconds later and I’m sure we both would’ve gotten out of there—

I tried not to think more about what Kira must’ve experienced in her final moments.

But it was hard not to. Big Mac had been right—Kira’s death *was* my fault—but I wasn’t going to have another death on my conscience. I should’ve run faster. I should’ve never let her use her magic to push me back.

I couldn’t have more regrets, not like this. Which meant I was going to find a way to save Ava, and I was sure as hell going to make sure that Cali never joined Kira on my kill list. I was going to make it my mission in life to keep them both alive and safe.

*No more regrets.*

Every muscle in my body was burning, and my fingers were numb with the effort and from the cold, but I finally made it to the top of the mill and hauled myself over the lip. I wanted to collapse with exhaustion, but I knew I couldn’t afford to do that—I wasn’t necessarily safe, yet.

But—when I looked—the coast was clear. Adéluce was long gone. I hoped she was off somewhere, writhing in pain from the wounds I’d inflicted. The thought made me wonder if I’d get a little break from her while she healed. I couldn’t count on that—a vampire-witch surely had top-notch healing abilities—but I could hope for it all the same.

I got to my feet and took off running again, back toward the Samara pack house.

I was just about to bound up the steps to the front door when I paused, suddenly unsure. What was I going to do once I got inside? I knew Mikah and Gabe would be there, expecting me to make some kind of decision about this stupid kiss thing. But I was at a loss. The kiss wasn’t going to work.

Would it be possible to just put it off?

I knew I couldn’t dither outside the house all day, so I shifted back to human and headed inside. I was about to head upstairs when I heard my name being called.

I looked around to see Knox, beckoning me into the living room.

“What’s up?” I asked tersely.

Knox was holding something, and after a moment, I realized it was that frilly-ass envelope I’d seen earlier.

“Hey, I know we need to talk about Ava,” Knox said quickly, “and I want to hear about whatever you learned from wherever you just went, but we also need to talk about this.” He held up the envelope.

“What is it?” I asked, baffled.

“It’s from the Vanguard pack.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t really have time to respond to their cotillion invitation, or whatever the fuck kind of party they’re throwing now—”

“Xavier, Lucian wants to leave the alliance,” Knox said soberly.

That stopped me for a moment. “For real?”

Knox nodded. “Yeah.”

I took this in, then I shook my head. “Honestly, at this point, I don’t really give a shit what Lucian does. The war is over. The alliance had its uses, but it doesn’t mean shit anymore. It can fall to pieces, for all I care—and the less time I have to spend with Lucian, the better. That guy sucks.”

“You got that right,” Knox agreed, looking down at the envelope. “I just figured you should know what’s going on.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right, thanks for telling me.”

“Sure,” Knox said, tossing the envelope onto the coffee table.

I gave the shrimp an assessing look. “It’s good that you’re thinking about this stuff, Knox. You’re becoming a really strong part of this pack—you’re helping it get better.”

Knox’s eyes went wide. “Whoa—thanks, Xavier. I mean… Thanks,” he said, clearly moved. “Yeah, I was thinking we could maybe—”

“Xavier! Is Xavier here? XAVIER!”

I spun around and sprinted up the stairs. Marissa was standing in the doorway of my bedroom, and as I approached her, I just prayed that nothing else had happened while I’d been gone. My mind was spinning in a million directions.

What if Adéluce had stolen Ava away?

Fuck—what if I’d signed Ava’s death warrant by wounding Adéluce? Of course that would happen the time I finally landed a blow on the bitch. My heart was pounding as I hurried toward Marissa, who was frantically waving me into the room.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“Just come look!”

“Just tell me!” I said as I stepped into the room, terrified of what I was going to find. But I wasn’t prepared for what I actually saw. Relief flooded my chest as I looked over at the bed.

Ava was awake.

**Episode 4457**

I finally managed to find my voice. “What are you talking about? What practice? Who even is this? I think you have the wrong number.”

The person on the other end of the line heaved a gusty sigh, loud enough that I could practically feel the breeze of it through the phone.

“I do *not* have the wrong number. This is Coach Ludwig, from CCU, home of the illustrious and winning Kangarats. Is this or is this not Caliana Hart’s phone number?”

“I-It is,” I stammered, more confused than ever. “But I need to—”

“The only thing you need to do is get your butt over to the gym on the main CCU campus for crew team practice. And I mean now, young lady!”

“Wh—*what?*” I sputtered, more confused than ever. “Crew team—”

“That right,” he snapped. “You were supposed to be here first thing this morning. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but this is *not* the kind of attitude I was expecting after reading your scholarship application essay!”

*Lola*. I narrowed my eyes. I was going to kill her. What the hell had she written in that essay? And how had I ended up on the *crew team*, for crying out loud?

Coach Ludwig was still talking, and I tried to tune back in.

“—expecting you to be an integral part of this team! It’s not like those girls can row without you there, barking out their orders. If you don’t show up, young lady, you’ll be letting everyone down—not just yourself. And that is not the kind of coxswain we need here at CCU. That is not what we do as Kangarats!”

I had about a million questions. What was a Kangarat? And what the *hell* was a coxswain? I wasn’t even totally sure what crew was. Were there boats involved? Sailing, maybe? Honestly, it didn’t really matter. All I knew was that I had to find a way out of whatever hell Lola had gotten me into.

“Listen, Coach, I’m really sorry, but I don’t know anything about—”

Coach Ludwig cut me off again. “You’d *better* be sorry, Miss Hart! But you can apologize to me and the rest of your teammates once you get down here to the gym so we can start practice with our full team!”

“No, that’s not what I was saying. I really mean—”

“I’ll see you in *one hour*, Miss Hart. Sixty minutes. That ought to give you plenty of time to get yourself over to CCU. No more excuses!” he said, then he hung up.

I just stood there frozen for a long moment. Then I looked down at my phone screen, which had gone dark. What the hell had just happened?

I shook my head and slipped my phone back into my pocket. Coach Ludwig didn’t seem like the kind of guy to just let this go, so I was probably going to have to go over in person and explain that I wasn’t qualified to be on his team.

“What the hell is up with that school?” I muttered to myself. Clearly no one there had any idea how to talk to another human being over the phone.

I dropped my pruning shears and headed back inside, where I pulled my purse and coat out of the closet. Coach Ludwig was expecting me in an hour, so I figured I might as well deal with this now. Otherwise, I imagined I’d have many more angry phone calls in my future—maybe even an angry visit.

As I was pulling on my coat, I heard someone call my name and looked up to see Sage and Zainab coming down the stairs.

“Hi,” I said, zipping up my parka. “What’s up, ladies?”

“We’ve been looking for you,” Zainab said. “We were just heading outside to find you.”

That surprised me. I really liked Sage and Zainab, but I didn’t know them all that well, and we’d never really spent any time together, so it seemed slightly odd that they’d been looking for me.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked.

“Well, that’s exactly it,” Sage said.

I frowned. “What’s it?”  
 Sage shrugged. “There’s nothing wrong.”

“Okay…” I said slowly, still not following.

Sage smiled. “There’s nothing wrong, Cali, but you’re the Redwood Luna, and we wanted to spend some time with you.”

“Oh!” I said, surprised.

“It’s been a while since our wine night,” Zainab pointed out.

“That’s true.”

“And we just wanted to see how you were doing after…” Sage gestured vaguely. “Well, *everything*.”

“Oh,” I said softly. “That’s really nice of you. Thanks, you two. Yeah, I’m doing okay, but I’m actually heading out right now.”

“Where are you going?” Zainab asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I have to deal with a mess Lola got me into.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay. Maybe we can just catch you later,” Sage said, looking slightly disappointed.

“You could tag along, if you want,” I said. “Want to come help me get out of college enrollment?”

Sage looked at Zainab, who shrugged and nodded. “Sure, I guess so. If that’s okay?”

“It’s fine. I could use the backup,” I said, searching in my purse for my car keys.

“This’ll be fun,” Zainab said, grinning. “I’ve always wanted to see a real college. I mean, I’ve seen movies, but you never know. I wonder if we can find a toga party…”

I frowned at her. “Zainab, it’s ten in the morning.”

She laughed. “I’m going to get my hopes up anyway. You never know.”

I laughed and waved the girls out the door. “Let’s get going.”

We walked down the porch steps and piled into my car. I was glad we’d finally gotten it back from the shop, otherwise I’d have had to ask to borrow Greyson’s, and I just wasn’t up for explaining this whole stupid situation to him—especially since I barely understood it myself.

I pulled out of the driveway and turned toward the CCU campus. I was glad I’d brought Zainab and Sage along—their chatter helped take my mind off how frustrated I was. And when we arrived at the campus, they were both glued to the windows, looking hungrily out at the tall stone buildings.

“Look at that one!” Sage squealed. “It’s just like in *Dead Poets Society*!”

“And look at that!” Zainab added, looking out the opposite window. “It looks like a castle!”

I didn’t bother looking around. I was on a mission, and not in the mood to be distracted. I drove straight to the athletics building and pulled sharply into a parking space.

Throwing my door open, I headed inside, ready to deal with this nonsense. Sage and Zainab didn’t bother holding in their gasps as we came in. The gym itself was pretty impressive, I had to admit. It had all new equipment, and the ceilings were high. It even looked like there was a running track going around on the second floor.

“You two stay here,” I told them. “I’ll be right back.”

I marched resolutely through the building, following the signs to the “Athletic Administration Offices.” Coach Ludwig’s office appeared to be near the back of the building, and as I approached it, I could hear the same booming voice I’d been subjected to during the phone call. I steeled myself to meet the huge, burly man who matched that voice, but when I arrived at the door marked “COACH ALLEN LUDWIG,” my jaw dropped.

The man inside the office, sitting behind the desk, was not the big football-type coach I’d concocted in my mind. He was short and skinny and completely bald. The top of his head was round and smooth, and it shone like it had been polished. Based on appearance alone, he didn’t look scary, but his voice was certainly intimidating.

He looked up as I walked in, and his eyes narrowed. I stood in the doorway, wringing my hands together. He was still on the phone, but when he saw me, he slammed it down without saying goodbye.

Okay, maybe he just was intimidating, period.

“Caliana Hart,” he said in that same accusatory voice.

I gulped. His voice still made me feel about two inches tall, and I nodded. I already had a bad feeling about how this was going to go… I just had to remain calm and explain my side. The phone was so impersonal sometimes; surely, he would be able to see me, talk to me, and understand that I was not crew material.

I took a deep breath, trying to get my nerve back, and barreled ahead. “Coach, I want to disenroll. I can’t do this—I can’t be part of the crew team like you wanted. I’m sorry.”

Coach Ludwig looked at me for a long moment.

“No,” he finally said.

I stared at him. “What?”

“No,” he repeated. “It’s a fairly simple word to understand, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I understand the word, but what do you mean, *no?*”

He shook his shiny head. “I mean *no*. I do not accept your disenrollment, Caliana Hart.” He smiled, the expression slightly menacing. “Welcome to the CCU crew team.”

**Episode 4458**

**Greyson**

Leaving Cali with Violet, Charlie, and Lilac—who was still riding the lawn mower like a bull at a rodeo—I headed inside and made a beeline for my study, which I knew would be empty and quiet. It was also where I’d left Lucian’s letter, which annoyed me like an infected hangnail every time I thought about it. After I looked it over again, I’d call Xavier next to see if he’d gotten one and get his thoughts.

But as I reached for the doorknob, I heard the sound of Elle’s voice, and I looked around. It sounded like she was speaking to someone in the kitchen. A moment later, I was walking into the kitchen myself, without any real memory of how I’d gotten there.

“Hi, Greyson,” Elle said, smiling at me.

I tried to smile back, but I was too confused.

What the hell had just happened? I’d been on my way to the study.

I frowned. Okay, this wasn’t good. I didn’t like that I’d just lost moments of time—or that I seemed to have moved without conscious thought. Whatever had just happened to me seemed dangerous. It seemed like trouble. I couldn’t afford to be walking around in a fugue state. I was the Alpha of my pack, and had been the leader of an alliance that had just won a very narrow victory. A lot of people were depending on me, and I couldn’t just lose control like that. I didn’t want to randomly find myself somewhere dangerous because of this sire bond nonsense.

Not for the first time, my thoughts went to the witch sisters. I took a step out of the kitchen doorway. I’d been trying to avoid taking this step, but the situation had just escalated. I needed to call them. Now.

I reached for my phone, but then I hesitated. Maybe I should talk to Cali about this—she’d definitely want to know about it. But I also knew it would stress her out. I felt a twinge of guilt at the idea of not discussing this with her first, but maybe it really wasn’t such a good idea. She was already so anxious after our conversation with Rowena; maybe it would be better to give her time to unwind. She had been so relaxed after we’d made love, and I didn’t want to be the reason why her shoulders tensed up again. Anyway, I’d be able to fill her in on everything later, and after I made the call, I’d have more information to give her, depending on what the three sisters had to tell me.

And I wouldn’t commit to anything they suggested without talking to Cali first. I looked down at my phone and knew that I could handle getting in touch with the sisters on my own.

Out in the hallway, I leaned against the wall and scrolled through my contact list until I found Chloe’s contact. I pressed the call button and waited.

It rang. And rang. And rang.

“Shit,” I muttered. I didn’t want to leave a voicemail for them. What the hell would that even sound like?

*Hi, it’s Greyson. Just wanted you to weigh in on some of the weird shit that’s been happening to me. Call back at your convenience.*

I ended the call and tried again. It rang six times, and I was about to give up when someone finally answered.

“Hello?” said a man’s gruff voice.

I frowned. “Hello?”

“Who’s calling? Who is this?” he asked.

I was surprised to hear the voice. “You first. Who’s answering?”

“Nah, *I* asked first,” the man said shortly. “Tell me who you are.”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Listen, I don’t know who you are, but I know you don’t own this phone number.”

“How do you know anything?” the man asked quickly.

This conversation was starting to hurt my brain. “I know who this number belongs to, man, and I don’t know—”

“No,” the man interrupted. “I meant, how do you *know* *anything*?”

“What?”

“How do *any* of us know anything?” he continued. “Have you ever considered that what you think is true might actually be a lie? Have you thought about that? Like, really, *really* thought about it?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. This call was going exactly how I should’ve expected it to go. Useless and not to the point. I needed to get a hold on things.

“No, I haven’t considered that, man, and now is really not the time for me,” I said shortly. “If this is still Chloe’s phone, tell her to call me back. That’s all I’m looking for right now. Got it?”

The man was quiet for a moment.

“Who’s ‘me’?” he finally asked.

“Greyson,” I said. “Greyson Evers. She knows who I am. She has my number—”

I stopped talking when the man burst out laughing. This whole conversation had felt like a riddle, but this was even weirder. I was losing my patience with this asshole.

“Just tell her Greyson called, and for her to—”

The man ended the call.

I looked down at my phone, baffled. I just hoped whoever the hell I’d just spoken to would pass my message along. If he didn’t, I would have to try again, or maybe I’d have to go up to Portland and find them at that bar where Maren had introduced me to them. A phone call would be fuck of a lot more convenient, though.

I rubbed my head, feeling the beginnings of a familiar headache. All my tension seemed to be coalescing right above my eyes, making my head feel like a taut rubber band.

Back in my contacts, I scrolled to Xavier’s name and dialed. I’d wanted to think for a while before I called him, but what was the point? I might as well just go ahead and call—just to get it over with.

Xavier picked up after two rings. “What?”

“Hello to you, too,” I said shortly.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something here,” he said, his voice edged with tension.

“Then I won’t keep you long,” I said sarcastically. “I just wanted to find out if Lucian sent you a letter, too.”

“Yeah, I got it. Frilly-ass paper. It was stupid,” he said bluntly.

There was a scuffling noise on his end and a muffled conversation, like Xavier had covered over his phone so I wouldn’t hear.

I frowned. I knew there was a lot going on over there with Ava’s attack and everything. I was sure that was the reason for him sounding so weird and distracted.

But we did need to talk about Lucian, so I plowed ahead.

“Yeah, agreed,” I said. “Especially about that dumbass paper. I can’t imagine how much that guy spends a year on stationery. Anyway, I’m calling to talk about the whole prisoner situation and how this new development affects it.”

“The prisoners?” Xavier asked vaguely, like he was barely listening to me.

“Yeah, the prisoners,” I repeated. “We need to figure out what to do about them—and about Lucian. They’re in his possession, which might cause some trouble.”

Xavier made a frustrated noise. “Yeah, listen, I can’t think about that right now.”

“Can’t think about it right now?” I repeated.

“I’ve got some pack stuff going on over here,” he said. “Lucian’s a dick, but he’s always a dick, and he can wait, right? Seriously, he’s the last thing I care about right now.”

My frown deepened, and my stomach knotted with guilt—I’d thought about Ava, but I’d probably waited too long to ask about her. “How’s Ava doing?”

“Um…” Xavier sounded uncertain, which was strange. He never sounded uncertain. It was one of the things that really bugged me about my brother—he was *always* certain, to the point of being bullheadedly confident. “She’s… I think she might end up being okay, actually.”

“Oh, good,” I said slowly. But if Ava was fine, then why did he sound so strange? “That’s really good, man. I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yeah…” Xavier said, trailing off.

My thoughts went back to what Rowena had said—about Xavier’s bond with Cali. I was glad to hear that Ava was going to be okay. She wasn’t my favorite person, but she was a good fighter, and I knew she cared deeply for her pack. And I was glad for Xavier’s sake, too. She was his Luna.

But I could admit—at least to myself—that I was glad to hear that Ava was on the mend for other reasons, too. More selfish reasons.

I wasn’t going to say any of that out loud, of course, but just as I was about to turn the conversation back toward Lucian and the prisoners, there was a deafening crash from Xavier’s side of the call. It was loud enough that even I flinched.

“What the hell was that?” I yelled, my heart pounding.

Xavier gave a shout, and then the line went dead.

**Episode 4459**

**Artemis**

“Are you sure about that, Artemis?” Adair asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

He looked worried. “You want to stay in the Fae world to see if you can locate Kadmos.”

“Yes. I know how you feel about this, and I know how this must sound to you,” I said hurriedly, trying to forestall any argument Adair might make, “but I know what I want. I need to find out what happened to my family, once and for all.”

I knew Adair didn’t agree, but in my heart, I felt that my father was still alive. And if Kadmos was still alive, then that meant I’d finally be able to find out more about who I was and where I came from.

Meeting Orla had been life-changing. Finding out that I had a mother—a *living* mother—and a sister had changed everything for me. I’d spent so many years believing that I was totally alone in the world, and finding out that I actually had a family had blown my mind. Some days, I felt like I was still getting used to it.

And it wasn’t just Orla and Cali—I had Tom as well. And Adair. It felt like I was slowly piecing together the family I’d always wanted.

But the idea of finding my father felt different, somehow. There was a chance that finding him could give me something more—the history I wanted. He could give me the grounding in my Fae ancestry that I’d always looked for. It was something Adair couldn’t give me. I wanted to know *who* I came from, not only where.

“Yes,” I said again, speaking partly to myself, this time. “I’m sure about this.”

Adair didn’t say anything. He stood there quietly, keeping his own counsel—as usual. Torin hadn’t been listening to our conversation. He’d wandered away and was busy looking at the verdant growth of plants that surrounded us, hunting for the herb we needed. Which made sense—that was the reason we’d come in the first place.

I took a deep breath. I knew what I had to do.

I turned to Adair. “I owe you an apology.”

“For what?” he asked, frowning.

I glanced away, feeling awkward, but then I forced myself to meet his eyes. “I never should have accused you of only wanting Kadmos to be alive for your own benefit. Of wanting him around to solve your problems.” I’d said it what felt like such a long time ago at this point, but I knew neither of us had forgotten. “That was a shitty thing to say, and I’m sorry. I know—or I’m learning—that sibling relationships can be hard, and I shouldn’t have said those things to you.” I shook my head. “I can’t even imagine what I would do if I thought Cali was gone. Losing her would destroy me.”

Adair was quiet for a moment, then he nodded. “Thank you, Artemis. I accept your apology. But I have to tell you, I really do think Kadmos is gone.” His voice was gentler than usual. “But I can see how important this is to you, so I will support you. I’ll do what I can to help you in your search.”

I stared at Adair, startled. It wasn’t the response I’d thought I’d get. Another lecture or a nice way of trying to let me down.

“You’ll help me?” I asked. I wasn’t quite sure that I’d heard him right.

“Yes.”

“Even though you don’t believe your brother is alive, you’ll still help me?” I reiterated. “But… *why?*”

Adair shrugged. “We’re family, Artemis. That’s why. I want to be there for you in all the ways I wasn’t able to be there for my brother. Besides, now that the war is over, there’s no reason not to start searching again.”

“That’s true,” I said, feeling breathless.

“Now,” he added, his voice getting sterner again, “I have to tell you that it won’t be easy, this search of yours. It will take time and resources.”

There was the Adair I knew. “Right.”

“And we need to find more information before we can truly begin.” Adair was in full brainstorming mode, now. “We might want to take advantage of the resources at our disposal here in the Fae world.”

I nodded, then glanced over at Torin. We’d come for the herbs, and I wasn’t sure if the other Fae we’d brought with us was interested in an extended stay. But we *were* already here… We could always help Torin get back and then stay longer. He could tell the others back at the pack house what we were doing. It was sudden, but… I’d wanted this for *years.*

I looked back at Adair. “I’m looking forward to proving you wrong about my father, Adair.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that right?”

I nodded firmly. “I’ve spoken to my grandfather—Orla’s father—and he told me he hasn’t seen Kadmos in the Fae afterlife. That has to mean something, right?”

Adair didn’t look convinced, but he nodded. “Perhaps it does. And I hope you’re right, Artemis. I take no pleasure in the belief that my brother is dead. I would love to be proven wrong.”

“And you understand the risk you’re taking here, right?” I asked. “And you’re okay with it? I mean, I don’t want to lose the uncle I just found while looking for the father I’ve already lost.”

“That is my worry, not yours,” he said. “I understand the risks, and I will act accordingly. Anyway, I think we can get the information we need quickly and quietly. After that, we can head back to the human world to think it over before we make our next move. Besides, even if I do get caught, the worst that will happen is that I’ll be dragged back to a life I don’t want.”

“Well, that still sounds pretty unpleasant,” I said. “And don’t forget about the *wife* you don’t want.”

His gaze sharpened on me. “That might be true. If I am caught, however, I assure you that I’ll be able to handle whatever happens afterward. I’ve done it before, and I could do it again. But if *you* are caught with me, Artemis, and your identity is brought to light, the consequences could be severe. The recovered daughter, long thought dead, of a family that essentially serves as Fae royalty? Many people would find use in your capture.”

I shivered at his words. I knew he was right, and that was what scared me. If I was caught, I’d either end up as a pawn in some political game I didn’t understand—a game that would put me in constant and very real danger—or I’d be killed as a way to retaliate against my family.

Adair gave me a steady look. “Previously, you had the advantage of anonymity in the Fae world. No one knew who you were, and anyone could look at you and see a fierce warrior who’s not to be messed with. But now, if someone recognizes me or catches wind of who we’re looking for… It’s a risk. And we—”

Suddenly, Torin gave a shout. We both spun around to see him holding up a bunch of herbs and jogging toward us, a grin lighting up his face.

“I found the herbs!” Torin said happily. “A big patch of them! I grabbed a whole bunch so we won’t have to worry about coming all the way over here for them again!”

Torin’s arms were filled with the red plants, their lacy leaves brushing against his excited face.

“That’s good,” I said vaguely.

“Thank you, Fae world, for this gift and for your bounty!” Torin sang out, looking up at the trees that surrounded us. “We are your servants, and we are grateful.”

“Yes, indeed,” Adair said shortly. He gave a curt nod to the trees, then turned back to me with a businesslike expression. “We should go. We can regroup and plan how best to navigate the Fae world to get the information we need.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

And it was only fair that we took Torin back, first. He’d only come to get the herbs—he definitely hadn’t signed on for a quest to find my long-lost father.

We turned and started back toward the lightning-struck tree that we’d used to come here. It was our ticket back to the human world, but I froze in my tracks when I heard the distinct sound of a twig snapping behind us. I’d spent too much time as a bounty hunter either pursuing or being pursued to mistake that sound.

Adair had stopped as well.

He shot me a look. “You heard that?” he whispered.

I nodded. “I heard it.”

Torin—oblivious to the twig snapping and to our whispered conversation, was still marching toward the split tree. He’d just turned back—presumably to see why we’d stopped—when I heard the deafening sound of something massive crashing through the woods behind us.

Adair’s response was the quickest—and the loudest. “RUN!”

**Episode 4460**

**Xavier**

“Xavier—”

I heard Greyson calling for me as Ava rushed toward me, and as she shoved past me, the phone went flying out of my hand.

I stared at the bed, struggling to process what had happened in the last few seconds. I’d been on the phone with Greyson—talking about god knew what—and then Ava had leapt out of bed with the speed of a fucking cheetah. I hadn’t been ready for it, mostly because when I’d first come into the room, she hadn’t moved at all. She’d just sat there on the bed, staring silently. Her eyes had been blank, and she hadn’t even looked at me. She hadn’t even made a sound. It had been unnerving as hell, but at least she’d been awake.

And then, while I was on the phone with Greyson, something had changed, and she’d jumped from the bed.

“Xavier!” Marissa was shouting at me. “*Do* something!”

Finally my brain caught up. I spun around and went sprinting after Ava, leaving my phone on the bedroom floor.

As I burst into the hall, I caught sight of her on the stairs. Damn, she was moving fast. Ava was always fast, but this was strange—she was practically a blur. How was this happening? How was she moving so quickly?

What with the running and Marissa’s screaming, we were causing enough chaos that people were sticking their heads out of their bedrooms to see what was going on.

“Xavier—”

“What’s happening?”

“Is everything okay?”

Ignoring everyone, I sprinted downstairs and stopped, looking around. Where was she? Where had she gone? How had she just *disappeared*?

“Xavier, what’s happening—”

“Where’s Ava?” I demanded.

Ronden—a Samara wolf I knew only slightly—shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her.”

What the hell was happening? None of this made any sense.

I lifted my head and scented the air. I could smell her, which meant I could track her, even if I couldn’t see her.

Sprinting out of the house, I shifted as I launched myself off the porch, landing on four paws. It was even easier to follow her trail as a wolf, and I followed it into the forest.

My heart was pounding hard, and I soon realized exactly where Ava was headed.

The Redwood lake house appeared in the distance, through the bare trees. I listened hard as I ran, but I didn’t hear a thing. Everything was still and quiet—almost eerily calm.

I didn’t like it.

Lifting my nose into the air, I took a deep breath, trying to hone in on the direction of Ava’s scent. I didn’t see her anywhere, and while I could smell her scent on the air, it was… *everywhere*. Instead of creating a trail, it seemed to have dispersed—suddenly, it was all around me. I had no idea where she was, but she seemed to be everywhere and nowhere, all at once.

Stepping out of the trees, I stopped and looked around. There was nothing, and it freaked me out. I’d never encountered anything like this mindfuck before. Why wasn’t my sense of smell working properly? What the hell was I supposed to do?

With a sigh, I shifted back to my human form and—with one last look around at the quiet stillness—headed toward the house.

The impulse didn’t make much sense, but I decided to look inside. Maybe Ava had gone into the house, for whatever reason.

I forced the door open and looked around. The house was quiet. No one from the Redwood pack seemed to be here. The silence continued to thud loudly in my ears. My gut was telling me something wasn’t right about any of this…

“Ava!” I called. My voice bounced off the high ceilings. “Ava? Are you here? Are you okay?” I walked deeper into the house, my footsteps almost painfully loud in the silence. “Can you hear me?”

I started wandering through the rooms, checking all of them. It was a big house, so I tried to work fast, but her scent still seemed like it was everywhere all at once. That couldn’t be right. I worried that I wasn’t going to find her.

“Ava! Can you hear me? Ava!”

Still no response.

“Ava!”

Standing in the main hallway, I turned in a circle. I was starting to feel truly crazed. What the hell was going on?

A thought occurred to me—a terrible thought—and it seemed to freeze my blood.

What if Adéluce had taken her? She’d already bitten her. What if this time she—

Suddenly, there didn’t seem to be enough oxygen in the room, but I shook my head firmly. No, I couldn’t let myself do this. I couldn’t assume the worst. And anyway, it just wasn’t possible—I would have felt it if Ava had died. I would’ve felt our mate bond breaking.

I thought back to the first—and only—time I’d felt that happen, and a remembered ache pulsed through my body. That was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I never wanted to feel it again.

I never *would* feel it again.

I passed a hand over my eyes and kept searching.

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I looked through the entire house, but Ava wasn’t there. Frustrated, I headed back outside and thought for a long moment. I wondered if I was ignoring something crucial, here. There was a chance that I knew exactly where she was, though the thought filled me with fear. I hadn’t let myself consider the possibility, because I *really* didn’t want her to be there—but it felt like I was running out of time, and I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

With a shaking breath, I turned and headed back into the woods, running toward the spot near the lake where Adéluce had bitten Ava.

And there she was.

I stopped in my tracks when I saw the lithe figure standing among the trees. Her dark hair stirred in the gentle breeze. From a distance, she looked so still and perfect, she didn’t even look real.

“Ava?” I called, my voice catching.

She was standing in the exact spot where Adéluce had attacked her. Her back was to me, and she didn’t turn when I called her name. She hadn’t even flinched.

Dread spread through my chest as I walked toward her. I felt like I was in a dream—or a nightmare—but I had to get to her.

I stopped in front of her and looked at her carefully.

She was standing still. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing—thank god she was breathing—was even. If she hadn’t been standing in front of me, and I hadn’t just seen her leap out of bed, I could’ve believed that she was still in a coma.

Her beautiful face was calm, and strangely peaceful.

“Ava?” I breathed, my voice rough with fear and emotion. “Ava? Can you hear me? It’s me, Xavier.”

She didn’t move.

“Ava, *please* wake up,” I pleaded, my voice catching.

Still nothing.

Taking a deep breath, I reached up and brushed her shoulder.

Then, like I’d electrocuted her with my touch, her eyes flew open and she *screamed*. The sound was deafening in the quiet woods. Her face had lost its eerie calm, and her eyes were wide and searching. She shoved me back so hard that I nearly fell, but I just managed to keep my balance.

“Ava—”

She moved away from me, running backward so fast that I was shocked. I’d never seen her move like that—and at that speed—before. Frankly, it was terrifying.

“Just tell me what’s wrong!” I begged her. “Tell me what I can do to help you!”

But she didn’t answer. Her eyes were still wide and startled, but she didn’t make a sound. She was staring at me like she was afraid, and after a moment, I realized her cheeks were glistening with tears.

She was crying.

It felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I wanted to throw my head back and howl. I wanted to shift and destroy whatever was doing this to her—but I had no idea what that was. I couldn’t do anything, and I *hated* it. Why was this happening to me again? Why could I never do anything to save the people around me?

“Ava,” I breathed, practically crying myself, now. “Please. *Please*.”

Her expression changed as she tilted her head. She was still crying—I could see the tears streaming down her face—but she was looking at me with a curiously blank expression, like I was a life form she’d never seen before, and she was interested in what I was going to do next.

This strange mask was even worse than the crying, and when she opened her mouth, my heart sank. Because when she spoke, it wasn’t with her own voice.

“Xavier Evers. You didn’t think you could just attack me without consequences, did you?” Adéluce’s voice emerged from Ava’s mouth. Ava’s mouth curved up into Adéluce’s twisted smile. “I’m only just getting started.”

**Episode 4461**

*Welcome to the CCU crew team.*

I blinked, trying to understand what I’d just heard.

“What? I-I don’t even… *Crew?* *What?*” I sputtered, trying to wrap my brain around what had just happened. “No way. I mean, I can’t possibly do this,” I finally managed to say. “I don’t even know what a crew team *does*!”

But, having had his say, Coach Ludwig was no longer paying any attention to me. His eyes were back on his computer. He was typing—and not responding to me.

It looked very much like he considered our conversation over, but it wasn’t. Not by a longshot. I wasn’t ready to give up. Not yet.

“Okay, what the hell even is a *coxswain*?” I yelled, trying to break through to him. “How can I sign up to do something I’ve never even heard of?”

Yelling at least recaptured the coach’s attention, and he looked up at me, giving me a long, disbelieving stare.

Then he sighed and shifted in his chair, so he was looking straight at me. “Listen, Hart, let’s just stop screwing around, okay? Can we just lay our cards on the table here?”

“Um… I guess?” I said, not sure what he was talking about.

“I’ve seen this before from other athletes, okay? You’ve lost your confidence, and you’re trying to wiggle out of this. I can see that. But you shouldn’t feel that way. Everything you need to do the job is right there,” he said, pointing at me.

I looked down with a frown, studying my jacket and the shirt underneath it, wondering what the hell he was talking about.

But I didn’t have a chance to ask, because he was still talking.

“It’s right there in your heart, Hart. I know you’re afraid, but you don’t need to be. You’re not going to be out there alone. We’ve got a whole team here to cheer you on. It’s a good group, and you’ve got me, too. Together, you’re going to be great. And don’t you worry—I’ll make you into the best damn coxswain anyone’s ever seen. You hear me?”

Something surged in my chest, and I nodded before I could stop myself. I didn’t really know why, but I was starting to feel excited. Really excited, like I *could* become the best damn coxswain anyone had ever seen.

Just as soon as I learned what a coxswain did.

Coach Ludwig got to his feet and leaned across the desk, his hand extended. “How about it, Hart? Are you in? Can we do this together? As a team?”

I grinned, shaking the coach’s hand. “I’m in. You can count on me, Coach. I can totally do this!”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he said with an approving smile. “Now get out of my office.”

I turned and walked out of the office. When I stepped back into the gym, I looked around, able to actually take it all in now that I wasn’t in total panic mode.

It was a huge, barn-like structure, with soaring ceilings. The floors and pillars were grey concrete, but the light coming in from the high windows chased away the dreariness and made the space seem warm and inviting. There was a banner strung across the far wall, above the main doors. It was bright white and had an illustrated kangaroo rat printed on it, with its tail wrapped around an oar. The phrase “The Fighting Kangarats” was printed across it.

The high ceilings made the gym echo-y, but it was nearly quiet, with only the metallic sound of the occasional weight being re-racked. There were a few guys scattered around, working out on the machines or lifting free weights. There was a row of rowing machines, and over in the corner there were two guys doing some yoga moves on a bright yellow exercise ball. No one was paying any attention to me. No one had even looked at me.

As I scanned the room, I realized I didn’t see any girls. It looked like this was just the men’s team, but I wondered where *my* teammates were—

Hang on. What the hell was I talking about? *Teammates?* What the hell was I doing? What had I just gotten myself into?

Before that thought process could devolve into total panic, something drew my attention. I spotted half a dozen guys huddled around one of the weight machines in the far corner. Not a big deal, in and of itself—but then I spotted Sage in the middle of the huddle, and my stomach dropped.

Oh no.

I jogged over to see what was going on. “Sage,” I said breathlessly. “What’s up? What are you doing?”

She didn’t seem to hear me—either that or she didn’t want to answer. Her gaze was fixed on something in front of her—the thing that had drawn the rest of the crowd to the corner.

I peeked around the elbow of one of the huge dudes in the crowd and saw what they were all looking at.

It was Zainab. She was doing pull-ups on the elevated bar of the weight machine, her body long and lean as she hoisted it up over the bar again and again with hypnotizing grace.

“Oh my god,” I muttered when I realized that the guys were counting her pull-ups. I dropped my head into my hands. This was not good.

“Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight…”

I could hear awe and wonder in the guys’ voices as Zainab went on and on and on, and Sage muttered something too low for me to hear.

“What?” I asked, leaning closer to her.

“This is so hot,” Sage said without taking her eyes off Zainab.

“Ninety-nine!” the crowd bellowed.

Admittedly, I didn’t know all that much about working out or strength training—the most I typically did in the basement weight room was pick up a couple of five-pound dumbbells and wave them around—but I did know that doing a hundred pull-ups was a lot. Maybe even suspiciously so.

I shook my head. I *also* knew that the werewolves didn’t need to go around advertising how supernaturally strong they were. They were supposed to stay low-key in public spaces. Displays of strength like this would only ever attract questions—questions we didn’t want to answer.

“Zainab!” I said pointedly. “I’m ready to go.”

I had hoped that this would draw Zainab’s attention, but all it actually did was draw the attention of every guy gathered around the pull-up bar. As one, they turned to stare at me.

There was a beat of awkward silence, during which no one seemed to know what to do. Then a guy stepped toward me. He was tall and muscled—I could tell because he wasn’t wearing a shirt. He had golden blond hair, and he looked like the kind of guy who would’ve been cast in a movie as *Frat Guy #2.* I couldn’t quite read the expression on his handsome face, but it wasn’t exactly welcoming.

“One hundred!” Zainab said. She dropped to the ground and dusted off her hands, looking for all the world like she’d just gone on a leisurely walk. She looked around with a smile. “Is it just me, or did the temperature drop a few degrees?”

The guys were still staring at me, so—not knowing what else to do—I raised my hand and waved. Awkwardly.

“Hi,” I said, forcing a smile.

Frat Guy #2 looked me over. “And who are *you*?”

“Oh, uh… I’m Caliana Hart. Cali. I’m the new women’s coxswain?” It came out like a question.

“I gotta say, that word is not said at all like it’s spelled,” Zainab interjected.

“I think the origin of the word is Middle English,” a guy with dark hair said quietly. “A lot of our language evolved from—”

“That’s enough, Max,” Frat Guy #2 said sharply, sending a glare toward Max.

Max just shrugged, then looked at me. “Anyway, you’re not the women’s coxswain. You’re ours.” He offered a small smile, but I couldn’t return it at the moment.

*I’m on the* men’s *crew team? Is that allowed?*

Lola really picked the sport I knew the least about, didn’t she?

I felt like the room was starting to spin around me. I couldn’t believe I’d gotten myself into this mess. Well, that Lola had. And actually, I *could* believe it, but I didn’t like it.

“Oh, right,” I replied lamely, trying to cover my surprise. “Well, it’s nice to meet you all.” When no one else said anything, I looked at Frat Guy #2. I decided I should probably know his real name if he was my teammate. “What’s your name?” I asked him.

“It’s Gael,” he replied shortly.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ga—”

“And I’m the captain of this team,” he went on, as though I hadn’t spoken. His eyes narrowed as he looked me over again. “And, as captain, I can tell you right now that we do *not* need a new coxswain.”

**Episode 4462**

**Greyson**

I looked down at my phone, baffled. The call had ended. Frustrated, I called Xavier back and listened to it ring until the voicemail kicked on.

“Xavier Evers. Leave a message.”

“Hey, it’s me. What’s happening over there? The call just ended. Are you okay? Just… Call me back.”

There was a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach as I looked down at the blank screen of my phone. Xavier had been so distracted the whole time I’d been trying to talk to him, and then the call had just cut off. It sounded like he’d dropped his phone… Or it had been knocked from his hand. But by who?

My instinct was to rush over to the Samara pack house and see for myself what the hell was going on over there. And to make sure my brother was okay. I knew he’d hate to be checked up on—by me, no less—but I felt like I had to go. He was probably fine… But what if he wasn’t? What if something actually *had* happened, and I did nothing?

I’d started for the door before I even realized what I was doing. I figured I’d just run over really quickly and check in. Even though I knew everything was probably fine.

I made it all the way to the porch before I stopped myself.

Wait—what the hell was I doing? I was the Redwood Alpha. I had responsibilities here, at *my* pack house. Was this really the most pressing thing I needed to be doing right now?

And Xavier was a Samara now. Not just a pack member, either—he was the Alpha. He was in charge of his pack, and checking up on him wasn’t my job or my responsibility. He wasn’t part of my pack anymore, and I needed to stop acting like he was.

*But he’s one of my little brothers…*

I shook my head, annoyed with myself. If Xavier needed help, he knew he could count on me. The Samaras knew that the Redwoods would always back them up. But until he asked for help, I was just going to let my brother handle his own pack business. If I knew Xavier, that was what he’d want, anyway. It was what I’d have wanted, in his position.

I turned and headed back inside. That was the right choice… Though I figured I’d check in again later, just to make sure everything was okay—which I was sure it was.

Besides, it wasn’t like I didn’t have my own pack business to deal with here. And Xavier could handle himself and his pack. He’d proven that much.

So I headed to my study. I still had work to do on this problem with Lucian and the prisoners. Lucian was acting unilaterally, and I couldn’t just let the Vanguards do whatever the hell they wanted with the Bitterfang prisoners. Plus, there was the little issue of Ethaniel and his threats being so far out of my control. If Ethaniel was just released, that could be very bad for me. And Elle.

These thoughts were churning in my head as I sat down at the desk, but I looked up when I heard someone calling my name. It was Rishika, out in the hallway.

Back on my feet, I opened the door. “What’s up?” I asked. “What do you need?”

“Oh, there you are,” she said, walking toward me. “I wanted to know if there were any updates.”

“Updates?” I asked.

“On the Vanguard situation,” she clarified.

“Oh, yeah.” I rubbed my eyes. “There are. Lucian sent the same letter we got to all the other packs in the alliance.”

Rishika’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? Wow.”

“Wow what?” I asked.

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “I just never thought he’d actually go through with it.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I always thought Lucian was pretty full of shit when it came to his threats, especially since the whole thing with Seluna kind of spooked him, but here we are…” I trailed off, eyeing Rishika curiously as she checked her phone. Again.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding vaguely as she looked down at her phone.

I frowned. It wasn’t like Rishika to be so distracted or into her phone. “Is there anything else that’s bothering you, Rishika? Anything you wanted to talk about?”

Her head snapped up. “Like what?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know, it just seems like your mind is somewhere else,” I said, nodding toward the phone in her hand.

She sighed and slipped the phone into the back pocket of her jeans. “I’m sorry. I’m listening.”

“What’s up?” I asked.

She flinched a little. “I just haven’t heard from Artemis in a while.”

“Oh,” I said. I thought about it and realized I hadn’t heard from the Fae since they’d left either. But I also hadn’t tried to contact them.

Rishika nodded. “She’s not answering any of my texts.”

I glanced at the clock in the living room. “Have they really been gone that long? It doesn’t seem like it. Anyway, I’m sure everything is fine.”

Rishika rolled her shoulders. “Yeah, I know. I just have this feeling I can’t seem to shake. But I’m sure you’re probably right. Artemis can take care of herself in the Fae world.”

I remembered my first encounters with “Artemis the bounty hunter” and chuckled. “You can say that again.”

Rishika cleared her throat. “Okay, so—Lucian. He wants to leave the alliance and has found a brand-new way to act like an idiot. Do you think it’s because of Elle?”

“Why do you ask that?” I said quickly.

“You know, because Elle decided to leave the Vanguards and come back here?”

I felt myself tense at the question. Logically, I understood why Rishika would ask, but logic didn’t stop me from feeling protective of Elle.

“I don’t think that’s what’s happening,” I said quickly. “And don’t go around saying that to Elle. I don’t want her to feel like she can’t be here, or that what Lucian’s up to these days is her fault in some way—”

“No, that’s definitely not what I’m saying,” Rishika said, shaking her head. “Of course Elle’s welcome here. And Lucian’s a wild card—I’m not blaming her for what’s happened. But keeping in mind Lucian’s motivations might help us decide how to deal with him, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, rubbing my head. “And yeah, I mean, Elle leaving the Vanguard palace likely pushed Lucian in the direction of sending that letter.” I looked at Rishika’s raised brows. “Okay, yes, it *definitely* pushed him. But it’s Elle’s right to be anywhere she wants to be.”

“I completely agree,” Rishika said firmly. “Elle’s not a prisoner to their mate bond. I’m just curious about what this really means for the pack.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “The alliance is so new, I just wonder about its stability.”

“Well, don’t,” I said. “The alliance is still in place. The Vanguard is the only pack to have left it—and that actually puts us in a position of strength.”

“You think?”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “Leaving the alliance at this point was a poor strategic move on Lucian’s part. It was an emotional choice, and those are rarely *good* choices.”

Rishika thought about this for a moment, taking it in. “Well, I think what we really need to consider now is what comes next.”

“Next?” I asked.

“Yes, next,” she said. “What is Lucian going to try in order to hurt you? We need to be prepared on that front. What do you think we should be doing to get ready?”

I thought about the question and about the ways that Lucian could get to me. The scariest options I could think of were the sire bond and the council. One of those I was already dealing with, and I was hoping I’d hear back from the witches soon. They always got back to me eventually, but they moved according to their own time. I could only hope it would happen sooner rather than later.

But the other way Lucian could get to me—the council… Well, that was another matter.

I looked at Rishika. “We need to find out more about the council.”

She nodded, but before she had a chance to respond, my phone started to ring. I pulled it out, hoping it was my brother, but I was surprised to see Aysel’s name on the screen.

“I have to take this,” I said to Rishika, who glanced down at the screen.

She frowned when she saw the name. “Aysel? What does she want?”

“Only one way to find out, I guess,” I muttered, then swiped to answer the call. “Hello?”

“My brother was wrong,” Aysel said without preamble.

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“He never should have left the alliance,” she said.

“Okay?” I said slowly, not sure where she was going with this.

She made an irritable sound. “So what are we going to do about it?”

**Episode 4463**

**Xavier**

I didn’t get another warning before Ava—speaking and acting as Adéluce—launched herself toward me. She was moving terrifyingly fast again, to the point where she was practically a blur. Ava had always been fast, but this was something else. I’d known Ava for a long time, and this wasn’t something she’d ever been able to do.

Acting on instinct alone, I dodged, but only just in time. I eyed her carefully as I got my feet back under me, not letting her out of my sight. She was circling around me, sizing me up again. I was surprised that Adéluce hadn’t somehow forced Ava to shift into her wolf form to make her even deadlier. Then again, maybe it wasn’t all that surprising. The wolves within us could sometimes operate independently, and if Ava wasn’t shifting, that was probably her wolf trying desperately to protect her against the terrible force inside her.

“That was some fast footwork,” Ava said. She looked like Ava, held herself like Ava, but was still speaking in Adéluce’s voice. “But you can’t run away forever.”

That was probably true, but that didn’t mean I was going to stop trying. Deciding not to wait around for another attack, I whipped around and took off running, sprinting through the thick trees toward the lake house. I was moving fast, but I could hear Ava-luce running behind me, and she was hot on my heels.

I reached the driveway of the lake house and then the front door, and I was just reaching out for the knob when she roughly grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back with astounding strength. Her long nails dug in hard enough that I felt them break through my skin. She wrenched me backward and threw me down onto the freezing stone porch.

I fell to the ground, and she was on top of me in an instant. It was Ava’s face hovering over mine, but I knew it was Adéluce making her eyes flash with deadly fire, so I grabbed her wrists, holding them tightly. I had to be careful, here—I didn’t want to be mauled by Adéluce, but I didn’t want to hurt Ava, either.

Above me, Ava-luce was gnashing her teeth and snarling, fighting to get to me. She was fighting to free her hands from my grip, and she was *strong*. I held fast, but it was a struggle to keep her hands from wrapping around my neck. I could feel my arms starting to shake with the effort of restraining her.

Ava was strong—I knew that better than anyone—but her strength seemed enhanced, almost superhuman. Adéluce must have done something to make her stronger. Ava had always been a good fighter, but not like this.

Gritting my teeth, I used my grip on her wrists to shove her away, and I somehow managed to unseat her from her perch on top of me. Ava-luce tumbled off me, giving me just enough time to scramble to my feet and run for the door.

But she was already lunging after me again.

I spun around, throwing my hands up defensively. “What’s your endgame, Adéluce?” I demanded, keeping my eyes trained on her, ready for an attack. “What are you doing?”

She didn’t answer, just looked at me, her eyes black with evil.

“Ava!” I bellowed. “Ava, if you can hear me, you have to fight this! Fight whatever she’s telling you to do!”  
 Ava-luce shook her head slowly. “Ava’s not in here.” This was Adéluce’s voice, and it had a taunting, singsong quality that made my blood feel like ice. “Your Luna is too weak to stop me, Xavier Evers.”

I was in full panic mode, but the part of my brain that was still capable of rational thought was stunned by this move. I couldn’t believe Adéluce was taking this chance. The vampire-witch had been so careful about making sure no one else saw or heard her. She’d made sure I couldn’t even say her name—and now this? She’d taken over Ava’s body. She’d probably kill her before she had the chance to wake up and know any of what the fuck was happening.

Suddenly it occurred to me that this was Adéluce on the defensive. This wasn’t part of her carefully mapped out plan to terrorize me from the shadows. This was something else entirely. This was Adéluce lashing out without thinking about the consequences. This was her getting desperate. This was her making a mistake.

It wasn’t much, but it was something—and I could work with that.

Ava-luce rushed toward me suddenly, her hands outstretched, reaching for my throat.

I ducked around her and started running again, back toward the lake. That Adéluce was making mistakes was good news for me, but there could be consequences for me, too, and I didn’t want Ava ending up as collateral damage.

I thought fast as I ran, dead leaves crunching beneath my feet, desperate to think of some way to get us both out of this—alive.

Thinking about what Adéluce had just said, I realized she was dead wrong about one thing—Ava was many things, but a weak Luna was *not* one of them. She was one of the strongest people I’d ever known, and she never *ever* stopped fighting. Even after death, Ava had fought her way back to the land of the living. If I could just get her to hear me, I might be able to convince her to fight back.

*Ava, can you hear me? Fight this! Fight against her!*

There was no answer. But if it wasn’t Ava resisting, then there had to be another reason why Adéluce wasn’t shifting in Ava’s body… Unless… *Ha*.

The bitch didn’t know how.

For all her power as a witch and abilities as a vampire, one thing she certainly was *not* was a werewolf, and I was going to exploit that. If I could just use the mate bond, I knew that I could get to Ava.

*Ava? Ava! Can you hear me?*

Even as I called out to her through the mate bond, I could feel my own wolf crying out for her. He lifted his head and howled, the sound lonely and heartbroken. He longed to hear her voice.

*AVA! Can you hear me?*

My mental voice melded with my wolf’s and formed a chorus of sounds, both of us calling out for her. I needed her to hear me. She needed to fight whatever hold Adéluce had over her.

I needed *he*r.

Still running—and with Ava-luce close behind me—I focused on that need.

*AVA! Can you hear me? AVA!*

I reached out again, through our connection. Wherever she was, it was far away. I could feel it—the absence of her. It was like reaching into the blackness of space.

*AVA!* I pleaded. *Are you there?*

There was a spark. It was small, but I could feel it.

I dodged around a copse of trees, trying to lose Ava-luce, and reached out again. *AVA!*

There was another spark, and I felt my hope growing.

That was when she caught me. Ava-luce rounded the copse of trees and lunged toward me, Adéluce’s crazed grin twisting Ava’s face. The sight of it made me sick to my stomach, and I reached out, searching for the mate bond.

And there it was. When I reached for it this time, I found it, and it felt solid—like a living thing. I just needed to latch on to that connection.

Ava-luce’s grin hitched. A strange, surprised look crossed her eyes, and she stumbled.

“What are you doing?” she demanded furiously.

Holy shit. Was it *working*?

“Stop it!” she snapped. “Stop it right now, Xavier Evers. You cannot defeat me. You cannot win!”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “I can’t. But *we* can.”

*AVA!* I screamed through the mind link, and my wolf threw his head back and howled, searching for Ava. We threw everything we had into this final call, begging her with all we had to come back to us—to find *us*. That was the way we were going to be able to stop this.

Ava-luce took a quick step to the side, catching herself before she could fall. She reached out, bracing herself against a tree to stay upright, and gasped, drawing in a long, shaking breath. What was she doing? Was she getting forced out? Was she trying to shift again?

As I watched, her face tightened, then went slack. I held my breath, and when she looked up at me again, I could see that Ava was back, looking at me through her eyes. It was really her, not Adéluce.

“Xavier?” she whispered.

She started to step toward me, but before she could move, before I could answer her, her eyes rolled back and her knees buckled. Fuck!

“AVA!” I bellowed, rushing forward, but I was too far away, and she crumpled to the frozen ground.

**Episode 4464**

**Artemis**

Not for the first time, I was running through a Fae world forest as fast as I could, sprinting hard through the bright green of the trees and soft underbrush. Torin and Adair were running on either side of me. We were moving fast, and as we rounded a stand of tall pines, I looked ahead at the split tree that was our way back to the human world. We needed to reach it.

I chanced a glance over my shoulder to see if I could figure out what the hell was actually chasing us.

*Shit.*

My eyes widened with shock as I caught sight of the form following us through the trees. I had no idea what it actually was—all I knew was that it was rhinoceros-huge and had large, pointed horns covering its broad skull.

And it was gaining on us.

*Shit shit shit…*

“Run!” I bellowed at Adair and Torin.

“We *are* running,” Adair snapped breathlessly.

“Well, do it faster,” I hissed.

“I’m trying,” Torin cried. He looked over his shoulder as he hopped over a fallen log. “But that thing—” He paused to pant for breath. “It’s too fast! We might not make it to the tree in time!”

“Save your breath,” Adair said. “You’re going to need it.” He shot a glance over his shoulder and then put on a burst of speed. “Just keep moving. We’re almost there.”

We *were* almost there. I could see the tree, and we were getting closer. I thought about the thing behind us. I could summon my bow and shoot it, but there were a few problems with that plan. Shooting would require me to stop, turn, and aim. I ran the calculations in my head, and I really didn’t think I’d have time to do it before the creature overtook me.

Adair, though… I glanced over at him. His head was down, and it looked like he was concentrating as hard as he could on running. His sole focus was escape, but I knew he still had his weapon, which gave me an idea.

“It’s moving too fast!” I yelled. “We’re not going to make it!”

“We have to!” Adair called back grimly.

“No! We need to fight!”

“But my herbs!” Torin protested. “What if I lose them?!”

“Oh my god, Torin. We’ll get you new ones! Just hide,” I huffed. The Fae was still good with a weapon, but I knew he wasn’t feeling his best. Between Adair and me, we should be able to handle this thing. “Adair, use your whips! Use them to catch the thing.” I sucked in a breath. “Do you think you can do that?”

“Of course I can,” he said shortly. “We’ll stop and fight on my count—one, two, THREE!”

As one, the three of us slid to a stop and turned to face the stampeding monster barreling toward us. It was grey and leathery-looking with four horns protruding on its head. And they were pointed right at us.

I’d been right about my arrows. They would’ve taken too long. Adair barely had enough time to summon his whip before the thing reached us. Adair snapped his wrist and flung out his energy whip. It wrapped around the creature’s throat, and Adair yanked, pulling the whip to tighten it.

This brought the thing up short, and it let out a furious roar. The sound was so loud it made my ears ring, but I knew this was the chance I needed.

Without waiting another instant, I got a running start and then launched myself onto the creature’s back.

It screamed and bucked as it felt my weight, but I wasn’t about to let it throw me. I curled my hand on one of the creature’s horns, gripping it tightly as the creature thrashed and reared, trying to send me flying.

I didn’t know if we had time for Adair to choke the thing to death with his whip, so I needed to take care of things while I had the chance.

Manifesting an arrow into my hand, I raised it above my head, then brought it down with as much force as I could muster, stabbing it into the base of the creature’s skull.

It took all my strength to get the point of the arrow through the creature’s thick brown hide, but when I did, it gave a terrible scream of pain and shock. The arrow immediately disintegrated, almost blasting me back onto the ground. But the thing was still kicking, and I didn’t want to get trampled.

I held on as tight as I could, expecting the thing to fall to the ground at any moment.

It didn’t, though greenish brown blood had begun to ooze out around the arrow wound.

Instead, the thing reared back with so much power that it sent me flying. I crashed to the ground with a grunt and lay there for a moment, fighting to get my breath back.

Then I pushed myself up and looked at the creature—which was still on its feet. So, apparently, all we’d managed to do was piss the thing off.

“How’s it going over there?” Torin called anxiously. He was standing behind a tree, clutching his herbs tightly.

I looked over at Adair. “So, I’m not sure how much of that you actually saw, but I did just stab that thing in the skull, and it didn’t do anything. So there’s that.”

Even from a distance, I could see Adair’s expression was grave. “I noticed,” he replied.

The creature was still jumping and rearing, trying to twist around and get the arrow out of its head. Then, in the distance, I heard a strange cry.

“*Abotriate*!”

Then, like someone had flipped the thing’s off-switch, the creature stopped moving. It went dead still, almost like it had been paralyzed.

The voice had come from the forest behind us. Heart pounding, I scrambled to my feet and ran to Adair and Torin.

“Did you hear—”

“Yes,” Adair said quickly.

Torin looked terrified.

“What was that?” I asked. “Who else is out here?”

Adair began to shake his head, but then he stopped. A look of understanding washed over his face. “I know what it is.”

“What?” I demanded.

“That thing isn’t a wild animal,” he said, his eyes going to the huge creature.

“What are you talking about?!” I whisper-shouted.

“This isn’t a random attack,” he went on, his voice low and edged with uncharacteristic fear. “This is someone’s pet. It’s being controlled. It’s not coming after us randomly—it’s *hunting* us.”

I swallowed down the bitter taste of fear in the back of my throat. “Adair? What do we—”

“We need to go. Now,” he said, without waiting for me to finish. “*Move!*”

And we were off again, sprinting toward the tree that was our way out of here.

“GO!” that same voice yelled in the distance, and the creature sprang to life again and charged after us.

Okay, this day officially sucked. I gritted my teeth as I ran as hard as I could, thinking back to the start of the day, when I’d naïvely thought this trip for herbs would be an easy errand. Like going to the market. Adair had even assured Cali that we weren’t going off on some big adventure, and that we’d be back soon. And now here we were in the Fae world fighting for our lives.

The thought made a hysterical laugh bubble up in my chest, but I didn’t have the breath to let it out.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of these useless thoughts, and instead focused on the tree. I’d never played hide and seek as a kid, but Cali had explained the concept—you were always running from the person trying to seek, but if you could make it to the designated safe spot, you won the game. That was what the tree felt like. If we could just reach it, we’d be safe.

I shot a glance over my shoulder at the charging, horned creature. It was still fast, but I was pretty sure that my arrow—while not lethal—had slowed it down. That was something. I’d at least given us a fighting chance of making it to the tree.

“Almost there,” Adair grunted as we ran. “We’re almost there. Keep going. And don’t stop—just run right through the entrance.”

“Is it open?” I asked desperately.

He nodded grimly. “I left it open—on purpose. Just in case we needed a quick exit.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

Torin was in the lead, and he’d almost reached the tree when two tall figures stepped out from behind it, blocking the way.

They were dressed in the kind of robes I’d seen in Fae royal courts, and they both had swords held out in front of them.

“ADAIR OF THE DARK FAE!” one boomed, glaring at us. “YOU ARE HEREBY CALLED BACK TO THE FAE COURT.”

We came to a startled stop and stared at the two figures.

“YOU MUST FULFILL YOUR DUTY.”

**Episode 4465**

So they didn’t need a new coxswain.

Then what the hell was I doing here?

My mind spun as I looked up into Gael’s handsome but stern face as he glowered down at me. I found myself weirdly upset by his words, but I had to remind myself that I didn’t even really *want* to be their coxswain. Nor did I even know what a coxswain was. It was Coach Ludwig who’d convinced me that I wanted to do this, so they could take their position and shove it up their coxswains.

I opened my mouth to say as much, but before I could, a wide grin spread across Gael’s face, making it shine like the sun.

“Like I said, we don’t *need* a new coxswain, but we sure want one!”

All the guys surrounding us laughed as I stared up at Gael, waiting for my brain to catch up. What the hell had just happened?

“Okay, this place is weirder than I thought,” Zainab muttered to Sage, and I couldn’t help but agree.

“Hey! Guys! Get over here!” Gael was yelling, waving to the guys doing yoga and the ones on the rowing machine. “Come over and meet our new coxswain!”

The team apparently wasn’t moving fast enough for him, so he reached out and grabbed my hand, pulling me after him as he strode across the gym.

“Come on, Cali! I want you to meet everyone!”

Holy crap. What was happening? And how was I going to get out of this now? I wasn’t sure I could. It wasn’t like I could just walk out the door.

My stomach was sinking as I freaked out, and I decided then and there that Lola and I were going to have a *very* frank conversation about all of this when she got back from her trip.

“—and this is Kayden and Jayden—”

They were the ones doing yoga.

“They’re twins, obviously. K and J, this is Cali, the new coxswain, obviously.” He rested his elbow on my head like he was lounging, demonstrating how much smaller I was than him. He grabbed my hand again. “And over here on the machine is Schmiddy—don’t worry, he always stares like that—and this is Johnny, and that’s Bear. I mean, his real name’s Brayden, but we call him Bear because he’s not one of the twins, and we don’t want to get confused. Over there on the weights”—Gael pointed to a couple of guys holding giant dumbbells that probably weighed as much as I did—“are Patel and Rodrigo.”

“Hi,” I said vaguely.

Gael looked around the gym. “I think that’s everyone, new girl. The only people missing right now are Nathan Wu and Jamie Codsworth. They’re our alternates.”

I nodded but didn’t bother to respond. I’d already forgotten every name Gael had just listed off to me. All except Bear. How could I forget Bear?

I looked around, trying to take everything in. The one thing that really stood out to me was that all the guys looked like athletes. Real athletes. With muscles and determined game faces.

What was I even doing here?

Gael gave me an enthusiastic grin. “We’ve all been waiting for you.”

“You have?” I squeaked.

“Of course. We all saw the tapes. You’re going to be such a great addition to our team.”

“The *tapes*?”

“Yeah!”

“What tapes?” I felt like my head was going to explode.

Gael looked confused, but he was still smiling. “The ones that you sent in with your scholarship application.”

I nodded, even as my heart threatened to beat out of my chest. I knew very well that no such tapes existed. I’d never rowed in my life. So what the hell had Lola sent in?

“Um, could I see one of those tapes?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Why?” Gael asked.

“I… I want to show my friends,” I said, glancing at Sage and Zainab, who were looking a little confused, but when I shot them a pointed glare, they started nodding.

“Yes!” Zainab said, a little too loudly. “Yes! We want to see them! School spirit! Et cetera!”

*Oh my god.* I glared at Zainab again, and she shut her mouth.

“Yeah, I can show you,” Gael said, pulling his phone from the pocket of his sweats. “Coach Ludwig sent them to the entire team. You should’ve seen him—he was so pumped when your application came in.”

He handed me his phone, and when I saw the screen, I felt my eyes go wide as dinner plates. Because there, on the tiny screen, was a video of a low boat zipping through the water. There were eight young guys rowing, and a small woman sitting at the front of the boat, screaming at them. The video was shaky, and the resolution wasn’t perfect, but the woman looked a hell of a lot like me.

I stared at the video, baffled as Gael went to spot one of the guys on a weights machine.

Sage and Zainab had moved closer to look, and Sage leaned toward me.

“That really looks like you, Cali,” she said. Then she lowered her voice. “Wait—is it?”

“No,” I whispered back. “It’s not. I *cannot* believe Lola did this. She deep-faked me into a rowing video.”

I actually might’ve been impressed with her skills, under *vastly* different circumstances.

What exactly had Lola been expecting me to do? I wasn’t the woman in that video, and however good at editing Lola was, it didn’t change the fact that I’d never been on one of those boats before. I didn’t know how this sport worked, or what my job was supposed to be—and now all these guys were expecting me to take charge and be the person in the front of the boat, telling the whole team what to do?

Clearly unaware of my internal freak-out, Gael closed the video and slipped his phone back into the pocket of his sweats.

“Anyway,” he said with a smile, “like I said, we’ve really been missing having a cox. Coach is doing what he can, but it’s really not the same as having one of our own leading the charge, you know?”

“Sure,” I whispered, because he seemed to be waiting for a response.

“And it seems like you’re going to be a great fit for us,” Gael added. “So you just let me know if there’s anything at all I can do for you to make your first semester with us better. If there’s anything *any of us* can do, you just let us know. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said faintly, and then he swooped down and wrapped me up in what I could only have described as a bone-crushing bear hug. It seemed to squeeze all the air out of my lungs, so I couldn’t do anything when he called out—

“TEAM HUG!”

*Oh no.*

An instant later, I was surrounded by the entire team, all hugging me and telling me I was going to be great, and how glad they were that I was here.

My heart swelled as I looked at their faces. I couldn’t believe it, but I was starting to think that I really did have to do this.

How could I *not*? I couldn’t let these guys down. They were counting on me.

So, right then and there—in the middle of the team hug—I resolved to learn everything I possibly could about being a coxswain.

I mean, I was still absolutely going to kill Lola the next time I saw her, but that wasn’t going to stop me from learning all I could about crew.

“Okay, okay,” Gael called out. “Let’s let the new coxswain breathe a little.”

As the team stepped back and I drew in a breath, Gael grinned at me.

“I hope we didn’t come on too strong, Cali,” he said. “We’re just really excited to have you here.”

“You know what?” I said, surprising myself. “I’m really excited, too. But for now, I’d better head out. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Bye!”

“See you tomorrow!”

“Don’t be gone long, little one!”

“Coxswains rule the world!” Bear called out.

“Thanks, Bear.” I smiled. “Bye.”

I waved Sage and Zainab over, and we’d almost reached the exit when Gael called out to me.

“See you tomorrow morning at five!” he yelled.

I almost ran into the door in shock.

Wheeling around, I stared at Sage. “Did he just say what I think he said?”

Sage looked startled. “If you think he said five a.m., then yeah, he said it.”

I groaned as I pushed my way through the door and out into the chilly winter day.

“What the hell am I doing?” I muttered to myself.

How the hell was I going to balance the human and werewolf worlds? How could I be both the coxswain the CCU Kangaroo Rats needed, and the Luna Greyson needed?

**Episode 4466**

**Greyson**

I narrowed my eyes. “What exactly do you mean when you say *we*, Aysel? Who are you referring to? Because you and I have never been a *we*—”

“I don’t need to hear this, Greyson Evers,” she interrupted sharply. “I am calling you because I want to fix what my brother has done. Pulling out of the alliance—and so suddenly…” She made a disapproving noise. “That should never have happened.”

“No shit,” I muttered. “Which is why I came to you about this *before* he did it, and you could barely be bothered.”

“I know,” Aysel said indignantly. “And I heard you, Greyson. I didn’t think he would *actually* do it. Like I told you, he makes baseless threats all the time. I can usually tell when he means them.”

“Well, looks like your Spidey sense failed you this time,” I said. “So why are you coming to me about this instead of just talking to your brother?”

She huffed. “I think you know, Greyson. Lucian’s decision to exit the alliance was very ill-advised. It’s not good for the Vanguards, as much as he wants to pretend otherwise. Being isolated and without close allies puts us in a weaker position. And—beyond that—being in the alliance was actually very good for Lucian. Being in a community of his peers is… better, for him. The last time he allowed himself to become isolated, we ended up with Seluna, and Lucian was nearly duped into making that demon our Luna.”

“Oh, I remember,” I said dryly.

“I don’t want anything like that to ever happen to my brother again,” Aysel said. “That’s why I’m calling you. And I’m telling you—” She stopped and took a deep breath, like she was bracing herself. “I’m *asking* you, Greyson, because you’re the strongest Alpha in the alliance. You’re the leader of the packs involved.”

I was a little taken aback by Aysel’s candor, and her bold honesty about her brother. All packs were insular by nature, but the Vanguards took it to another level. And she was deeply loyal to her brother, so this was not a normal move for her.

And as for the stuff about me being the strongest Alpha in the alliance—she was probably only complimenting me to get me on her side. I couldn’t assume that she wasn’t going to contact the other alliance Alphas and say the exact same thing to them.

Apparently, I got lost in thought a little too long for the princess’s liking.

“*So?*” she asked pointedly.

“So what?” I asked.

She made an irritated noise. “So how are you going to fix this?”

“Listen,” I said, “I’m not entirely sure what you’re asking me to do, Aysel.”

She sighed. “I’m not expecting an answer right this moment, Greyson. But something needs to be done.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Can you send Lucian’s mate back to him? Her leaving was—”

“No,” I said flatly. “I’m not doing that.”

“Greyson—”

“I won’t, Aysel. Elle is her own person, and no one gets to order her to go anywhere.” I didn’t even bother trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

Aysel sighed. “I understand, Greyson. And though having Elle back would make things easier for me, I happen to agree with you. So we’ll need to think of something else. Anyway, I’m sure that Lucian and Arielle will be back together soon enough. They are mates, after all, and that bond is unbreakable.”

I bit back a curse. Aysel was right, of course, and it wasn’t my place to be pissed about what she was saying—but I couldn’t help it. Her easy assumption that Elle and Lucian would be drawn back to each other grated on my nerves.

“Have you spoken to any of the other Alphas?” I blurted out, asking the question I’d been pondering since the beginning of the call.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“No,” Aysel finally said. “I haven’t spoken to anyone else. Not yet.”

Well, that was something. It also meant that I’d have time to beat her to the punch.

“Good,” I said. “You should figure out some options for fixing this to present to the alliance—or what’s left of it.”

I didn’t want her taking her Elle idea to any of the other Alphas as a possible easy fix. I knew they were decent guys, but I also knew that sending Elle back would look like the easiest solution, and I didn’t know how that kind of conversation would end.

“I’ll call the other Alphas once there are some options on the table for discussion,” I told her.

“Fine,” Aysel said. “That’s acceptable.”

And then, without a word of goodbye, she ended the call.

I looked down at my blank screen in surprise. The abrupt hang-up was rude, but it was also typical of Aysel—and it reminded me of the strange call I’d had with Xavier. It was probably a good time to try calling him again. And now that I’d spoken to Aysel, I actually had a valid, official reason to want to talk—beyond just wanting to make sure he was okay.

I dialed Xavier’s number, but again, it just rang and rang. I hung up when the voicemail kicked on. I wasn’t about to leave another message.

“Well?” Rishika asked. She was still standing next to me, and she looked up at me with a tense expression. “What was that about?”

“Aysel wants to get the Vanguard pack back in the alliance,” I said. “And she wants me to help her figure things out with Lucian.”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “That sounds like a fun time. Were you trying to call Xavier just now?”

I nodded. “Yeah. No answer.”

She took this in. “Think you should just head over there? I mean, if he’s not picking up the phone…”

“Maybe,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

“I heard a little of Aysel’s side of that conversation,” Rishika admitted, “and it didn’t sound like she was interested in being patient. I don’t think this is the kind of thing she’s going to let hang for too long. She’s going to want action.”

“That’s true,” I said with a sigh. “Yeah, maybe I will go over to the Samara house.”

Even though I’d been reluctant to go earlier, it made more sense now. This wouldn’t be about checking up on Xavier—there was alliance business to discuss. And Rishika was right—Aysel wasn’t going to wait around for long.

I looked down at my phone again.

*Love, I’m headed to the Samara pack house*,I typed. *Alliance business. Give me a call or shoot me a text when you have a second.*

I sent the message to Cali and put my phone down on the table next to the front door, kicked off my shoes, peeled off my clothes, and headed outside.

I shifted as I jumped off the porch, landing on the frozen ground on four paws. Then I sprinted off into the forest, heading for the Samara pack house.

My thoughts were churning as I ran, and the run passed so quickly that I was surprised when I emerged from the trees into the clearing surrounding the Samara pack house.

I shifted back to human as I walked toward the house, but as I approached it, Xavier sprinted out of the woods. I stared at him, shocked to spot an unconscious Ava lying in my brother’s arms.

“What’s going on?” I yelled, running toward him.

But Xavier ignored me completely, rushing into the house. I followed him, and when I raced inside, I found Gabriel and Mikah hurrying after him as he ran up the stairs.

“Hey!” I said, grabbing Mikah’s shoulder. “Hang on!”

Mikah spun around. “Greyson? What are you doing here?”

“I came over to talk to Xavier about something—but then *that* happened,” I said, jerking my chin up the stairs, where Xavier had disappeared with Ava. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on? You know, since you were the one who texted me earlier?”

Mikah nodded shortly. “Yeah, okay. Ava was sleepwalking or something of the sort. Xavier found her, but she hasn’t woken up… We found out that the only way to wake Ava up from the coma she’s in is if Xavier kisses her.”

“What?” I asked, not following. “What are you talking about?”

“A kiss will wake her up. That’s what the guy said.”

This didn’t clear anything up for me. “What? Like a fairy tale or something? That can’t be real.”

Mikah shrugged. “Yeah, that’s what Xavier said. But apparently, true love’s kiss is a real thing. Who knew, right?”

“And so Xavier…” I trailed off, staring up the stairs.

“Yeah,” Mikah said. “Xavier’s got to kiss Ava.”

I was shocked. True love’s kiss? Did that mean Xavier was really in love with Ava?

What would that mean for the *due destini*?

What would it mean for the balance of the bond between Cali and me?

**Episode 4467**

**Xavier**

“Xavier! What’s going on?”

I could hear Greyson yelling behind me, but I barely registered his presence. I didn’t know why he was here at the house, and I didn’t care. Nothing mattered except figuring out how to help Ava.

Marissa appeared at my elbow and followed me as I raced toward the bedroom.

“What’s going on?” she asked breathlessly, but I ignored her, too.

Carefully, I put Ava down on the bed. She was motionless, and her eyes were closed. She hadn’t woken or even stirred since that brief moment of recognition in the woods.

I ran my hands over her body, looking for injuries. I put my fingers to her neck to feel her pulse, then leaned forward to feel her breath on my cheek. She seemed unhurt. She was fine, other than the fact that she was unconscious.

“Xavier, what happened?” Marissa asked again. “How did you find her? What happened out there?”

I looked up into Marissa’s waiting face, but I could only stare at her. I had no idea what to say. I couldn’t tell her the truth—that a vengeful vampire-witch had possessed Ava’s body out of spite, and then forced her to fight me, and then when Ava had found the strength to fight back, the vampire-witch had disappeared, and I had no idea what damage she’d left behind.

So I just avoided Marissa’s question completely.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head. “I—I’ll fill you in later.”

“Xavier,” she pressed. “You—”

“She was sleep walking or something,” I said quickly. “When I found her outside, she didn’t seem like herself, but she’s here now.”

Marissa looked at me for a long moment. “What did you and Gabriel and Mikah find out about her condition?”

“Go ask—”

“Mikah and Gabriel haven’t said anything,” Marissa said sharply. “And I want to know what you learned out there. Did you find a way to fix her or not?”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t need this interrogation right now, and I really didn’t need what was going to come next.

“Yeah, Xavier.” Gabe had appeared in the doorway of the room. He gave me a hard look. “Why don’t you tell the rest of the pack what the plan is? Explain to Marissa what we learned about Ava’s condition up on the mountain.”

I looked up at Gabe, and Mikah, who was standing next to him in the doorway. Just behind them was Greyson, who looked confused.

“I—” My voice caught. I couldn’t tell the pack what I’d learned. What if the only solution we had didn’t work? What if that was how the pack discovered how I really felt about their Luna? That kind of revelation had the potential to completely shake the dynamics of the pack—and just when the pack had started to feel secure. They didn’t need to know how complicated my feelings were about Ava.

But everyone was looking at me expectantly. They were waiting for me to say something.

So I took a deep breath. “I have to call on our Alpha-Luna bond to bring her back. I have to use the strength of that connection.”

Gabe gave me a sardonic look. Whatever. What I’d said had sounded good enough, and it wasn’t all that far from the truth.

“Everyone needs to go,” I said sharply. “I have all the information I need.” I swallowed hard. “I’m going to try this and hope it works.”

Greyson moved a little, and when I looked up at him, I got the impression that he wanted to say something to me before he left.

I gave a small shake of my head and hoped he understood that now was not the time.

He seemed to get the message and turned to leave without saying anything, and I was grateful for that.

I was even more grateful when Gabe and Mikah followed him, and then Marissa got to her feet a moment later and followed them out the door.

I stood and closed the bedroom door, then turned to look at Ava’s still form. I was struck by how small she looked, lying on the massive bed. She had such a large presence, sometimes I forgot that she was physically small. But she looked tiny now, and delicate and vulnerable. The wolf within me howled for her, waiting to protect her. Wanting to shield her from anything that wanted to harm her.

But it couldn’t, because the thing that was harming her right now was attacking from within, and there was nothing I could do to fight it. That was what made Adéluce so infuriating—I couldn’t fight her, and there didn’t seem to be anything I could do to stop her.

I leaned back against the closed door and ran a hand over my face. I felt the rasp of a five o’clock shadow on my palm. When was the last time I’d slept through the night? When was the last time I’d sat down to eat? Or taken a shower that didn’t feel like an attempt to break a speed record?

I was at my wits’ end, and the kiss was looming. There was just no way it was going to work—and I had no idea what I was going to do when it didn’t.

My stomach was tied in knots as I stepped toward Ava’s inert form on the bed. I sat down next to her, but she didn’t stir as I sank into the mattress.

I raised my hand and caressed her cheek. Here, alone, I could confess to myself that I really did care for her. And it wasn’t just her beautiful face and body—it was *her*. Her strength, her will. I cared about Ava. And I hated seeing her like this. It pained me to see her hurt. When I’d thought she was dead, my first instinct had been to tell her lifeless form that I loved her.

Frowning to myself, I smoothed her windblown hair away from her porcelain skin. What the hell did some old-ass vampire even know, anyway? This true love’s kiss shit might’ve worked for Boris at some point in his very long life, but that didn’t mean it was the only option.

But I knew there was no way to get an accurate solution because I couldn’t be honest with anyone about the problem.

With a gusty sigh, I heaved myself off the bed and knelt next to Ava, my face level with hers. I knew I should just do it. Just kiss her and get it over with. And it wasn’t that I didn’t like kissing Ava. Actually, it was just the opposite. Kissing her was familiar; it was good. It was something I’d done to lose myself at a time when I needed it the most… But now, it was something I sought out because I could have it. I could have her.

I looked down, letting my eyes linger on her lips, which looked blood-red against her pale skin. The sight of them cracked something open in my chest. Warmth spilled out, filling my chest with heat. Ava was important to me.

Without another thought, I leaned over and pressed my lips to hers.

And then something happened.

I could feel our mate bond. I could feel the connection stretching between us, almost like a physical thing. I could feel our bond, and it felt strong… and loud. My wolf was howling for her, and somewhere—in the distance—I thought I could hear her wolf, too. Was she calling back to me? Was she trying to let me know that she could feel me, too?

And then she started kissing me back. It was almost imperceptible at first, but then it became more obvious.

My heart pounded, and my head was spinning. Was this really happening? Was it *working*?

As if in answer to these questions, Ava’s arms lifted up and wrapped around me, pulling me closer.

For a long moment, I felt lost in the kiss, but then rationality returned, and I pulled away from her, panting.

“You’re awake!” I burst out.

Ava’s eyes opened, and when she looked up at me, they were filled with love. “I’m awake,” she said quietly, her voice a rasp.

I stared at her, shocked. She *was* awake—that was undeniable. Her eyes were open, and she was talking. She was actually awake.

So what the hell did that mean? According to Boris, nothing short of true love’s kiss would’ve awakened her. I’d never thought it would work because… Well, how could it? Cali was the love of my life.

And yet Ava was awake and blinking at me. So did this mean that I loved Ava, too? That what I felt for her was just as strong as what I felt for Cali?

It was hard to wrap my mind around any of these ideas, but I had to ask myself the question—was I equally in love with two people?

**Episode 4468**

By the time Sage, Zainab, and I got back to the pack house, I was no closer to figuring out a game plan for how to go about everything.

I sat for a moment after I turned off the engine, thinking hard. What I *did* know was that now that I’d met the crew team, I really didn’t want to let them down.

But I didn’t want to let the pack down, either. And if I spent all my time with the team, then I’d be letting the pack down. But if I just quit school, then I’d be letting the team down.

“Oh god,” I groaned, leaning forward to let my head rest on the steering wheel. I felt like my brain was going to explode.

“Cali?” Zainab leaned forward from the back seat. “You okay, girl?”

“No,” I muttered.

“Yeah, you don’t look okay,” she said. “You look like you’re spiraling. I think you need to clear your head.”

“I’ll say,” Sage said under her breath.

“You know, whenever I have a big problem, a good hard workout always helps me.”

“Good for you,” I said flatly.

“So maybe you want to join Sage and me for a quick gym session?”

“You just worked out,” I reminded her without looking up.

Zainab scoffed. “Come on. Those pull-ups were nothing. I’ve got lots left in the tank.”

I took a deep breath and pushed myself upright again. “Okay, maybe. Actually, it’s not a bad idea. I need to get my strength up if I want to be a collegiate athlete… I think?” I looked over at Sage and Zainab. “Do you think I need to change? Like, muscle-wise?”

Sage shook her head. “I think you’re going to be fine, Cali. But Zainab is right—a workout might help you think.”

“Okay,” I said, and we climbed out of the car.

Zainab led the way into the house, then once we were gym ready, we headed downstairs to the gym.

“Why don’t you just hop onto the treadmill for now?” Zainab suggested, pointing at the machine.

“Why?” I asked, stepping toward it.

She shrugged. “The mindlessness of it might help calm you down.”

That sounded like a good plan, so I stepped on and turned the machine on, starting at a low setting. I started to jog, keeping my pace easy.

Zainab was right—the monotony of the action did calm me down, but after a few minutes, I started thinking again. If I decided to really follow through with this crew thing, then I was going to need to get on a strict schedule. Working out every day, no excuses.

But was that even doable? Schedules weren’t exactly compatible with werewolf life, where things changed on a dime. What would I have said if I’d missed practice because of the Bitterfang war? *Sorry guys, I can’t make it to practice today—I have to fight an army of werewolves to the death with my magical fairy sword.*

The thought actually made me smile, and I picked up my pace a little. I couldn’t quite believe I was actually thinking about it, but I was getting really excited about the prospect of doing something as normal as joining a sports team and going to school. There was something comforting about the banality of it—and that was a comfort I almost didn’t want to admit that I’d been missing.

It was strange, really, because I loved my life here at the pack house, with the pack. I loved Greyson—and even Xavier. But when I thought about it, I could definitely see the appeal of having an aspect of my life in which the biggest crisis would be forgetting to study for a test.

I grinned to myself as I ran. I really did hate studying, so that seemed like a likely possibility.

“Hey, who’s down there? Have you seen Cali?” Greyson called down from the top of the basement stairs.

“I’m down here, Greyson,” I called back, turning off the treadmill and wiping sweat from my forehead with my shirt. “I’ll be right up.”

I stepped down and grabbed a bottle of water from the small fridge in the corner.

“Thanks for the company today,” I told Sage and Zainab, taking a long drink. “It was great hanging out with you guys.”

Sage smiled from her spot at a weight machine. “It was fun. But next time, we should do something with wine again.”

I laughed. “Agreed.”

I headed upstairs and found Greyson in the den, pacing.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked.

“Hey, there you are,” he said, looking up. “I just went over to the Samara house to talk to Xavier about the Vanguard situation.”

“That was smart,” I said.

“Before I went over there, Aysel called me. She wants my help to change Lucian’s mind about pulling out of the alliance. She’s desperate to stop him, from the sound of it.”

“That makes sense,” I said thoughtfully. “What did Xavier say about it?”

Greyson shook his head testily. “Nothing. I mean, I didn’t even get a chance to talk to him about it.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“He was too wrapped up in whatever’s going on with Ava. But it looks like he’s got a handle on things, and it might be fixed now.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So is she out of her coma? Is she okay now?”

Greyson nodded. “Xavier found a cure.”

I frowned, confused. “What kind of a cure? What did he do? I mean, I’m glad she’s going to be okay, but how did he fix her?”

Greyson gave me a long look. “Do you remember what Rowena said about the bond between you and Xavier?”

I nodded slowly. I knew it was difficult for Greyson to talk about this. “Yes, I remember. It’s strong. But it also branches out. But what does that have to do with any of this?”

He shook his head. “This is going to sound batshit crazy.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, so Xavier, Gabriel, and Mikah met up with some old vampire who’s seen someone wake up from this kind of coma before. Apparently, the only cure is true love’s kiss.”

I gaped at him. “*What?*”

“I know. It sounds completely absurd. Like some dumbass fairy tale.” He shrugged. “But I guess it worked.”

“It *worked*?” I repeated.

He nodded. “When Xavier kissed her, Ava woke up. She’s totally back to normal, by all accounts.”

“But what does—”

“That’s literally everything I know,” he said, putting up his hands to forestall my flood of questions. “I really think it’s a bit absurd. I don’t put that much stock in it being the way they woke her up.”

Greyson might’ve doubted it, but I was reeling. I just didn’t know what to think. I’d spent such a long time convincing myself that whatever was making Xavier act so strangely was also forcing him to be with Ava. That he wouldn’t be with her if he weren’t under some kind of duress.

But now…

Now, I didn’t know what to think.

True love’s kiss. *True love…*

Even if there was an ounce of truth to what Greyson had been told, it would be enough. What if it just had to be love, period? That could be enough… Xavier had loved Ava at one point. Did that count? Or did it have to be that now, in this moment, he loved her?

Shit. I didn’t like any of these options…

I wished I’d thought to ask Rowena how strong the branch between Xavier and Ava looked. *Stable, my ass. More like flourishing.* My recollection was that she’d been a little squirrely on the topic—and with this new bombshell Greyson had just dropped, I had to suspect that she’d acted that way because the connection between Xavier and Ava was just as strong as the connection between Xavier and me.

*Could it be… stronger?*

I rubbed my head. I didn’t know what any of this meant, but I didn’t like the sound of it. At all.

“I’m sorry, love,” Greyson said quietly. He moved toward me. “I know this is probably difficult for you to hear.”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “No. It’s good to know. I appreciate you telling me, even though it’s probably hard for you to talk about, too.”

He reached for my hand, but then his phone rang. His hand froze in midair as he looked down, distracted, and pulled his phone from his pocket.

“Do you have to answer that?” I asked, thinking about how good and safe and reassuring it would feel to have Greyson’s arms around me.

“I’m sorry, love, but I think I do. This could be important—” He stopped short, his eyes going wide with surprise as he looked down at the screen.

I narrowed my eyes. There was something he wasn’t telling me. I could tell from the look on his face.

I leaned over to look at the name on the screen and felt my stomach lurch.

“Greyson,” I said flatly, looking up at him. “Why is that witch sister calling you?”

**Episode 4469**

**Artemis**

Adair looked at the armed guards standing in front of us, blocking our escape route to the human world. Both of the men were average sized, and I realized they were both young.

Adair sized them up, and then—astoundingly—he scoffed.

“I’d like to know why the two of you think you can demand anything from me,” he said haughtily.

I looked over at him, frankly impressed. It was amazing how quickly he’d switched from running-for-his-life mode to taking complete and immediate ownership of the situation. There were times when I forgot Adair’s noble past, but right now, it was plain as day.

The two soldiers—if they even *were* soldiers—didn’t respond.

Adair narrowed his eyes. “That’s what I thought. I don’t think you have any sort of power from the Dark Fae court at all.” He looked over at me. “I think these two are bounty hunters. Isn’t that right?” he asked, looking back at the men.

They hesitated for a moment and exchanged glances, then one of them shrugged.

“Hey, what can I say?” he said, his upper-class accent vanishing completely. “A job’s a job, mate.”

“Is that right?” Adair asked icily.

“And don’t get all wound up about the robes. We thought you might come easier if we pretended to have some court authority,” the bounty hunter added, sounding a little sheepish.

Adair’s jaw tightened. “How did you find me?”

The other hunter snorted. “You’re here.”

“What does that mean?” Adair snapped. I was glad he’d asked—I wanted to know what that meant, too.

“It’s impossible for you to traverse the Fae world without alerting us,” the man said. “The sanguinis signum will always find you.”

*Sanguinus signum, sanguinis signum, sanguinis signum*… I thought hard, trying to remember what that was. Then it came to me. Sanguinis signum—the blood signal.

I looked over at Adair and saw that his eyes had gone wide. I didn’t know what had freaked him out so much, but I kept my mouth shut. The bounty hunters were completely focused on Adair—it seemed that they didn’t really care about Torin or me, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“The sanguinis signum?” Adair repeated, sounding incredulous. “Who would—” He shook his head. “That magic hasn’t been used in centuries. It’s completely taboo. Who…” He stopped himself again, looking disgusted. “I should’ve known—*nothing* is beneath Celeste.”

“Yeah, we don’t really care about all that,” the first bounty hunter said, shrugging. He had a long scar over his eye. “I mean, maybe it’s out of fashion or whatever, but that’s really none of our business. It’s not our job to decide what the client wants or needs. We’re just here to fetch and deliver, and right now, we’re here to fetch you.”

“This will be easier for everyone if you come along quietly,” the second man said. He looked sharply at me and Torin. “We’ll even leave your friends here. Unscathed,” he added generously.

I looked over at Adair, wondering what he was going to do.

His eyes blazed. “I’m sorry to inform you gentlemen that you’re going to be disappointed. I hope you were paid in advance, because I will *never* acquiesce to such a request. You can tell Celeste that I have nothing for her, and never will again—and that it’s time for her to let me go. I will not participate in their disgusting legacy.” He glared at the hunters. “I’ve made my choice.”

The guy with the scar sighed theatrically. “See, that’s really too bad, because it means that you’ve made our choice for us, too.”

“How about this?” the other guy said, taking a step forward. “You can take all your complaints to Celeste in person—after we bring you in.”

The hunters took a step toward him, and Adair’s energy whip manifested in his hand. Taking this as my cue, I summoned my bow. I could still sense the horned beast standing behind us, and I knew if either of the hunters gave the order, this was probably over. I didn’t think the three of us would be enough to take down two bounty hunters *and* whatever that monster was.

I thought quickly and objectively about our chances, and once I determined that we were screwed, I stepped forward. “Wait.”

The hunters and Adair all looked at me in surprise.

“What are you doing?” Adair hissed.

“We might yet come to an agreement,” I said, looking around. I held out my hands, letting my bow disappear.

Adair shot me an angry look, but I ignored him and put a hand up to keep him in place. Then I walked to the man with the scar.

“I want to negotiate,” I said.

He looked surprised, but just for a moment. Then he started to laugh.

I ignored this. “The bounty on Adair is mine, but I get it. This is business, right? We’re all just trying to do our jobs. How about this? If you let me keep the guy, I’ll pass on the next tip I get for a high-value target.”

They clearly weren’t expecting to hear me speak their language, and they paused, taking it in, considering my offer. Or thinking of the ways that they could kill me. They had no reason to think I was telling the truth—I was this random Fae alongside Adair.

“Or,” I said, “I know a Fae who can heal you. I see you’ve got that, uh, scar and all.”

The guy tipped his head, apparently thinking.

I’d softened them up, so I went in for the kill. I leaned forward, getting right into the man’s face, and looked deeply into his eyes.

“You’re going to let me have him, and you’re going to walk away,” I said softly, keeping my voice calm and even. “You think you’ve learned about a new bounty, but the second we walk through that gateway, you’re going to forget this whole encounter. You never even saw Adair. Not today, not ever. It was a mistake. The sanguinis signum was wrong. Now, tell your friend to hear me out.”

The hunter’s eyes were unfocused. He frowned, clearly confused, and then nodded. He turned to his partner. “I think we should hear her out.”

I felt the magic in the air as it washed over the first hunter. I stepped over to the second man, who hadn’t heard what I’d said to his friend, and was glaring at me.

“I don’t think so,” he said, but he stopped speaking as I leaned in close, staring into his eyes.

“You’re going to let me have Adair, and you’re going to walk away,” I said in my even tone, repeating the process. It worked right away, and the second guy’s eyes went hazy within seconds. “The second we walk away, you’ll forget about this whole encounter. You never saw Adair. You thought you had him, but it was a mistake. The sanguinis signum was incorrect.”

I waited until the second guy nodded dreamily, and then I stepped back, smiling, pleased with myself. I turned to Adair and Torin, who were watching me in silence.

“Go,” I said, waving them toward the tree. “Get through.”

Torin didn’t need to be told twice. Still clutching his now somewhat bruised herbs, he stepped quickly toward the tree and then into the split, passing through the portal in an instant.

Adair hadn’t moved yet. He was eyeing me with a strangely appraising look on his face. I couldn’t read it, and I couldn’t tell if it was approving or disapproving, but I didn’t have time to figure it out right now. I trusted my magic, but the horned monster was still in play, and I wanted to get the hell out of the Fae world as soon as possible.

I waved at Adair to go, and after a moment, he followed Torin through the portal.

Keeping my eyes on the bounty hunters, I moved toward the tree. I’d just turned to step through when I got the sense that there was something—or someone—just behind me.

I whipped around to see what it was—but there was nothing there.

That was so strange. I could’ve sworn…

I gave my head a firm shake and stepped determinedly into the space between the two sides of the tree. But as I passed through to the human world, a terrible thought occurred to me.

I’d been so caught up in getting the three of us to safety, I hadn’t really processed what the bounty hunter had said to Adair.

*It’s impossible for you to traverse the Fae world without alerting us. The sanguinis signum will always find you.*

My heart pounded. I might’ve dealt with the two bounty hunters we’d left behind, but that didn’t mean that others hadn’t been alerted by the sanguinis signum. And anyone who’d heard the blood signal would know what it meant—Adair was alive, and there was a massive bounty on his head.

People were going to come looking for him.

**Episode 4470**

**Greyson**

“I called her because I thought the sisters might be able to help with the sire bond,” I said quickly, in answer to Cali’s question.

The wariness on her face didn’t change, but she nodded. “Okay.”

I answered the call, putting the phone on speaker so we could both hear it. “Hello?”

“I’m sorry about my brother,” Chloe said, without even bothering to say hello.

Cali shot me a questioning look, but I could only shrug. I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about either.

“Your brother?” I asked. “You have a brother? I didn’t know there were more of you. I’m surprised.”  
 Chloe laughed. “Well, it might be a surprise to you, Greyson, but trust me when I say that nothing ever surprises *us*. And I’m referring to the man who answered the phone earlier, who you spoke to. That was my brother.”

“Oh, that guy,” I said, remembering the terse man I’d left a message with. “That makes sense.”

“He likes to play tricks on people, including stealing their cell phones,” Chloe added. “So I’m sorry if he was rude to you when you called. It’s not personal; that’s just his way.”  
 “That’s fine,” I said, waving away her apology. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, it’s going to matter soon enough, but you’re right—for the moment, it’s fine,” Chloe said cryptically. “I’m calling because I want to know what you need.”

I gritted my teeth, suddenly remembering just how much I hated talking to the witch sisters. They must’ve spent years practicing being so vague and cryptic—conversations with them were always beyond irritating.

When I spoke, I was careful to make it clear that I hadn’t actually been calling to ask for anything. “I was just looking for some information, wondering if you might know anything about the werewolf sire bond.”

Then, to my surprise, Chloe laughed.

“What?” I asked, confused. “What’s funny?”

“Oh, you are, Greyson,” she said, still chuckling. “What have you gotten yourself into now? The sire bond? Well, that’s a new wrinkle for sure. I can’t imagine the *due destini* is reacting well to something like that.”

I glanced up at Cali, whose expression was stony.

“Yeah, well,” I said, “I’m just wondering if there’s anything I can do about the bond. That’s all I want to know—”

“I’m here, too,” Cali interrupted.

“Cali? Is that you?” Chloe asked.

“Yes,” she said flatly.

“Oh, Cali! I’m so glad to hear from you,” Chloe said. “And to hear that you’re there with Greyson. I know you and I haven’t spent much time together on this plane, but I really am glad to hear your voice.”

I was confused by this for a moment, but then I remembered the dream visits Cali had told me about.

“Anyway,” Chloe was saying, “I’ve been hoping that you and I would get a chance to spend more time together. If you and Greyson end up needing my help. Or my sisters’ help. And you probably will,” she added with a tinkling laugh.

“Why do you say that?” Cali asked.

“Oh, my dear—the sire bond on top of a mate bond on top of the *due destini*?” She made a tsking noise. “We are talking about an *immensely* difficult situation.”

She went quiet, then.

I looked down at my phone, wondering if the call had been dropped, but she was still there. She must’ve paused to think, because after a moment, she kept talking.

“You know, I don’t think the *due destini* and the sire bond have ever had their magics intertwined before. At least, not to my knowledge.”

“Is there anything that can be done to untangle them?” Cali asked carefully.

Chloe was slow to answer. “Maybe. Like I said, it’s never happened before, so I can’t know for sure, but I think it might be possible to untangle the magic. But I can tell you that the price is likely to be very high. Probably *too* high.”

Cali shot me a worried look. “Too high?” she repeated. “What does that mean? And what kind of price?”

Cali’s question chilled me to the bone, but if I’d been hoping for an answer to it, I was sorely disappointed.

“I’ll need to speak to my sisters,” Chloe said, dodging the question. “Once we come up with a solid idea, I’ll be able to answer that question definitively. When I know more, I’ll call you back.”

“But—” Cali started, but it was too late. The witch had ended the call.

I looked down at my phone. I wasn’t sure what to think, or what to make of the conversation we’d just had. But I knew we were going to have to do *something* about the sire bond with Elle. We couldn’t keep going like this.

Looking up, I saw that Cali looked as unsettled by the call as I felt.

She was twisting her hands together. “I didn’t like the sound of that, Greyson. All that stuff about the price being too high…” She shook her head. “I wish I’d known that you were getting in touch with the sisters.”

“I’m sorry, love, but I needed information, and it’s a pretty niche subject. There’s no Big Mac to talk to, no Kira… Rowena *just* did the tub spell for you, so we should probably leave her alone for a while.” I shrugged. “There are no other witches we can trust or that we’ve worked with before. And I was always going to tell you about this, but I decided to hold off until I’d actually spoken to the sisters.”

“I know, but…” Cali’s voice trailed off.

“And remember, the sisters have done some big magic for us before.”

“Yes, but not without a price,” Cali reminded me.

“That’s true,” I had to admit. “But I think it’ll be worth it in the long run. I hope.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said tensely. She shook her head. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Who would get hurt?” I asked.

“You, probably,” she said. “Or Elle. And that can’t happen. That’s not something I’m willing to compromise on.”

“I don’t know,” I said doubtfully. “I understand what you’re saying, but think about the situation as it is right now, Cali. It’s untenable. And if we’re talking consequences, think about it—the price is already high. Plus, I’ve saved their lives, all three of them. That has to be worth at least another favor.”

“I know, but…”

Cali looked so miserable, I stepped forward and took her hand.

“Cali, listen,” I said. “I didn’t want to worry you, but the bond is really affecting me. It’s started making choices for me, and I’m worried about what’s next. I’m worried that the effects of the bond will keep impacting me, and that I’ll stop noticing. And we have no idea what else could go wrong with the sire bond—”

I stopped when the door behind me flew open. Elle burst into the room and ran right toward me. When she reached me, she flung her arms around my neck, holding on tight.

The blood drained from Cali’s face. “Elle? What are you doing here? Greyson and I were talking.”

Elle clung onto me tightly and answered without looking at Cali. “I could feel Greyson getting sad—and angry. It was both at once. So I came as quickly as I could to see what was wrong.”

And there, deep in my heart, I could feel Elle’s concern for me. It was like a physical presence, and the knowledge of it washed over me, making me feel warm and deeply connected to her. It was the feeling of seeing a good friend you haven’t seen for a while, but it’s like nothing’s changed between the two of you.

Logically, I knew that what I was feeling was the sire bond at work, but that knowledge didn’t stop my heart from racing and my arms from tightening around Elle, pulling her body against mine. It was comforting. Just a pause from everything that Cali and I had been discussing. A moment to breathe.

Too late, I looked up at Cali. Her face registered shock and pain, and it was rigid, like she was working hard not to start crying.

Shit. That had been the complete wrong thing to do.

My heart—which had been racing a moment earlier—sank like a stone, and I pulled away from Elle. She tried to pull me back to her, but I stepped away, reaching for Cali’s hand.

But she pulled it away and took a step backward, just out of my reach.

“Cali…” I said.

“It’s okay, Greyson,” she said, but her eyes were still sad. “I get it. But…”

“But what, love?”

“Maybe Lucian was right,” she rasped, her voice shaking.

“What do you mean?” I asked, not liking her tone.

She shook her head, looking away from me. “Maybe the sire bond *is* stronger than the mate bond. How are we supposed to beat that?”

**Episode 4471**

**Xavier**

I tried not to dwell on my last thought too much as I pulled Ava to my chest and enfolded her in my embrace, but that was easier said than done. It was a question I’d asked myself many times—and a question that I’d answered just as many times: I loved Cali, and Cali alone. It was as simple as that.

Or was it?

*Am I in love with two people? Is that even possible? If I am, that would be a glitch in the* due destini*, wouldn’t it? How would that even be allowed to happen?*

Ava returning to the land of the living after I’d killed her had complicated things more than I ever could’ve imagined. Things had been a lot easier when I’d hated Ava and wanted nothing to do with her, but that had obviously changed in a big way. But did I truly love her?

The only thing I knew for sure was that Cali and I were meant to be. Ever since I’d first laid eyes on her, I’d known deep down that she was the one for me. That was still the case—nothing had changed on that front—but how could I move on with Cali if I loved Ava, too?

*My kiss woke her up from her coma, so that means something, right? Even if I wasn’t aware of it before now, it’s clear that there’s love between us, or she’d still be lying there, dead to the world.*

I took a deep inhale of Ava’s scent as she clung to me, her face buried in my chest. She was shivering slightly, and rubbed her back until the shaking stopped. Then I stroked her hair, unable to ignore the fear I felt at the thought of losing her again.

*Is that love? Feeling like I can’t be without her? I suppose it’s a* kind *of love, but is it the romantic kind?*

Granted, we’d been sleeping together pretty regularly. But I’d sort of fallen into that because I’d been looking for an escape from the Adéluce situation, and what better way to do that than sex? But if I really stopped to think about it, it had stopped being just about sex a long time ago. We were partners. She was my Luna. And I could honestly say that all the bad feelings I’d harbored toward her when she’d first returned were long gone.

Things were different between us now, and that fact was fast becoming too real to ignore.

“What—?” Ava started, her raspy voice breaking through my thoughts. She cleared her throat. “What happened to me?”

“You were bitten by a vampire,” I said. When her eyes widened, I rushed to add, “It’s gone. You’re safe.” I knew it couldn’t be a promise, but I hoped it wasn’t a lie.

Her brows drew together in thought. “I remember… kind of.”

“How are you feeling?”

Ava sighed. “Tired. Woozy. But all right.” She flashed me a weak smile.

I realized then that I was ready to do anything to make sure she never ended up in this state again. I thought back to the sheer panic I’d felt when I hadn’t been able to wake her up. I never wanted to go through that again.

I looked at the fading vampire fang marks on her neck. They were almost fully healed, finally. I reached out to touch them.

“Does it hurt at all?” I asked as I brushed my fingers gently across her neck.

We locked eyes, and I could’ve sworn I heard her voice catch in her throat as she said, “No, not really. I can definitely feel that they’re there, and they sting a little when I move the wrong way, but it’s barely noticeable.”

“That’s good,” I said. I was surprised by the low, intimate tone of my own voice. I’d used it with her without thinking, which meant I’d clearly become a lot closer to her than I’d ever intended. Or had I been subconsciously trying to reach this point all along? What had I actually done to stop the growing bond between us? Not much, when I thought about it.

“How long was I out?” Ava asked.

“About half a day.”

“That long? I should’ve healed quicker than that… That doesn’t usually happen with vampire bites on werewolves.”

I just shrugged, not sure what to say.

“Well, what woke me up just now?” she pressed.

Just then, the bedroom door swung open, and Marissa poked her head in. She gasped. “Ava, you’re awake!”

Ava laughed as Marissa came bounding in and threw her arms around her friend, thoroughly ruining our moment.

*That’s probably for the best. How am I supposed to tell Ava that it was my love that brought her back? I’ve been working overtime to keep my feelings about her as vague as possible because I don’t want to mislead her… But when she finds out what happened, then what?*

“Thank god you woke up! I was so worried about you!” Marissa said. “I thought we were all going to be stuck on our own with this guy,” she added, shooting me a look.

“Nice,” I said dryly.

“I’m kidding!” she said quickly. “But really, we were all so worried.”

“I’m all right,” Ava assured her friend. “I was just asking Xavier how I woke up.”

Marissa shot me a confused look. “Wait, it wasn’t the Alpha-Luna connection?”

I cleared my throat, glancing at Ava. “Yeah, I had to call to your wolf with mine, and everything… Then I just went for it…” I trailed off as my half-baked explanation fell flat. Both women were looking at me like I’d just grown another head. “Anyway, just glad you’re back,” I muttered. “Whatever it was that brought you back, I’m just happy it worked.”

Marissa hugged Ava again. “You can say that again.” She pulled away and looked Ava in the eye. “Do you need anything?”

“I am a bit hungry… And I’d love a shower,” Ava said. “I feel pretty gross.”

“I’ll go grab you something to eat,” Marissa said before she turned her gaze on me. “Xavier, will you help her with the shower? She just got out of a coma—be gentle.”

I rolled my eyes. “*Goodbye*,Marissa.”

Ava laughed as Marissa left. “A coma? That seems a bit dramatic.”

I gave her a stiff nod before offering my hand to help her out of the bed. “What do you remember about before now?”

I had mixed feelings about the answers I might get. She’d been dazed after the attack, but she seemed okay. But to have her go into that freaky sleepwalking phase… Had she really been here? Or had she been sort of going through the motions? Was it possible she’d seen more of the attack than she initially thought?

On one hand, it would be a relief if she’d actually seen Adéluce in action. On the other hand, Adéluce would probably punish both of us if Ava discovered the truth.

“I’m not sure,” she said, shakily getting to her feet. She leaned on me, and I took her weight easily.

“Take your time,” I murmured as she gripped my arm. It was strange to see Ava so out of sorts. She was usually such a strong, fierce werewolf. Adéluce had really taken a lot out of her, and it pissed me off.

I helped Ava to the bathroom, started the shower, and then helped her strip off her clothes. I kept my eyes focused on neutral places, trying to keep things clinical.

“I feel like I was in this… fog,” Ava continued as I helped her out of her pants.

“Do you remember anything else from the attack?”

She shook her head. “No, just what I told you after it had happened. The vampire attacked. That’s it.”

I tensed, just as I was reaching to unclasp her bra. “And what about after that?” I pressed. “Nothing new?”

Her bra fell to the floor, and Ava pressed a hand to her head, looking lost for a few moments as I finished undressing her.

“No, I don’t remember anything else, really. It feels like I’m only just waking up now. Everything that happened after the attack is a blur.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “Did you see anything while you were in the coma? Any dreams or anything? Visions?”

I quickly stripped off my own clothes and then helped her into the shower. She threw her head back and let the water cascade down her body while I squeezed a dollop of shampoo into my palm and kneaded it through her hair. Ava moaned and sagged against me.

“That feels so good,” she said. “Thank you for doing this. I still feel a little weak.”

“I know. Just lean on me. I’m here,” I said as I gently guided her head under the water to rinse the suds out of her long, thick hair.

When her hair was clean, I picked up a bar of soap and smoothed it over her skin, then handed it to her so that she could finish.

“I don’t like that you don’t remember everything,” I said. It was probably a deliberate move on Adéluce’s part, of course—a way to get under my skin by using Ava without exposing her to the truth.

Ava turned to look at me, her eyes wide as they met mine, water rushing over the delicate angles of her body. “Xavier, do you think that whoever attacked me will do it again?”

**Episode 4472**

I went to the living room and sat down on the couch, pulling one of the pillows to my stomach and hugging it tightly. I felt horrible. I’d seen it with my own eyes—Greyson and Elle had demonstrated the strength of their connection, right in front of me.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen it, but something about this time felt different. It had almost felt like I was encroaching on a private moment between them—and Greyson was *my* mate, so that wasn’t a good feeling to have about him and another woman.

*What, can they sense each other’s feelings now or something? I’ve always been good at that, with Greyson and Xavier. I always know when they’re not saying something, or when they feel a certain way. Our mate bond at work.*

But whatever had just transpired between Elle and Greyson was something else altogether. It had almost seemed like they were on the same page without even having to say a word. It was like Elle had known *exactly* what Greyson was feeling—all the way from another *room*—rather than having to guess.

*How can I compete with a connection like that? Greyson’s going to try to downplay it, but I saw what happened—no matter how much I wish I didn’t.*

I wondered if their little moment was a direct result of the splintering Rowena had identified within the *due destini*. Just how deeply did the sire bond go? Because from the looks of it, it went deep. Too deep for me to be comfortable with.

*Why can’t I feel the same thing with Greyson, or even Xavier? If I did, maybe I would’ve been able to resolve this Xavier situation a long time ago, without having to rely on magic spells and gut feelings.*

I sighed and shook Xavier from my thoughts. I needed to focus on Greyson right now, not him.

I knew that Greyson had no control over what the sire bond did to him, and neither did Elle. And I had to admit, I was glad he wasn’t experiencing some uncontrollable violent reaction instead. But it still didn’t feel very good. It was becoming painfully obvious that they weren’t able to fight the sire bond’s influence, and I had to wonder what that meant for me and Greyson.

Knowing that neither of them really had any control over it was both a good and a bad thing, as far as I was concerned. If they couldn’t control it, that meant what I’d just witnessed was something they hadn’t been able to suppress. But by the same token, if they couldn’t control themselves, how were they going to avoid crossing any lines?

Either way, it *hurt*—regardless of logic, and my understanding of how complicated the sire bond was.

*I have to figure out a way not to take it out on Greyson, like I did just now… That’ll only make things worse. I have to be supportive, otherwise I might drive him into her arms.*

I buried my face in the pillow and let out a frustrated scream. I hated that I’d even had that thought.

Still in my feelings, I jerked to attention when I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. Someone was calling me. I came up for air long enough to look at the screen and see that it was Lola. Had she finally read my texts?

I answered the phone. “You have a lot of explaining to do,” I said flatly.

Honestly, I was excited to think about something other than Greyson and Elle—even if that something was another stressful situation that required my attention.

“Hello to you, too,” Lola said. “I have a lot of explaining to do about what? About how we just arrived at the couple’s retreat? You wouldn’t *believe* how gorgeous this place is, Cali. And guess what we’re staying in? A yurt! Normally when you hear the word ‘yurt,’ you don’t picture the lap of luxury, but that’s a pretty outdated take at this point—”

“I’m glad you’re safe and all,” I said, cutting her off, “but did you see any of my texts?”

“Um… No?”

“I can’t believe you! You enrolled me in college!” I shouted. “Without my permission!”

There was nothing but silence on the other end, so I kept going.

“And not only that, you sent them a fake crew video of me? What the hell?”

“Um—I—uh,” Lola sputtered, obviously at a loss for words. “I knew you wouldn’t enroll on your own, Cali, so I just did it for you so you wouldn’t have to worry about it! Plus the money thing was always an issue, and the fake video took care of that—”

“But a coxswain?” I demanded. “Really, Lola? I’ve never been a coxswain in my life! I didn’t even know what a coxswain was before I was told that it was my role on the team! Oh, on the *men’s* team. Imagine my surprise when I got *that* bit of news.” I let out a dramatic sigh. “What would possess you to do something like that? Why would you think that lying about that was a good idea?”

“Well, because all you have to do is, like, sit in a boat and shout stuff, right?” Lola said.

“How the hell should I know?” I demanded. “I’ve never done crew in my life!”

“I’m sorry,” Lola said. “Well, sorry-*ish*. I thought it was a good idea! And this way, you don’t have to worry about the money. I know you didn’t want to have to rely on Greyson for it, and the tuition was certainly a lot, so I thought I’d just solve the problem for you. You’re welcome.”

I shook my head and pinched the bridge of my nose, wondering what gave my friend the gall to go to such crazy lengths all the time. “I appreciate that you were thinking of me, but did you not even stop to think about all the lying I’ll have to do to keep this up?”

Lola sucked her teeth. “Well, just un-enroll, then. Sorry for trying to do a nice thing for you. I’ll make sure never to do anything like this again, even if it’s for your own good.”

“Lola, don’t try to guilt me. *You’re* in the wrong, here.”

Lola groaned. “Okay, okay, I know I overstepped a little.”

*A little?*

I was shocked that she was downplaying this so much. She’d created an entire fake persona for me that I would have to uphold—not only to keep the scholarship, but to avoid getting found out and shamed for taking a scholarship away from an *actual* coxswain.

“I only did it to make you happy, Cali,” she said. “I know you didn’t really love college the first time around, but that was partially because you were so worried about money and your mom was so sick—it was just bad all around. I selfishly wanted us to go back to school together and experience some of the fun times we missed when our lives… took an interesting turn.”

I sighed. I hadn’t expected that explanation. How could I stay mad at her now that I knew she’d gone behind my back for such a thoughtful reason?

*It* was *a nice thought, and college will be a good distraction from pack house drama. Not to mention that an education is kind of important… And being a coxswain actually might be a calling—one I never would’ve tried in a million years, without her interference.*

“Thanks, Lola. It was very thoughtful, I guess… And I do want to experience the whole college life thing with you, too—but you should’ve let me in on your plan so that I could be part of the decision.”

“I know, I get it. I really do. I really am sorry,” Lola said. “For real.”

“Thanks… Though I think you’re going to get your wish, anyway. They won’t let me drop out. The crew team is counting on me, and you know how strong my guilt complex is.” I sighed. “We can talk about it more when you get back. Just enjoy your retreat with Jay, okay?”

We ended the call, and I flopped back against the couch. What was I going to do about any of this? I had the Greyson-Elle sire bond thing and the unstable *due destini*, and I still hadn’t fully processed the fact that I’d actually *died* for a few seconds. That really seemed to have messed everything up—my head included.

*It’s weird knowing that I was just… gone. Even for a few seconds. Dead. Just like that. I really could’ve left this world behind for good without even realizing it.*

The thought caused a weird twist in my stomach, and I wasn’t sure how to cope with it. My almost-death just felt like the cherry on top of the worst sundae in the world.

I smashed my face back into the pillow and screamed again.

I felt the couch sink down beside me, and a warm arm slid across my back. I finally looked up to see Greyson looking back at me, his expression grim.

“Hey, Cali,” he said evenly. “We need to talk.”

**Episode 4473**

**Greyson**

I knew from the moment Cali had turned and left the room that I’d messed up. I hadn’t had a good response—any response—to the idea that the sire bond was stronger than the mate bond. I’d just frozen. Now, I wanted to do whatever I could to make it up to her.

“What do you want to talk about?” Cali asked. Her cheeks were red, and I assumed she was embarrassed that I’d caught her screaming into a pillow. But I wasn’t judging. I probably would’ve done the same thing, under the circumstances.

“Cali, I really feel awful that you’re so upset about what happened with me and Elle. I can’t even begin to explain it. It was kind of like an out-of-body experience—that’s the only way I can describe it. I just want to talk it through with you. I never intended for it to happen, and I don’t think Elle did, either.”

Though I had to wonder if I was making assumptions about Elle’s intentions simply because I trusted her and knew her character, or if it was because the sire bond was giving me additional insight into what she was thinking. Honestly, I wasn’t sure. I hated not knowing my own feelings.

Cali sank into my side and rested her head against my shoulder, letting out a big sigh.

“You good?” I asked her.

She nodded. “I think so. I’m really sorry about this whole mess.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” I said jokingly.

I was grateful when she laughed, even if it was only a little chuckle.

I stood up and offered her my hand. “Come on. Let’s go talk this out somewhere private.”

Cali let out another sigh, but she took my hand and let me pull her to her feet. I led her into the study and shut the door behind us.

I guided Cali to the couch, then crouched down in front of her so I could look her in the eye. “First, I want to apologize, officially, for what you saw back there. I hate that you agreed with Lucian for even a second. I can’t say that I’m sure about what this new development is with Elle, but I know that nothing can shake the mate bond between you and me. I’m sorry that I caused you to feel even a *shred* of doubt. Sire bond or not, that’s on me.”

“Thank you, Greyson, but I know you can’t control it. Neither of you can,” Cali said. “I’d be more upset if you were doing all of this on purpose, but you’re not, and I’m trying to be mindful of that.”

I reached out to take her hand. “You know that kills me, right? That this thing I can’t control is hurting you over and over again? I just wish it would go away. You’re the only one for me—the only one I’ll ever want. You know that, right?”

Cali didn’t say anything for a long while, but she finally gave a slight nod.

I started to lean close to her. I wanted to show her again that our mate bond—our connection—was everything to me. I cupped her face and bent toward her, just as she tilted her face up.

I could sense her hesitation, as well as my own, and our lips slid together almost shyly as we felt each other out. But then Cali leaned closer, and her breasts brushed lightly against my chest, igniting the flame of desire inside me that always burned for her, no matter what.

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her against me as I slowly dipped my tongue into her mouth. I savored her warmth and the sweetness of her breath, my fingers caressing the silky-smooth skin of her face.

I wanted to prove to Cali that our bond was stronger than my sire bond with Elle, and that it always would be. But still, there was a part of me that hated the fact that I had to keep proving the depth of my love for Cali. My love for her had never wavered, not even once—so why did it feel like it was always being put to the test? Always being questioned? Even in the face of the sire bond, why was it necessary to confirm what Cali and I both already knew? Was there something wrong with my connection to Cali? Was there something we needed to address?

*This isn’t right. I shouldn’t have to prove my love to Cali time and time again. Is the sire bond creating all this uncertainty, or is it something else? But what else could it be? Cali and I love each other, no question—so why does our bond seem so shaky right now?*

Despite the questions flowing through my mind, the heat of our kiss only grew, and we both sank back onto the couch.

I pushed all thoughts of Elle and the sire bond away, wanting to just live in the moment with Cali. She was all I wanted—all I’d *ever* wanted—and I was willing to do whatever it took to show her that. Even if I had to do it over and over again.

I crawled on top of her, and she moaned, shifting so that I could fit between her legs. I deepened the kiss, spurred on by the feel of her body pressed against mine, her hips slowly rocking against me. I pulled back so I could remove my shirt, then I hungrily brought my lips to hers once again.

Cali’s yelp stopped me cold. I pulled back, surprised by the taste of blood in my mouth. I looked down and saw a spot of red on Cali’s bottom lip. I’d kissed her a little too hard.

I reached out to wipe the blood from her mouth with my thumb. “I’m so sorry, love. Are you okay?”

Cali nodded. “I’m okay,” she said, but I could sense that the mood had shifted. She was already straightening her clothes, and she wasn’t making eye contact.

I sat up and pulled my shirt back on. “I’m really sorry about that, Cali. I didn’t mean to get that… excited. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No,” she said, looking away. “But maybe we shouldn’t be doing, uh, *that* right now. You know, since we haven’t really talked about what happened with Elle. Maybe now’s not the time.”

I grimaced and ran a hand through my hair, wishing there wasn’t any need to talk about something that should’ve been a non-factor in our relationship.

The sire bond was strange. I couldn’t really even put my finger on the emotions it stirred in me. There was just this magnetism between Elle and me that was bound to cause trouble with Cali. How could it not?

“All I can say is that I’m sorry, and that I’ll do everything in my power to keep it from happening again,” I said.

“Thank you for the apology, but it’s not all on you,” she said. “I really am sorry for how I reacted. It was just a bit of a shock to have Elle just burst in like that while we were having that conversation—which was tense enough already. I was still trying to wrap my head around why you were talking to the witches, and then she came in, and everything just… went wrong.”

“I know,” I said. “But Cali… It was like I couldn’t help myself.”

“And you know I know that,” she said. “Still, it didn’t feel good that you instantly dropped our conversation to deal with Elle. That said, I know my reaction could’ve been better. The sire bond just keeps catching me by surprise, I guess. Whenever I’ve got myself convinced that it’s nothing to worry about, it seems to throw something new into the mix.”

“I feel the same way,” I said. “I had no idea that it would change into… whatever it’s becoming. And again, I’m just so sorry that my actions made you feel that way. I hate it. I want you to feel secure in our relationship, and I don’t want you to have any doubts about us.”

“It’s not that I have doubts…” Cali paused. “Well, maybe I have *some* doubts, but not in the way you think. Seeing you two like that just hits me somewhere deep. I don’t consider myself a jealous person, but I don’t think *anyone* would be thrilled to see their mate locked in an intense connection with a beautiful woman.”

“And that’s why I think the best course of action is to bring the three witches on board to break the sire bond,” I said. “It’s what I was saying before—this bond is making choices for me, making me change my way of thinking without my input. I’m sick of it.”

Cali tensed, and I knew she was replaying our conversation from earlier. “So… What does that mean? Are you really going to ask the witches to break the sire bond, regardless of the price?”

**Episode 4474**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t sure how to respond to Ava’s question. Especially since I had no doubt that Adéluce was going to have another go at Ava, and probably Cali, too.

My own fuck-ups had led to this. I’d attacked Adéluce, and now she was trying to reassert her power over me. Adéluce’s only goal was to see me suffer because of the part she believed I’d played in her family’s destruction. But I wasn’t about to let the vampire-witch destroy my life, or the pack I was rebuilding.

I smoothed Ava’s soaking wet hair back from her face and looked her in the eyes. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. We’re going to find the vampire who did this to you, and they’re going to pay. It’s as simple as that. We’ve been hunting for them, and we’re not going to stop. Whoever they are, they made a big mistake by attacking a Luna—especially *my* Luna.”

That made Ava smile a little, and my fondness for her rose inside me.

“Oh, Xavier,” she breathed, pulling me into a hug.

I stood there wrapped in her embrace, letting the water wash over the both of us as I once again tried to weigh up just how much I cared about her, once again tried to decide if it could be called “love.” I still wasn’t sure how I was going to navigate any of this—Adéluce, my feelings for Ava—but I was going to keep my promise to Ava, no matter what.

I took her face in my hands and pulled her into a kiss. I allowed my mind to go blank, letting myself enjoy this quiet, uninterrupted moment with her.

“Let’s finish up so you can go eat something,” I finally said.

I moved to get out of the shower, but Ava held me in place. I smiled at the proof of how quickly her strength was returning.

She looked up at me. “I know what Marissa said, but I don’t want you to be gentle. Not even a little.”

I knew what Ava was asking for, but I wasn’t sure if I should give it. I was grateful that she was alive—way more grateful than I ever would’ve thought possible, not too long ago. I wanted to show her how I felt about her, but only if she was really all right.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea, Ava,” I said hesitantly.

Her hold on me tightened. “I know what I want, and I know what I almost lost because of the attack. *You*. I need you. I want you. I’m not some fragile, broken little bird.”

She rose to her tiptoes and pressed a hard kiss to my lips, raking her fingers through my hair and down my neck.

I wanted to give in so badly. I felt the same way she did—almost losing her had shown me that. But what was I going to do with those feelings? I was still at a loss. I didn’t want to be in this position, but I was. Now I had to deal with it.

I stopped thinking as I leaned into Ava’s kiss, slowly backing her up against the wall. Gently, I slid my hands down her sides and then moved to cup her ass, squeezing gently as I explored her mouth with my tongue. She arched against me, her heavy breasts pressing against my chest as my own longing began to take hold of me.

I dropped down to my knees, rested her thigh on my shoulder so that I could support her weight, and then pressed my lips to her sex. I kissed her gently, running my hands up and down her legs as I slowly extended my tongue and swirled it around her clit before dipping it deep inside her.

“*Xavier*,” she moaned, her thighs tightening around my head as I thrust my tongue deeper, tasting her wetness as it mingled with the water still pelting us from above.

I suckled her, slowly devouring the sweetness of her fluttering channel as I felt my own arousal surging between my legs. I stood and took my erection in hand, then I watched as Ava’s hands pushed mine aside. She met my eyes as she slowly pumped her hand up and down my shaft, her thumb caressing the sensitive spot on the underside of the tip.

Gently, I turned her around and, nibbling at her ear, entered her slowly. She reached back to grab my hips, urging me to go faster.

“Don’t tempt me,” I said, still taking things slow.

“I don’t need you to be gentle, Xavier,” she said. “Do whatever you want with me. *Please*.”

It was the way her voice almost broke when she asked it that undid me. Still slowly, we both let out an exhale when I slid all the way in. I waited there, trying to hold back from giving her what she’d asked for. She wiggled her hips against me, trying to urge me on.

“Xavier, please…”

“I know you don’t need me to be gentle, but I want to be,” I said. I slowly retreated from her depths before sliding all the way back in. “Besides, doesn’t that feel good?”

“Yes,” Ava breathed. Her hand slapped against the wall as I increased my speed. I held her waist steady and slowly swirled my cock around inside her, favoring technique over power.

I gently nudged her legs farther apart and, my erection growing until I was filling her, stretching her, satisfying her, I thrust into her with a bit more speed than before, still taking care not to put too much heat behind my movements. Ava arched her back and opened herself to me.

“I needed this.” She looked at me over her shoulder, and with a wicked smile, she reached back to grab my hips and yanked me in hard and deep.

I groaned and stayed pressed against her, doing my best to hold back from giving her what she wanted. “*Ava*,” I breathed.

“X, I want you to fuck me,” she said. “*Hard*.”

“Oh yeah?” I grunted.

I picked her up and, still being gentle, pinned her against the wall. This time I entered her with a little more strength than before, but I was still taking it easy. Once I brought her to the brink, she wouldn’t care how she’d arrived there.

With smooth, fast thrusts, I plunged into her over and over again until her screams were bouncing off the walls. She clung to me, dragging her fingernails down my shoulder blades as she rode me to her climax.

She thrashed against me, jerking her hips against mine and bringing my own climax slamming through me so that I had to lean against the wall to keep my footing.

When we were done, we had one final rinse and then stepped out of the shower. I toweled her off, taking care to be gentle with her neck.

Despite Ava’s enthusiasm in the shower, I sensed that her energy was waning. She needed food and more rest—though the thought of her going to sleep again caused me some alarm. What if she didn’t wake up? What if she slipped back into the coma? That was what had happened last time. She’d seemed to be on the mend, and then she’d gone to bed and hadn’t woken up.

I wasn’t about to put anything past Adéluce. She had her claws in me even deeper than before, and she was going to do everything she could to remind me who was in control. And that was exactly why I needed to figure out a plan to kill her. That had always been my mission, but it was even more pressing, now.

We returned to the bedroom to see that Marissa had left a plate of food on the nightstand—soup and a sandwich.

“You should try to eat,” I said to Ava as she lowered herself onto the bed.

Ava looked at the food. She seemed a little uncertain.

I picked up the bowl of soup and offered her a spoonful.

Ava rolled her eyes. “I can feed myself.”

“Then do it,” I said.

She gave me a playful glare and took the mouthful I was offering, then took the spoon for herself.

“I’m going to go check in with the others, but when I come back, all of that had better be gone,” I said sternly.

“Sure, sure.”

I left Ava and immediately went looking for Gabe. I found him downstairs in the living room with Mikah, and he stood up as I approached.

“She’s awake?” he asked.

“She is,” I said.

I watched a mix of emotions pass across Gabe’s face. He thought I was still in love with Cali, that the kiss shouldn’t have worked. But it *had* worked.

“Well, that’s, uh… More complicated than I thought,” Gabe said.

Ignoring the comment, I faced him head-on. “Gabe, I’m about to ask you something, and you can’t say no.”

**Episode 4475**

Greyson was hesitating, and I knew it was because I probably wasn’t going to like his answer to my question.

“So, you want to get the witches to break the sire bond?” I asked, keeping my voice neutral. I wanted the sire bond gone as much as he did, maybe even *more* than he did, but I wasn’t willing to pay some awful price to get rid of it. We didn’t know what the price would be, but still I had a bad feeling about it.

Greyson sighed. “Yes. Of course I do. What else am I supposed to do? I don’t want my mate to be upset about a sire bond that I have no control over, and it doesn’t look like it’s going away any time soon. Plus, as we’ve both pointed out multiple times, we have no idea how this bond might continue to morph and change. Hell, it already has.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. If the bond had shifted this much in such a short amount of time, there was no telling what it might look like a month, or even days from now. “Plus, there’s the whole unbalanced *due destini* thing that Rowena brought to our attention. It doesn’t feel great having that in play on top of the sire bond issue. It feels like that’ll only bring about horrible consequences… But the spell could, too!”

“That’s a risk I’m going to have to take,” Greyson said. “But I’d rather take that risk and preserve my connection with you than do anything else. I only want Elle as a friend, as a pack mate—that’s all. I hate how powerless I’m starting to feel against the sire bond. I have to take my power back, for Elle’s sake as much as my own.”

“I know,” I said.

It had to be hard for werewolves, having to fight such a strong, primal aspect of their identity whenever it went against their human desires. I didn’t envy Greyson, and I knew I had to be mindful of the differences between us in these sorts of situations.

“When I beat the shit out of Ethaniel, that was me giving in to my wolf and to the sire bond,” Greyson said. “I could’ve taken that *way* too far if you hadn’t stepped in, Cali. Though maybe I should’ve kept going, since Ethaniel wants to cause trouble for me now,” he added, his expression darkening.

“Don’t think like that, Greyson,” I said. “You can’t. But I understand what you mean. You want your control back. I get it. I just hope that you don’t have to give up something important to get it.”

Greyson nodded. “I don’t want these fake feelings just coming at me out of nowhere. I want to focus on you and the pack and nothing else. You and the pack are my world, Cali.”

Hearing that from Greyson gave me back the warm fuzzies I’d been missing since I’d seen him with Elle. It felt good to hear that Greyson was still devoted to me despite everything.

“I do understand why you want to break the bond, Greyson,” I said. “But I’m just concerned about the consequences. We formed a close relationship with Big Mac, and we had a great relationship with Kira, too. We could trust that their spells would work, and that they wouldn’t ask anything awful in return. When it comes to the sisters, though…”

“I know, and you’re right to be concerned. Why don’t we just wait and see what the witches come back with and go from there?” Greyson suggested. “If the price is something we’re unwilling to pay, we say no. Simple as that.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said. “Depending on what they say… Maybe we could even get a second opinion?”

It sounded like I was talking about visiting a doctor, but it actually seemed like a perfect plan. If the three witches came back with a price that we didn’t like, we could just back out of any potential agreement and find someone else to fix the sire bond. At least now, we knew that something *could* be done about it.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t,” Greyson replied. “It’s not like I *have* to do what the sisters suggest. I have a choice in that, at least.”

I let out a breath of relief. “I’m glad that you’re at least open to the idea of using someone else, if we need to. I don’t think Big Mac will be willing to help, but we could talk to someone else. Maybe Rowena? And if she’s out of her depth, there’s Nneka, or maybe we could even call Okorie?”

I was starting to feel better. We had options—I had to remember that.

“There are plenty of witches out there,” Greyson agreed. “We’ll find one who’s willing to talk and see what our options are. The last thing I want is for this to stress everyone out, but the sire bond has to go—that much I know for sure. I’ll do whatever it takes to get rid of it.”

“I know you will,” I said. “That’s what scares me.” I ran my fingers along the back of his hands. “Just promise me that you won’t agree to do anything without telling me first.”

“I won’t,” Greyson said. “We’re in this together.”

It felt good to hear him say that. With Greyson by my side, I felt like we’d be able to handle whatever came our way. We’d done a good job of that so far. No matter what tried to take us out—be it a rival pack or a vengeful father back from the grave—we always managed to come out on top. We just had to stick together.

Greyson pulled me into a hug, and I wrapped my arms around him, breathing him in.

After a few seconds, I pulled back to look at him head-on. “I’m really sorry that I was so insensitive before, and that I ran off. I wasn’t thinking of your feelings, or Elle’s, and it showed.”

The only thing I’d cared about in that moment was getting away from them as soon as possible—before I saw anything that would’ve made this whole situation worse. Again, the feeling that I’d been encroaching on a private moment between them grated against my newly rediscovered sense of calm.

“It’s all right,” Greyson said. He ran a finger down the side of my face. “The sire bond is a lot to deal with.”

“Understatement of the century,” I grumbled, shaking my head.

He laughed. “My bad.”

“But really, I am feeling a lot better than I was,” I said.

“You mean better than when you were screaming into a pillow?” Greyson teased.

I gave him a faux scowl. “Too soon, Greyson!”

I laughed a bit more as I replayed those desperate moments in my head. Screaming into a pillow was the only thing I’d thought to do to take the edge off the anger and confusion I’d been feeling. Better to scream into a pillow than to scream out my frustrations at Greyson and Elle.

“Sorry, love.” Greyson raised his hands in surrender. “But I really do apologize about the way the sire bond has been controlling me, and how that’s affected you. If I’d known that any of this was possible when I turned Elle…”

“You wouldn’t have done it?”

Elle was a part of our pack now, and it felt like she always had been. But I could admit, it would’ve been nice not to have to deal with the trouble she’d brought along for the ride.

“I guess I don’t want to say that I regret turning her, but I do wish I’d had some idea of what I was really getting into.” Greyson shook his head. “Never in a million years did I think that turning her would end up hurting our bond.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely not something you can plan for,” I said. “But it kind of sucks.”

“Understatement?” Greyson teased.

“Major.” I laughed and gave him a playful swat on the arm before he leaned in and kissed me again. I lingered in the heat of the moment for as long as I could before he pulled away and stood.

“I need to go check on what’s happening around the house, and maybe cook something—without Torin here, I need to make sure that the pack doesn’t starve,” Greyson said.

“You go ahead—I’ll join you in a minute,” I said. “I’m just going to go grab a sweater.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.” Greyson smiled at me before ducking out of the study.

When he was gone, I got up to shut the door behind him. An intense fear gripped me as I leaned against the door, shutting my eyes.

Even if we got another witch to weigh in on breaking the sire bond, what if the only ones capable of doing it were the three sisters?

**Episode 4476**

**Xavier**

Gabe gave me a long, hard look before he finally spoke.

“Here’s the thing, Xavier,” he said flatly. “I can *always* say no—and don’t underestimate my ability to do it, either. That’s exactly why I choose not to belong to a pack—so I can do what I want, when I want without having to bend to the whims of any Alpha.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, man. I’m not about to ask you to kill a bunch of bunnies or something. I just want you and Mikah to act as Ava’s bodyguards.”

The idea had occurred to me the moment I saw him. I’d promised Ava that I was going to keep her safe, and right now the only way I saw to do that was to make sure that someone had eyes on her 24/7.

*I’d love to be the one to watch out for Ava, but Adéluce has me on a short leash. She can get me out of the way whenever she wants. I need someone Adéluce won’t pay as much attention to watching out for Ava.*

Gabe looked surprised. “Seriously? You’re trying to hire us again?”

“Yes,” I said simply. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to do. Name your price.”

Mikah looked confused as he stood up and joined the conversation. “Did I hear what I think I just heard?”

“Yes,” Gabe said dryly. “Apparently, Xavier thinks he needs a bodyguard. And dude, you don’t. You’re an Alpha werewolf. If youcan’t protect yourself against a threat, then what hope do the rest of us have?”

“I’m not asking for me this time,” I said. “Like I said, it’s for Ava.”

“Well, that’s exactly my point,” Gabe retorted. “You’re an Alpha—you’re more than capable of guarding your mate. Not to mention the fact that I doubt Avaeven needs guarding. She’s a Luna, and a pretty badass one at that. Lunas are strong in their own right—isn’t that kind of a requirement?”

“Of course it is,” I said hotly. “But that’s not the point. A vampire *successfully* attacked Ava out of the blue—or maybe it was a targeted hit.”

I was a little surprised that I’d been able to say that last part, seeing as it *had* been a targeted hit. Apparently Adéluce thought that was appropriate to share.

“As Alpha of the Samara pack, I have specific duties to uphold,” I continued. “I won’t always be able to be there at Ava’s side. I want to look out for her and protect her, and I think you two could do that. I want you to fill in for me during those times when I can’t be there, and even when I’m there as well. The more eyes on Ava, the better.”

Gabe gave Mikah another look, and I was sure they were mind linking.

I watched them closely, already preparing myself to counter whatever excuse they might come up with. No matter what, I was going to convince them to do this. I was more motivated than ever to kill that damn vampire-witch, but I wasn’t going to be able to do it alone. Also, I needed to be able to focus on killing her without worrying about Adéluce going after Ava when I wasn’t watching.

*I’m going to kill her. I have to. If I don’t, I’ll never get my life back, and I’ll spend the rest of my life in constant fear. But I have to be smart about taking her down.*

I just needed to figure out exactly how to take her out. I had to. No matter how I looked at it, Cali and Ava were at risk because of me. Adéluce would never be satisfied, no matter the lengths I went to in order to mollify her. I was always going to fall short of her unmeetable expectations. And as long as she had her claws in me, she would try to hurt Ava again—and Cali, too, the moment she found a good enough reason to do it, and probably even for no reason at all.

I had a feeling that Cali was in her crosshairs now—though the vampire-witch was so unpredictable that there was no way to really know for sure. It just felt like it was probably about time for her to shift her attention to Cali, now that she’d successfully used Ava against me. She hadn’t made any moves to punish Cali in the days since the kiss we’d shared during the war, but her attempt to push Cali off a rooftop during Lucian’s premature victory party had been bad enough. I couldn’t give her another reason or opportunity to do something like that.

“So, are either of you actually going to say anything?” I finally asked.

Gabe sighed. “Why can’t you choose someone from the Samara pack to handle this? You’ve got a pack now. Use it.”

“I *am* using it,” I countered. “For patrols, for running the house, for recruiting more pack members. I need the pack to keep doing all those things. Guarding Ava is a specialized task that’s best suited to someone who isn’t in the pack. Having this as your sole mission will allow you to give it the attention it deserves. It’ll be your priority. Besides, you two are a bit more seasoned than most of the Samaras, and I trust that you’ll be able to handle the job. Not to mention the fact that Mikah is a vampire, and if this vampire were to attack again, he knows how other vampires think better than anyone.”

Mikah nodded slowly, and actually seemed to be listening. “I get your point—though I feel the need to remind you that vampires aren’t a monolith.”

“Sure,” I said. “But if it comes down to a werewolf predicting a vampire’s next move and a vampire doing the same, I’d trust the vampire’s assessment more.”

“Fair enough,” Mikah admitted.

Gabe sighed again. “Are you really that worried about Ava?”

I saw no reason not to tell the truth about that. “Yes, I am. I want her protected. Her safety is important to me, and you two are the people I trust most to keep her out of harm’s way… Besides myself, of course.”

Mikah and Gabe exchanged another look before Mikah sighed and said, “Fine. We’ll do it.”

Gabe nodded. “We will—but have you given Ava a heads-up about this? Something tells me that she isn’t going to be all that pleased about being babysat.”

“I don’t care—it’s what I want, and she’ll see it my way once I explain it to her,” I said simply. “Thank you both.”

“Well, I guess I’d better take a minute to actually unpack, since it looks like we’re not leaving anytime soon,” Gabe grumbled.

“Think of it as a new adventure,” Mikah said as he followed him upstairs.

I watched them go, relieved that they’d agreed to look after Ava. I knew that their presence wouldn’t be enough to keep Adéluce from trying to hurt my Luna, but maybe one of them would see her if she tried anything.

But deep down, I knew that Adéluce was too smart to show herself when there was a chance anyone else might see her—unless she *wanted* them to. Her entire game hinged on my being haunted by the phantom of her, and not being able to tell anyone the source of my suffering—or even that I was suffering at all.

Marissa approached me, and I could tell she had something on her mind.

“So, now that Ava’s back and better than ever, what are we going to do about that vampire?” she asked, getting straight to the point. “The bloodsucker who had the nerve to touch our Luna? I know you’re just as pissed about it as I am.”

I nodded, wishing that I could actually just come out and tell Marissa what was going on so we could throw the full force of the Samara pack against Adéluce. I pictured an all-out battle with my wolves running Adéluce down and ripping her to shreds. It could go down that way or just one-on-one. Death ultimately was what she deserved, and it was the end I hoped to give her one day, one way or another.

“The patrols aren’t enough,” Marissa continued.

“No,” I agreed, “but we need to keep them going. Maybe we should step them up, though. We need a clue—something to set us in the right direction.”

“Should we go back to where it happened?” Marissa asked. “Maybe we missed something.”

“Wouldn’t hurt,” I said. “Go get a few of the others—we can head out to search right now.”

Marissa rushed off, and I stood there and hoped that Adéluce had made a mistake. Maybe she’d dropped something, or left some clue behind—anything that might give me a way to destroy her, once and for all.

I needed to get a leg up on that damn vampire-witch, and I knew what my first step had to be. There was one thing that would strip away her power and even the playing field between us.

I had to bait her into doing what she’d taken pains never to do—show herself.

**Episode 4477**

**Greyson**

I rummaged through the kitchen, searching for the garlic powder as the pot of chili I was making simmered on the stove. I’d been looking for about five minutes now, and I still had no clue where it was. I knew we had to have it, but I wasn’t having much luck tracking it down.

I had no idea what to make of the way Torin had organized the kitchen. It *was* organized, but not in a way that made any sense to me. Back when I lived on my own, I’d arranged my spices in alphabetical order, but this was… some other kind of order. Knowing Torin, it was probably by flavor profile. I was certain that there was some kind of method to his madness, but it was clear that he and I had very different methodologies.

Eventually, I found the garlic powder and shook it into the pot. It was smelling good, and I hoped no one would be disappointed that it wasn’t Torin’s cooking. It was a pretty basic chili recipe, but it tasted good. At least, I’d always liked it. I was sure that Torin would’ve jazzed it up with all sorts of additions that I never would’ve thought to include, though.

It felt good to be doing something other than thinking about the sire bond and the stress it was putting on Cali and me. I’d been worried that a talk wouldn’t be enough to address all the layers of the sire bond issue, but I’d felt really good about things when I’d left Cali. Especially now that we’d decided to do something about it—even if the solution was a bit stressful, too.

As for Elle, I hadn’t seen her since she’d burst into the study to talk about the emotions she was feeling—*my* emotions. I understood why she’d been so frantic, and I was happy that I’d been able to be there for her, even though I knew that dropping everything to comfort her hadn’t been the right thing to do when I should’ve been giving my attention to Cali.

But even though I hadn’t seen Elle since that encounter, I could still feel all her feelings. Her uncertainty and fear about what this new development meant for the both of us was still coursing through her, and as a result, it was coursing through me, too. I didn’t know how to deal with it. It was difficult enough to deal with my own worries without adding Elle’s to the mix.

I hadn’t told Cali about feeling Elle’s emotions—it only would’ve made things worse and added to her stress. But even as I stirred tomato sauce into the pot, Elle’s feelings were with me, surging through me as if they were my own.

It was unlike anything I’d ever experienced, and it was definitely not something I wanted to be dealing with. There was nothing fun about experiencing feelings that weren’t your own. And there wasn’t any indication that any of this would stop without some kind of external intervention, and that was the most concerning part.

*I have to break this sire bond at any cost. If I don’t, it’s going to tear me and Cali apart. I can feel it. And it might drive me crazy in the process, too.*

Rishika came walking in.

“Something smells good in here,” she said. “Cooking up something amazing for the troops?”

I laughed. “I hope so. I wanted to have something ready, since everyone’s spent the day cleaning up the yard. I’ll put this on low to simmer and then I’ll head back out to help.”

“No worries, we’re making good progress out there,” Rishika said. “The trenches are up next. We’re making a game of it to pass the time.”

“Sounds great,” I said. “Thanks for the update. And for doing all of that.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “But there’s something else I wanted to touch base with you about, too. The prisoners at the palace—what’s the plan for dealing with them now that Lucian has officially pulled out of the alliance?”

Rishika rocked back on her heels and was clearly trying to appear nonchalant, but I could see that this was weighing on her mind.

I put the lid on the pot and turned to face Rishika. “I’ve been struggling to figure out exactly how to handle that, but it’s definitely on my to-do list. There are multiple Alphas in that group, including Ethaniel. We need to be involved in handling him, along with everyone else—and Lucian doesn’t get to just decide what to do with them because they’re in his custody. It’s still a decision for all of us to make, alliance or not.”

Plus, there was no way I could leave Ethaniel’s fate in Lucian’s hands. I supposed if he just decided to kill him, I wouldn’t mind so much—even though Cali would throw a fit. But if for some reason he chose to let Ethaniel go, or if Ethaniel started running his mouth about me and Elle to someone who could take the information to the council, that would be a problem.

“Exactly,” Rishika said. “This is too delicate to leave to Lucian, and I have a feeling he might fight us on it. Who knows what he’ll do, given half a chance?”

“Right. I’m glad Aysel’s gotten on board with trying to change his mind, but I’m worried that this situation might become quite difficult to navigate. Lucian was pretty adamant about wanting to kill the prisoners.” I lowered my voice. “And I can’t say I completely disagree with him… But I do want to have a say in what happens to them. I was the leader during the war, so I should be the one to finish this.”

“Agreed,” Rishika said. “Lucian might’ve delivered the killing blow to Malakai—snatched it right out of your hands, the little shit—but you were the one who led us there. You led the entire alliance.”

“Hopefully I’ll be able to convince Lucian to see it that way,” I said.

Rishika gave me a skeptical look. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “And I appreciate the check-in. However I decide to handle this, I’ll be sure to keep you posted.”

Rishika nodded and went back outside.

I pulled the lid off the pot and stirred the chili again, thinking. I’d been telling the truth when I’d told Rishika that I appreciated her checking in, but at the same time, it showed where I was falling short. With everything else going on, I’d put the fate of the prisoners on the backburner.

I was about to go check on Cali when I realized my phone was blowing up with text messages, blinking and vibrating on the counter as notification after notification rolled in.

I picked up the phone and scrolled through them. They were all from Aysel.

The first one read, *What are we going to do about Lucian?*

I chuckled at the next one. *Greyson, I need you! He chose the blue china to decorate the dining room.*

Another text below that one. *THE BLUE! This is a CODE RED*

Next text. *CODE RED!*

I slowly strolled out of the kitchen, still reading the texts. They got more ridiculous as they went on.

*Lucian’s insisting that we dig another pool in the side yard. Greyson! We already have five pools!*

And then after that, *Or do we have seven… Or four? I don’t know, but we don’t need another pool!*

*Greyson, why aren’t you answering? Don’t you see that he’s losing his mind? I caught him staring at an old photo of him and Jace—you don’t know Jace, and you don’t WANT to know Jace! If you thought Seluna was bad, I’ve got news for you—humans can be demons, too!*

This was classic Aysel, bombarding me with problems that weren’t actually problematic. I’d been hoping for news about the prisoners, but they obviously weren’t at the top of Lucian’s priority list—or if they were, he wasn’t sharing with Aysel. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

I was about to put the phone down when another text rolled in. *Greyson, this isn’t just my problem, it’s ours.* *We need to fix it.*

*There’s no “we” in this*, I thought to myself. *Not when it comes to Lucian. He’s acting alone, and Aysel’s his sister. If she’s so concerned, she should be stepping up and doing something about it rather than texting like a madwoman and begging me to take care of it.*

But then I stopped myself. This might actually be a way to get back into the palace and see about the prisoners.

My phone buzzed as another text came through. *There’s something else. Something I don’t want to say over the phone.*

I read and then reread Aysel’s text, not liking the sound of it.

Finally, I texted back. *I agree, this is our problem. How soon can we meet?*

**Episode 4478**

I grabbed a sweatshirt, pulled it on, and finally made my way back downstairs. I’d stayed in my room for a while to steal a few moments alone, and it had helped. A little.

I was happy that Greyson and I had talked things through about the sire bond, but I was still feeling a little uneasy about going to the three witches—even though we weren’t going to make any decisions about moving forward until we heard the price they came up with. The last time Greyson had gone to them, I hadn’t known what happened until after the fact. All I knew was their methods were… different? No, maybe intense was a better way of thinking about it.

*I just don’t have a good feeling about it—and why would I? I learned to trust Big Mac and Kira, but they’re different. Witches like the three sisters can’t be trusted. They’re trickier; they hold their cards closer to their chests than the witches we know. We can never know their true motivations… But what if we have no choice but to use them? What if they’re the only ones who can fix Greyson and Elle’s problem?*

I saw Greyson standing in the kitchen. He was cooking, and it smelled divine. For a quick second I stood, watching and admiring him from afar. He was doing everything he could to fix this, I knew that. And I was trying, too, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t difficult… For both of us.

He turned, and I quickly moved so he wouldn’t see me. I still wasn’t ready to talk to him like everything was one hundred percent okay. It wasn’t. Not yet.

I just needed a little more time, but I didn’t want him to know that I was still so down about what had happened, especially after we’d talked about it. I was still feeling pretty overwhelmed. Greyson had apologized, and I needed to remember that he wasn’t doing any of this on purpose—and neither was Elle—but I couldn’t help how I felt.

Craving fresh air and a bit more time to process, I headed out to the backyard, where Charlie, Violet, Lilac, and the others were all still busy cleaning up. Getting out of my own head and lost in cleaning sounded good. I needed to redirect my energy to something other than worrying about Greyson and Elle for a while.

I lingered on the porch for a few beats, admiring how much the pack had already done to restore the yard. It was looking good, and it was nice to see it turning into a clean slate, without all the memories of damage and battles.

I bounded off the porch and made my way over to Rishika and Ravi, who were talking quietly.

“How can I help?” I asked.

“Hey, Cali,” Ravi said distractedly. “We were just discussing what to do with these trenches we built.”

“We don’t need them right now, but they might come in handy in the future,” Rishika said.

I looked down at them. I hated to admit it, but Rishika was right. We never knew what enemy might decide to attack next.

I was really hoping that we wouldn’t be in danger again anytime soon, but I couldn’t help but think about the vampire attack at the party. There was no way to know if that vampire was still hanging around.

I shook off my negative thoughts as Ravi spoke up again.

“Yes, the trenches could be useful, but they’re a bit of an inconvenience when we go out on patrol,” Ravi said. “And I know we aren’t precious about the pack house, but they’re a bit of an eyesore, too.”

“That’s true,” I said, biting my lip in thought. “Maybe we could fill some of them in and leave the others? It’s not like it took us long to dig them, especially with my magic.”

“True,” Rishika said. “Maybe we should see if we even have enough dirt to fill them in. We might have to bring some in, which would be a pain in the ass.”

“There’s dirt over there, but it might be frozen solid,” Ravi said. “I saw Charlie banging his shovel against one of the piles earlier. It sounded like he was hitting a brick wall.”

“I’ll check it out,” I said, crouching beside the nearest trench. The ground was frozen over, but it never got *that* cold in Oregon. And ice was no match for magic, anyway.

I stared down into the trench, wondering about the best way to fill it in. I’d used my magic to create some of the trenches, so maybe I could use my magic to… un-create them. Like Ravi had mentioned, the mounds of dirt were there. There was no harm in trying.

I walked up to one of the huge mounds and summoned my magic. I shot a blast of energy at the dirt and cried out when a bunch of it blew at me. I threw my hands up to cover my eyes and lost my footing. I let out a clipped yelp as I fell into the trench. I hit the ground hard and then lay there looking up at the sky for a few moments while I tried to decide whether to laugh or cry.

*That didn’t go very well, did it? I hope no one saw…*

I groaned and tried to sit up, but my back was throbbing. I leaned back against the wall of the trench, keeping my eyes shut as I took a deep breath through the shooting pain.

*Smooth move, Cali. Maybe I bruised my tailbone or something. Hopefully it’s that and not a break.*

“Rishika! Ravi!” I called out. “Can you help me?! I kind of… fell in.”

“Whoa. What the hell happened to you?”

I opened my eyes to see Artemis looking down at me. “Artemis!” I said, practically shouting her name. “You’re back already?!”

The Fae hadn’t exactly said how long they’d be gone, but I hadn’t expected her back for at least another day or so.

“Just in time, apparently,” Artemis said as she jumped down into the trench with me.

“I was trying to fill in the other trench, the one across from this one,” I said, wincing at the pain radiating down my back.

“And how did that work out for you?” Artemis asked with a smirk.

Ignoring her little dig, I asked, “Did you find the herb for Torin?”

“We did. Now all he has to do is boil it or something. You can be his first patient.”

Artemis leapt up to sit on the edge of the trench, then leaned down to pull me up just as Rishika and Ravi rushed over to join her. I groaned and gritted my teeth as the three of them worked together to lift me out of the trench.

“Thanks,” I groaned, rolling over onto my back once I was on solid ground again.

“Don’t mention it,” Rishika said distractedly. I could see Rishika and Artemis eyeing each other. I knew Rishika was glad my sister was home already, too.

Artemis finally pulled her gaze away from Rishika to focus on me. “Let’s get you inside. Torin’s already in there with Greyson. I was actually out here looking for Rishika, but what do you know, I found you first.”

Rishika and Artemis helped me into the house, and Greyson immediately came rushing over.

“What happened, Cali? Are you all right?”

“I slipped,” I said. “And kind of fell into a trench.”

“Yes, *kind* of,” Artemis said.

I shot her a dirty look. “But I’m fine, for the most part,” I added. “Thanks for asking by the way, Artemis.”

“What?” she said. “You’re strong; I knew you’d be okay. And if not, Torin’s about to be back to full power, so why worry?”

Artemis and Rishika helped sit me down gingerly on the couch, and Torin came walking over to give me a big hug.

“I’ll heal you in a second, Cali. We got all the herbs I needed and more. I should go shopping in the Fae world more often—it was definitely worth it,” Torin said excitedly.

I was surprised to hear that they’d gone all the way to the Fae world to find what Torin needed. I looked at Artemis, who simply shrugged. I was still a little bummed about not getting to go with them. If I’d felt left out of the Fae field trip before, I was *really* feeling it now.

It would’ve been nice to go back to the Fae world and see how things were going. It definitely would’ve been a hell of a lot more fun than staying back and witnessing what was going on between Elle and Greyson.

“Where’s Adair?” I asked.

“He went to talk to Tabitha,” Artemis said.

“So you had to go to the Fae world?” I asked. “I would’ve liked to help.”

Artemis sighed and looked between me and Rishika. My sister’s demeanor had completely changed, and I was getting more worried by the second as a heavy silence descended between us.

“There’s something that you can help me with now,” Artemis said. “I need to go back to the Fae world, and I’m leaving today.”

**Episode 4479**

I stared at Artemis in complete shock. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“*What?*” I burst out. “You’re going back to the Fae world? *Today?*”

It was one thing for her to drop that kind of news on us, but quite another to give us literally no time to process it before it became a reality.

I tried to stand up, but the pain was too much, and I sank right back down into my seat. I’d definitely done something bad to my butt. Really bad.

“But you can’t leave, Artemis! You just *can’t*,” I said. “That’s crazy! And you definitely can’t just up and leave *today*!”

I looked to Rishika for support, but she looked just as surprised as I was. At a loss for words, too.

“I didn’t know how to tell you all, so I thought I might as well just get it out,” Artemis said. “What’s the expression? Rip off the Band-Aid?”

“But right NOW?” I blurted out. “Without any conversation or discussion? Without even a *day’s* warning?”

My head was spinning, and if I hadn’t already been benched on the couch with a butt injury I might’ve collapsed.

“It’s not like there was ever going to be a good time to tell you all this,” Artemis said. “And if I’d tried to discuss it with you”—she turned her attention to Rishika—“or with you, you only would’ve tried to talk me out of it.”

“But you at least could have pulled me and Rishika to the side to tell us privately—something other than just blurting out! This is just… crazy, Artemis! And I’m not afraid to say it. This was the wrong move on your part.”

Artemis rolled her eyes and threw up her hands in exasperation. “Sorry that I didn’t follow your rule book for how to deliver *my* news, Cali.”

I just shook my head at her, still in shock.

*I’m so confused. Where the hell is this coming from? She hasn’t expressed a desire to return to the Fae world in a while, and never so urgently. Did something happen on their trip that caused this?*

“Is this about Kadmos?” I asked abruptly.

Artemis arched an eyebrow. “Of course it is. It’s no secret that I want to find my father. The war is over, so it’s time for me to go do that, whatever it might take. Simple as that.”

“And how long is that going to take?” I asked. She could be gone for days, weeks… months?! I was shocked by her lack of consideration for me and Rishika. It was strange. She was usually so mindful of her girlfriend’s feelings—and mine, too. But right now, it seemed like they were the last thing on her mind.

“It takes as long as it takes,” she said.

Rishika’s face fell, and she turned to walk away. She still hadn’t said a word, and that said it all.

“Rishika, I’m sorry!” Artemis called. “Can we just—”

Rishika turned around with a fierce look that cut Artemis’s statement short. “Do *not* follow me right now.”

And with that, she disappeared upstairs.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Greyson and I exchanged a glance.

*I can’t believe she’s doing this right now!* I mind linked to him. *She could have at least given it a day or something so she could break it to us! Has she even talked to our mom about this?*

*I’ll admit, she could’ve approached it a lot better—*

*Damn right she could’ve!* I said, cutting him off. *I’m so mad I barely know what to say! Why would she give us no lead time?*

I looked at my sister, doing my best to deal with all the hurt swirling around inside me. I couldn’t believe she was just going to up and leave us with barely any notice. We were just starting to really get to know each other as sisters, and now she was just going to throw all that progress away and leave for an undetermined amount of time?

Artemis met my eyes. “Look, I’m sorry. I just knew you weren’t going to be happy about this, no matter what. And I really only just made the decision, so it’s not like I could’ve told you about it months ago or anything. Not that it would’ve made any difference.”

Before I could respond—not that I even knew what to say—Torin came rushing in.

“It’s finished!” His expression fell as he took a good look around the room, clearly feeling the new vibe. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” I said. “There’s nothing to discuss. What do you need to do with the herbs now?” I asked, needing to change the subject. In the back of my mind, I was kind of hoping that if I just ignored the issue, it would just go away. Artemis wouldn’t leave without me and Rishika being completely okay with it, right? So maybe we could just not be okay with it and force her to stay.

Artemis’s jaw was set as she turned on her heel to go back outside. Everyone jumped when she slammed the door—hard.

Torin watched her go. “It definitely seems like I interrupted something… But I won’t push.” He cleared his throat. “So, anyway, all that’s left for me to do is drink the tea, then I should be good to go. I really hope it works.”

*Me too, or I’m going to be wobbling around the pack house for a week.*

Torin went back to his boiling mixture and ladled some of it into a mug. He drank the entire thing really fast, despite it being extremely hot, and then he closed his eyes and let out a long, deep breath. After about a minute, he opened his eyes again and looked at us.

“So that’s that,” he said.

“So… Did it work?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Torin said. “I guess I won’t know until I try to heal you.”

I sat back on the couch as Torin came to stand over me. Even moving that much caused a swirl of pain to shoot through my body. If Torin’s powers didn’t work, there was a chance I was going to need some actual medical intervention. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Torin frowned in concentration as he hovered his hands over my back.

“Yay!” I cheered around a wince of pain as Torin’s hands started glowing blue.

“Yay is right—my hands haven’t glowed since my injury, so this is definitely a start!” Torin said. He chewed his lip nervously as he ran his hands over my body.

“I think it’s working,” I announced, once I realized the throbbing pain had stopped. I stood up to make sure that Torin’s magic had really done the trick. I spun around and did a few twists, just to make sure that everything was back to normal. “I feel great, Torin! Thanks!”

Torin covered his face with his hands and broke down crying.

Shocked at his reaction, I quickly wrapped my arms around him. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just so happy that my magic’s back! I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to help everyone anymore,” he cried. “I just don’t know what or who I’d be without my powers. They’re such a big part of who I am.”

Greyson clapped Torin on the back. “I’m happy for you, Torin, but just so you know, we value you for more than your healing abilities. You mean way more to us than that.”

Torin’s crying only intensified as he turned and wrapped his arms around Greyson.

Greyson’s eyes found mine as he reached out via mind link. *Go after your sister, Cali.*

*But Torin’s so upset right now, and he literally just healed me…*

*Go*, Greyson said gently. *I’ve got him.*

I gave Greyson a quick nod before heading back outside. I spotted my sister standing at the edge of the woods, and I hustled to join her.

“Artemis!” I called. “Artemis! We need to talk about this! You can’t just walk away!”

She just turned away and walked deeper into the woods. *Damn her.* I ran to catch up with her.

“Come on, Artemis! Don’t be this way! I’m your sister!” I said when I finally caught her. I grabbed her by the arm and spun her around to face me. She still looked as pissed as she’d been when she left the house, but I didn’t care. I needed to get to the bottom of what was really going on here.

“What, Cali? You already made it clear how you feel,” Artemis said. “What more is there to discuss? I’m not budging on this.”

“I know that, but you have to see where I’m coming from!” I said. “Why did you wait until now to say something about going to the Fae world?”

“I told you because of the war,” she said. “Now that it’s over, it’s the best time to go before something else goes wrong around here.”

“But you could be gone for so long,” I said. “I just got you… You know there’s no way I’m going to let you go alone!”

**Episode 4480**

The pissed-off expression on Artemis’s face only deepened, and I was worried that she was going to take off into the woods at any second just to get as far away from me as possible.

“I’m going alone, and that’s final. And it’s not up to you whether I got to the Fae world or not, Cali,” she snapped. “Do I need to remind you that I’m *from* the Fae world? It’s my home. The human world is nice, but I don’t have the same connection to it that you do.”

I could see that my sister was only getting more agitated, but I couldn’t just leave things like this. “Please reconsider, Artemis,” I urged her. “Come back to the house so we can talk about this. I promise I’ll consider everything you have to say, as long as you do the same for me and just hear me out.”

Artemis’s expression grew even more impassable. “I’m done talking, Cali. I’ve spent almost all of my time here in the human world helping you and the werewolves. It’s time for me to do something for myself for once. My father is alive, and I’m not going to waste any more time here. I’ve made my decision.”

I took a step back from her, feeling like she’d just slapped me. “Is that really how you think of the time you’ve spent here? As a waste? What about meeting our mother? Was that a waste? And what about meeting and falling for Rishika? Why are you being so *cold*?”

Artemis let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s so easy for you to judge, isn’t it, Cali? You have your father. You grew up with him. But I’ve lived my entire life never meeting mine. Wondering about him, hoping to see his face… Now that I know he could be alive, that I could meet him, and that I might need to help him? It’s different for me. I don’t expect you to get it.” Artemis looked past me like she was plotting her escape from this conversation.

“But I do get it, Artemis,” I said. “Of course you want to find your father—but why does it have to happen like *this*? So suddenly with no preamble. Why can’t we make a plan? Why won’t you let us *help* you? We’ve helped each other before, and we can do it again.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Cali. I don’t need your help or anyone else’s. You didn’t grow up in the Fae world like I did,” Artemis shot back. “You don’t know the ins and the outs of that world. I do.”

I was taken aback. “So what are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is that you’d only get in the way if you came with me.”

I was stunned. After everything we’d been through together, all the training and the fighting side by side, did my sister really just think of me as a nuisance? I thought I’d proven myself… I thought I’d shown her that my magic was improving, and that I could hold my own just like she could. But clearly, that wasn’t the case.

I started to say something, but I was too overwhelmed. I turned and headed back toward the house.

“Wait, Cali, stop! That came out wrong,” Artemis called. “Stop! Wait!”

I didn’t turn back, and I didn’t stop. It was starting to feel like I didn’t know my sister at all—the way she was acting reminded me of how she’d been when I’d first met her in the Fae world, before we’d realized we were sisters. She’d been distant, cold, closed off. But since then, we’d grown closer. At least I thought we had. Had I really misjudged our connection so greatly?

A stream of hot tears rolled down my cheeks, and I quickly swiped them away. I didn’t want Artemis to see me crying. She’d already insinuated that I was weak, and I didn’t want to prove her right.

The war was finally over, and things had finally calmed down, only for me to have to face the possibility of losing my sister. I didn’t understand Artemis. At all. I usually understood where she was coming from, but not this time. Why couldn’t she see things the way I did?

Why couldn’t she see that she was part of the pack, and that the pack needed her?

I heard Artemis rushing after me, and I finally turned back to face her, just as she grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Listen, Cali, I didn’t mean what I said. I’m sorry. I know you’re as good a fighter as anyone… I didn’t mean to make you feel like your help wouldn’t be good enough. I love you very much, and I love Mom, and I love Rishika, and I really care about the pack, but you have to understand that this is something I have to do. And I mean this in the nicest way, but it’s not about you. This is about *me*.”

I wanted to hug her and let her know that I loved her, too, but before I could, I heard the front door open and close.

Artemis and I both turned to see Adair walking out of the pack house with Tabitha and Dani in tow. All three of them were carrying bags.

Even Artemis seemed surprised. “Wait, where are you going?” she asked. “Did I miss something?”

Adair shot us both a neutral look, cool as always. “It’s time for me to move on. I’ve hung around here long enough that it might become a problem.”

“What? But why?” I sputtered.

“Being back in the Fae world made one thing clear—the Dark Fae aren’t going to give up on me.” Adair sighed. “I’d hoped that maybe, with time, they’d find someone else to terrorize, but it seems like I’m still their favorite pastime—blood signal and all.”

“Blood signal?” I repeated. I was alarmed. I had no idea what a blood signal was, but it definitely sounded bad. Why hadn’t Artemis mentioned it at all?

“Yes, a blood signal,” Adair said grimly, though he didn’t shed any light on what that was, exactly. “It’s not safe for me to stay in one place like this anymore. It was wishful thinking from the beginning to assume that I could. And since the war is over and the immediate threat to the pack is gone, there’s no need for me to stay. If I do, it’ll only put the pack in danger.”

Adair sighed as Tabitha put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“And given the way things typically go around here,” he added, “you all have enough of your own potential danger to contend with without adding mine to the pile.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, but this was still a lot to take in. It was starting to feel like everyone was abandoning the pack. It was like our family was falling apart right before my eyes—maybe an imperfect family, but a family all the same.

I guess I’d always known deep down that some of the newer members of the pack might not stick around forever, but it was all happening so fast—and all at once, too. The change was difficult for me to process… to say the least.

Deep down, I knew I couldn’t make Adair, Dani, and Tabitha stay, but Artemis was my sister, and that was different. I couldn’t just let her walk out of my life for an unknown amount of time without doing everything in my power to stop her. I still wasn’t sure what I could do to change Artemis’s mind from her sudden departure. I didn’t want my older sister to suddenly be… gone. I knew a lot of my emotions were coming from a selfish place, but I loved her. I’d just found her, and right now I was willing to try just about anything to get her to stay just a bit longer.

“But where are you going?” I asked Adair.

He shook his head. “Can’t tell you that—it’s safer that way, for all of us. It’s better that you’re all in the dark about my whereabouts. The point is, I need to go somewhere where they won’t be able to find me. If everyone knows where I am, it kind of flies in the face of why I’m leaving in the first place.”

I quickly turned my attention back to Artemis as an idea took shape in my mind. “See, Artemis! It’s dangerous. You shouldn’t go to the Fae world! At least not right now. Give it a few days, at least until things die down a bit? The Dark Fae are hunting for Adair, and you could easily get caught up in that. You should stay here, where we can protect you.”

Adair looked between Artemis and me. “Actually, the Fae world might be the safest place for you right now, Artemis,” he said. “You should go.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “*What?*”

**Episode 4481**

**Greyson**

“I’m so glad to be back,” Torin said, sniffling into my shirt.

Even though I didn’t have much experience with hugging people who weren’t Cali or my mother, I felt like I was pretty good at it. I was doing my best, at least. Torin seemed to think so, because he still hadn’t let me go.

Over his shoulder, I eyed the chili simmering on the stove. I could practically hear it demanding my attention, but I stood my ground. The chili would have to survive for a bit without me, because I had more important things to deal with. I was going to comfort Torin.

In a very Alpha way, of course.

“The pack doesn’t only see you as our healer, Torin—I mean that.” I broke the embrace to rest both my hands on his shoulders. “You’re our friend, our packmate. We love you, and we want to see you happy.”

He gasped. “You do?”

“Of course. Cali adores you. You’re one of her best friends.”

A few more tears escaped his eyes. This was going well. Or not?

“Are you…” I gave him a tissue. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m fine,” he said, sniffling. Then he smiled, so I was pretty sure these were happy tears. “I’m sorry for—” He gestured at his face as I gave him another tissue. “I was overcome by all the emotions.”

“No need to apologize. I got you.”

Torin kept smiling and hugged me again. Well, okay. This was a thing, then.

It was kind of nice, actually.

“Thank you for saying those things. Being a member of the Redwood pack means the world to me,” he said, sniffling again. Was he going to start crying again? Had my comforting been a little *too* effective?

“Wait…” He turned to face the stove. “Is that chili? Because it smells like chili!”

“Yes, it’s—”

In a second, he was hovering over the stove, lid in hand as he eyed the contents of the pot. “Chili!” he cooed, like he was talking to a baby. “It looks amazing—and it smells delicious. Who did this?”

“I did.”

He grinned. “I can see all the love you’ve poured in here!”

I’d tried my best not to disappoint a bunch of very hungry werewolves. So. Yes.

“I had no idea you could cook,” Torin said. “Did you do it a lot in the past?”

“When I was living alone, I guess,” I said. “But I haven’t done much cooking in a while. Just here and there for Cali and me.”

“Excellent!” Torin’s grin vanished. “Can I stir the pot? I love stirring,” he said with an intensity that made me chuckle.

“Knock yourself out.”

I’d barely finished my sentence when my phone buzzed. Aysel had sent me another text.

*I can meet now, but you have to come to the palace. No texts, no phone calls.*

Well, shit. Apparently, I was just going to be hopping into the fire.

Would I see Lucian if I went over? Could that be Aysel’s plan? The last thing I wanted was to walk into an intervention that I wasn’t prepared to be a part of.

Not that Lucian didn’t *need* an intervention—he needed a series of interventions, with multiple seasons—but I didn’t appreciate Aysel’s games. Still, I knew Aysel well enough to be certain that she wouldn’t change her mind about talking over the phone.

I had no choice but to go to the palace. The Vanguard siblings were a constant damn thorn in my side.

“So, Torin,” I said, eyeing him as he gazed lovingly at the chili. “How do you feel about finishing that up for me? I need to run an errand.”

“Of course!” All excited, Torin put on an apron. “I’ll be the best sous chef you’ve ever seen.”

I thanked him and reached for a pad of paper. I wrote a quick note for Cali explaining the situation, folded it up, and gave it to Torin. I’d send her a text, too, but who knew where her phone was right now? “Give this to Cali when she comes back, please. It’s important.”

He gave me a military salute and put the folded paper in his apron pocket.

I left the kitchen—but not before hugging Torin one last time.

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When I got to the palace, a huge cleaning operation was in progress. A bunch of professionals were dragging away fallen branches and parts of the roof, along with all the broken glass, statues, and other formerly-fancy-but-now-ruined décor.

Nobody paid any attention to me as I walked through the main entrance, and I wondered if Aysel had told them that she was expecting me. I was looking around for her when I spotted Armin, and he made a beeline for me. If Armin was here, that meant Lucian was nearby, and I did *not* want to talk to him before speaking with Aysel. Or to talk to him at all, actually. Ever. For the rest of my life.

Why was I here again?

Armin stopped in front of me. “Redwood Alpha. Walk with me.”

I sighed. “Aysel is—”

“Expecting you, I know,” he said. “Follow me.”

I found it interesting that Armin hadn’t mentioned Lucian, so I played along. He led me to Aysel, who was sitting in a run-down room. She was dressed in a flowy, princess-like gown, as ever, but the space all around her was a mess. There were books scattered on the floor, the wallpaper had been half-stripped, and there were broken mirrors and glasses everywhere. Aysel had a whole tea set laid out, though only the cups didn’t seem chipped.

If the scene had been set up by anyone other than Aysel, I would’ve called it sad.

“Thank you, Armin,” she said. “Can you close the door on your way out, please?”

Armin followed her orders immediately. Was Lucian’s right-hand man helping Aysel out, then? Because it seemed so. But did Armin have any idea what Aysel wanted with me? I wasn’t about to ask her, though. Better to cut to the chase.

“So?” I walked toward her. “What’s going on that I needed to come here to talk about it?”

“Take a seat.” Aysel gestured for me to sit across from her. Picking up a small jug, she asked, “Would you like cream with your tea?”

“I’m not here to drink tea, Aysel,” I said. “If you couldn’t say whatever you need to say via text, how is talking in here any better? Your brother has ears everywhere in the palace.”

Taking a sip of her tea, Aysel whispered, “I refuse to text about this, and I couldn’t leave to meet you elsewhere. Lucian’s keeping tabs on me. It’s rather inconvenient, to be honest. Let’s make this fast.”

I heard marching footsteps, and then the door swung open.

“Armin!” Aysel huffed. “I thought—”

It wasn’t Armin. It was Lucian. Great.

“You!” Lucian’s eyes were fixed on me. “I knew I smelled a rat.”

Lucian had just called me a rat, but I was too shocked by his appearance to react. He was wearing *sweats and a T-shirt*. I’d *never* seen him look so human and unkempt before. Not even after Seluna had dumped him and tried to kill everybody.

Okay, this was *bad.*

Lucian pointed at me. “You’re not welcome here, Greyson. Get out.”

Snapping out of my stupor, I spoke up. “Aysel invited me. I’m her guest.”

Aysel sat up straighter. “Exactly. He came because I asked him to.”

“And I’m asking him to leave,” Lucian snapped. “I’m the prince here, am I not?”

Aysel scoffed. “Don’t be absurd! Greyson’s your best friend!”

Lucian’s eye twitched. “He betrayed me! I despise him!”

The fact that these two unhinged peacocks had ever thought of *me* as Lucian’s best friend was so fucking surreal and ridiculous, I didn’t even know where to start.

And I thought my relationship with *Xavier* was fucked up.

“Lucian,” Aysel said. “Please don’t—”

“Get the Redwood Alpha out of my house immediately, sister, or I’ll kick you out, too,” Lucian growled.

I couldn’t believe my ears. If there was anyone the princeling genuinely cared about—other than Elle—it was his sister. Or at least it used to be.

“Lucian,” I said sharply. “Get a grip—”

He growled, eyes flashing with fury. He marched toward me, but then Aysel blocked his way.

“Do *not* tell me how I should feel,” Lucian snarled.

I suspected—and it was a very strong suspicion—that Lucian had officially reached a higher plane of problematic.

I forced my voice to stay even. “You need to calm down. This is not the way to discuss anything.”

“Guards!” Lucian shouted. Two Vanguard wolves appeared at the door in seconds. “Get him out, now!”

“Goodness, brother, there’s no need to shout,” Aysel said with a nervous chuckle. “We aren’t heathens.” She grabbed me by the arm. “I’ll escort Greyson out right now. There’s no need to be forceful about it.”

Lucian and the Vanguard wolves moved aside as Aysel pulled me past them. I maintained eye contact with the princeling until we turned the corner. His gaze was dark and seething.

“That was—”

“I’ll tell you when it’s safe to speak,” Aysel whispered, cutting me off.

She didn’t say a word until we made it outside, to the driveway.

Whirling around to face me, she said, “We don’t have much time, Greyson. Lucian’s set the execution of the prisoners for tonight.”

**Episode 4482**

**Xavier**

“Are you done arranging the patrol groups?” I asked Marissa.

“Yes,” she said. “We’re all set.”

Donovan eyed me. “Don’t wanna be a pain in the ass here, but… If we’re going to go back to the scene of Ava’s attack, shouldn’t you check in with Greyson first? Since it’s Redwood land and all.”

I knew Donovan was right, but that didn’t stop me from glaring at him. The lake house *was* on Redwood land, but our going there wasn’t a big deal in my eyes. We were in an alliance with the Redwoods, and they were still living in *my* house anyway. Plus, I didn’t really care if Greyson had a hissy fit about me being at the lake house—patrolling the area of Ava’s attack would be good for the Samaras’ morale. While the possibility of Adéluce leaving clues behind was low, it wasn’t zero.

“Donovan’s right,” Marissa said. “Greyson should know—it’s protocol.”

“I’m not going to ask for Greyson’s permission. That will just delay things, and I really doubt he’d have a problem with it, anyway,” I told them. “If it will make the rest of you feel better, I’ll let him know we’re coming, but I’m not waiting for a response.”

Donovan and Marissa exchanged a look but nodded. I grabbed my phone to shoot my brother a quick text. *Headed to the lake house where Ava was attacked. If you have a problem with it, don’t.*

“Okay, done,” I said. “Let’s go. If he gets too fussy about it, I’ll ask for forgiveness later.”

Marissa snorted. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

I grinned. She was right. I wasn’t going to apologize for doing what was right for my pack. Greyson wouldn’t have hesitated to trespass on my territory to help the Redwood pack. Why should *I* second-guess myself and wait for his go-ahead? This was about making good on what I’d told the pack we’d do: helping track down who’d attacked Ava. I needed to act like it, even if I knew more than I actually could say.

“Get everyone who’s coming,” I told Donovan and Marissa. “We’re ready to leave.”

Marissa and Donovan nodded, heading outside just as I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. I looked up to see Ava peering at me.

“What’s going on?” she asked. She looked a little tired still, and her lips were red, like she’d been chewing on them nervously. The color was startling against the paleness of her skin and light blue of her eyes.

She really was beautiful.

Damn it.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed yet. You’re supposed to be resting,” I said, meeting her at the end of the staircase. My voice sounded funny—a little gruff. Worried.

She scoffed. “I’m not just going to lie around in bed all day, Xavier. I’m the Luna of this pack.”

“You were in a bad place, Ava—”

“And I’ll still be in a bad place if you keep babying me like this,” she retorted. “Where are you going with Donovan and Marissa?” She didn’t give me a chance to reply. “You’re heading out to do a sweep of the scene of the attack, aren’t you?”

I groaned, rubbing my face. She seemed to take that as a yes.

“There’s no way you’re going without me, Xavier,” she said.

This woman was fucking impossible. “This is not what—”

“I may not remember much about the attack, but going back there might help me put some of the pieces together.” She grabbed my hand. The determination in her face gave me pause. “I *want* to remember, Xavier.”

I swallowed hard. What if Ava *did* suddenly remember? Would that push Adéluce even further over the edge?

“You’d be safer here,” I told her. Gabe and Mikah had agreed to keep an eye on Ava, and I trusted them. Of course, I would've preferred to keep her by my side at all times, but still. “You really do have to rest, Ava.”

“I’m going,” she declared. “End of story.”

She had that stubborn look on her face that told me she wasn’t going to change her mind, no matter what.

I sighed. “Fine. Let’s go.”

At least this way, I’d be able to keep an eye on her.

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I led the patrol group toward the lake house, my head spinning with questions. Would Ava be able to remember her attacker? And if she did, would she be able to pass that information on to the others?

I was the one who’d made a deal with Adéluce. Ava wasn’t part of that. I had no idea if Adéluce had toyed with Ava’s memory, but I didn’t think there was any spell in place to make sure my mate kept her mouth shut. At least I hoped there wasn’t.

If Ava was able to identify Adéluce and tell the pack about her, that could be key to the vampire-witch’s future demise. There was potential there. But even if Ava miraculously managed to remember who’d attacked her and was able to speak about it, would anyone believe her? Adéluce was supposed to be dead, after all.

*Someone’s coming*, Geraint suddenly mind linked.

*He’s right*, Ava said.

I brought the group to a halt, and we all waited in silence, watching and listening. I realized that I’d been far too lost in my thoughts. *I* should’ve been the one to realize someone was approaching, not Geraint.

Fuck.

I recognized my brother’s scent before Greyson’s wolf appeared. Without a word, he shifted back to human, clearly ready to have a chat. “What are you doing here?” he asked with no hostility, just curiosity.

I shifted, too, and answered, “We’re checking out the scene of Ava’s attack. I texted you.”

His eyes flickered behind me, at the Samaras I’d brought with me, and I heard them shift to human as well. He nodded, then he looked at Ava. “Glad you’re doing better,” he said to her. Then he turned back to me. “It’s actually good to run into you. We have a Lucian problem,” he said seriously.

Of course he’d said “we.” Greyson had a habit of turning all his problems into collective ones, dragging me into his bullshit all the time. I wasn’t about to go into a debate about that right now, though. Not with my pack watching us.

“What about Lucian?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Aysel told me that Lucian’s going to execute the prisoners tonight,” Greyson said.

*Tough luck.*

“I’m not making that my problem again,” I said. “It’s fucked up, but I have other shit to deal with right now. Lucian can do what he wants with the prisoners, as long as he doesn’t cause me any more trouble.”

Murmurs broke out behind me. The Samaras were talking among themselves, some agreeing with me, others on the fence about the situation. I couldn’t hear Ava’s voice, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. But Greyson’s frown was definitely *not* a good thing.

“Greyson?” Ava spoke up. “What’s going on?”

“Give us a second?” he asked her. When she nodded, he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me aside. I rolled my eyes. I was about to get lectured. Some things never changed.

“This is it, then?” Greyson asked, looking me dead in the eye. “Is this what the war has done to you?”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?” I snapped.

“After the final battle, you agreed with Cali and me about keeping the prisoners alive. You said that you didn’t want to be like Silas—but hey, maybe you’ve changed your mind about that.” Greyson’s tone was cold. His face, too.

“I’m nothing like Silas!” I snapped. “I know I agreed with you at the time, but I can’t fucking deal with this right now. My Luna was attacked, and there are a million other things I have to deal with. Lucian has the prisoners, and it’s his palace they ruined, so whatever—let him deal with them.”

Greyson stared at me. “You think it’s a good idea to let Lucian do whatever he wants, then?”

I paused, narrowing my eyes at him. “Where are you going with this?”

“What do you think?” Greyson demanded. “The prisoners were captured while the alliance was still intact. All the packs were supposed to have a say in how to handle them, not just the Vanguards. If we give into Lucian’s bullshit demands, if we give him free rein and let him have his way on this, what’s going to happen next?”

I scowled, crossing my arms. I hated it when Greyson made sense. “I know what you’re doing right now, Greyson.”

“I apologize for forcing you to see what’s right in front of you,” he said flatly. “You *know* that if we give Lucian an inch, he’ll take a mile. He’ll think he’s in charge and start stirring shit again. He needs to be contained, Xavier. Do you—”

“Fucking hell, I know that,” I grumbled.

“So, what are we going to do about it?”

**Episode 4483**

I stared at Adair incredulously. “How would Artemis be safer in the Fae world? There’s a war going on there! And there’s, what—*a blood signal* on you? What is that, exactly? How do we know they haven’t put one of those on Artemis as well?”

“They might’ve,” Adair said, “but it’s not as likely.”

My eye twitched. “So, you’re saying that she should take a calculated risk and move ahead with her plan?”

“I’m right here, you know,” Artemis told me wryly. “You could include me in the conversation.”

I waved her off with a *shush* as Adair told me, “In the Fae world, Artemis is one more Fae among the many. She’s anonymous. In the human world, she stands out. Fae don’t belong here.”

I flinched, pointing at my chest. “*I* belong here.”

Adair sighed, shaking his head. “Still, Artemis is now associated with me. So, if those Dark Fae come looking for me here, they could track us both back to the Redwood pack house.” He gestured behind me, and my stomach dropped.

“You’re saying that everyone here is in danger now?” I whispered.

“We’ve talked about this before, Cali. That’s the reason I’ve wanted to get out of here. I’m on the run…” He glanced at Tabitha. “I can’t stall any longer.” Another glance at Tabitha.

Her hand was locked in Dani’s. Both of them stared at Adair silently, their expressions sad. The fact that they were going with Adair told me something about the conversation Tabitha and Adair must’ve had. I doubted she was going to let him go without her, and of course Dani wasn’t going to let Tabitha go. Not after they’d just found each other.

*This isn’t a* calculated *risk—it’s just a* risk *all over.*

But they were taking it.

“If it is answers that Artemis seeks,” Adair went on, “she’ll have a much better chance of finding them in the Fae world.”

Artemis nodded. “You know he’s right.”

I gulped. “What about Torin? Would anyone be looking for him?”

Adair paused. “I can’t rule out anything, but I don’t think it’s as likely. Artemis and I did the fighting.”

“How much fighting are we talking about? What happened in the Fae world, exactly?” I asked, looking between Adair and Artemis.

My sister shrugged. “Eh. You know.”

“What she said,” Adair replied cryptically. “But my earlier point about Fae standing out in the human world still stands. Torin doesn’t belong here.”

My chest ached. Torin belonged with *me*. Artemis had always had a wildness about her that made the notion of her settling down seem unlikely, but Torin was different. He *wanted* to be here, and I didn’t want him to leave. I wanted him to grow old with me. Lola, Torin, and me, best friends forever, sitting in our rocking chairs, eating snacks we probably shouldn’t be eating because of our high blood sugar.

*Do Fae and werewolf-vampire hybrids get high blood sugar? Regardless, the point is that Torin can’t leave!*

“Torin’s staying,” I told Adair firmly. “I know he wants to stay with the Redwood pack.”

Adair said nothing. He glanced over my shoulder, toward the woods. “We need to get going. Nobody’s going to expect any of us to return to the Fae world after everything that happened.”

Artemis waved him off. “You forget that I used my manipulation magic on them. They won’t even remember that we were there. Unless we were seen by someone we didn’t have the time to get rid of.”

The more I heard about my sister’s trip to the Fae world, the worse it sounded. She’d had to use manipulation magic? They had to “get rid of” people—did that mean *kill* them? All that for what was supposed to be a normal enough herb-hunting trip?

“Seriously, what on earth happened on that trip, Artemis?” I asked again.

Artemis shrugged again. “Nothing we couldn’t handle. But Adair’s right—I need to return now, when they least expect it.”

“What about telling our mom?”

A flash of regret played out on Artemis’s face. Realization dawned on her. “You’re right. I’ll talk to her.”

I grabbed my phone. “Let’s call her right now.”

*… before you change your mind*,I mentally added.

“Call her after we’re gone,” Adair cut in. He glanced at Dani and Tabitha, who had been quietly talking among themselves. “Every minute I stay here increases the risk that I’ll be found. I don’t want to put anyone from the Redwood pack in danger.”

“But—”

“Goodbye,” Adair said firmly, taking a step forward to… hug me. It was a supremely awkward embrace, but it still happened. And then, if the hug wasn’t enough, Adair told me, “I wouldn’t be leaving if I didn’t think you’d be okay without me, Cali. You have proven to be a quick learner when it comes to your magic.” Patting my shoulder, he went on. “Remember to keep practicing. A Fae can never let down their guard, and there is always room for improvement.”

I knew that Adair cared about me. He’d shown it before in that cold, weird way of his. But this was something else—something more.

*It’s sad to see him go…*

“Thank you for everything,” I told him quietly. “You’re a strict but good teacher. I’m lucky to have been your student.”

Adair nodded, stepping aside. Tabitha was next. She smiled at me softly, hugging me tight. Nothing awkward about this hug. She said, “Thank you to you and to the entirety of the Redwood pack for taking care of my sister for so long. I owe you one.”

“Of course,” I said, swallowing hard. “Dani is a wonderful person.”

And then, there was Dani. She wiped her tears quickly, and I did the same. We laughed awkwardly and hugged each other. When I faced her, I said, “We fought against a demon together, Dani. I’ll never forget that.”

Dani sniffled. “I’ll never forget how kind you’ve been to me.”

I looked between the two sisters. “I’ll miss you two, but it’s not goodbye forever. Will you come back when the threat from the Dark Fae court has passed?”

They both nodded, promising they’d do their best. They had said goodbye to everybody else earlier, and Dani had called Lola. She promised me we would stay in touch, and we shared one final group hug that Artemis crashed.

“I want to be included,” she said grumpily. All four of us laughed. When Artemis was done saying her goodbyes to the sisters, she turned to Adair. He stood there, his face as severe as ever.

“Good luck finding your father, Artemis.”

She gulped, taking a step forward at the same time he did. They embraced stiffly, reminding me of two forks hugging. But, hey, at least they tried. I wondered if they’d meet again in the Fae world, but I didn’t ask that out loud.

“Well, Cali,” Adair told me. “Tell Greyson a final goodbye from us. He is an honorable Alpha. We are grateful.”

I nodded, a lump growing in my throat.

Adair took a last long look at the pack house. “It’s been… interesting.”

A moment later, Artemis and I watched Adair, Tabitha, and Dani disappear among the trees. The lump in my throat grew, and I felt an emptiness building inside. More people were leaving. Who was next?

“I never thought I’d say this considering how badly things started between us,” Artemis whispered, “but I’m going to miss Adair.”

“Me too.” I smiled sadly. “I used to think he hated us.”

Artemis laughed, shaking her head.

*Will you miss me?* I thought to ask Artemis. *Do you love me as much as I love you?*

I didn’t say either of those things to her.

“Let’s call Mom,” I said, wiping the last of my tears.

She picked up quickly.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Cali! How are you, sweetie?”

“I’m right here, too, Mom.”

“Artemis!” Orla’s voice echoed through the phone. I could her grin in her tone. “To what do I owe this unexpected treat? I never get calls from both my daughters at the same time. Should I see if Tom is free and make this a family phone call?”

Artemis pressed her lips together. I cleared my throat.

The heavy silence was answer enough.

Orla’s excited tone vanished. Quietly, she said, “Girls, is there something wrong?”

Artemis took a deep breath. “I’m going to the Fae world to look for my father. And no one is going to talk me out of it.”

Another silence. This one even longer. My heart was pounding, and I wrapped an arm around Artemis. What was Mom thinking? Was she hurt? Was she worried? Was she going to try to talk Artemis out of leaving?

*Will she succeed?*

“I knew this day would come,” Orla said in an even voice. “I always thought you would want to return to the Fae world, Artemis. I just hoped that it wouldn’t be so soon.”

My last hope had vanished. The feeling was bittersweet—I was glad that my mom didn’t sound sad, but at the same time, *I* was sad.

I didn’t want Artemis to leave.

“If you need anything,” Mom went on, “remember you are a Wrenthorn. Grandma Hera will always welcome you with open arms.”

“Okay,” Artemis said. Her voice was throaty. She was holding the phone tight, and her eyes glistened. “Thank you.”

Mom’s tone lowered. “Be careful, okay? As much as you can. Please.”

“Okay,” Artemis agreed.

“I love you, Artemis,” Mom said.

No tears fell on Artemis’s cheeks, but her eyes glistened. “Me too, Mom. Love you.”

We hung up just as I heard the door behind us. Rishika had stepped out onto the front porch, looking as imposing as ever. She locked eyes with Artemis, the atmosphere between them charged.

And then, Rishika asked, “Will you at least stay tonight, Artemis?”

**Episode 4484**

**Greyson**

Xavier scoffed, like the bratty little brother that he was a lot of the time. “We’re dealing with a pretentious princeling who tried to marry a demon. Lucian’s bullshit’s one of a kind, Greyson.”

“Thanks for stating the obvious,” I deadpanned. “But we still need to come up with something to convince Lucian that it’s not in his best interest to go on with the executions.”

“Feels like the only way is by force,” Xavier said with a scowl.

Of course he’d say that. Before I could write off violence, though, Xavier added, “But I don’t want to risk another pack war. It wasn’t that long ago that we almost had one with the Vanguards. Nobody wants a repeat of that.”

I’d fully expected Xavier to shrug and say something along the lines of, *How about we just kill him?* Like that would be the easiest thing in the world. But Xavier seemed to be thinking less like a hothead lately. I wasn’t going to tell him that, but I appreciated it.

“We should talk to him,” I said. “Lucian loves talking. We just need to find our angle to make him listen, despite his anger.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “He’s pissed Elle’s at the Redwood house, huh?”

“I’m not going to talk about that,” I said firmly.

“Whatever.” Xavier rolled his eyes. “Still doesn’t change the fact that we don’t know what to say to Lucian. He cares about nothing other than his mate and bragging about himself.”

“We could use the bragging,” I noted.

Xavier scowled at me, eyebrows knitted in confusion. “What?”

“Maybe we could appeal to Lucian’s vanity,” I said. “We could… play up how well he did during battle. And how much we value him. How he made the alliance better, or some shit like that.”

Xavier stared at me for a moment, his face blank. And then he burst out laughing. “Neither of us is that good of an actor, Greyson. The world would be a much better place without the likes of Lucian.”

I glared at Xavier. “Don’t you think I know that? I’m talking about lying our asses off here. This could snowball.”

Xavier huffed. “Into *what*?”

“If Lucian goes ahead and kills the prisoners, the council might get involved—”

“Would they have gotten involved if the Bitterfangs won the war and it was *our* heads on the chopping block?” Xavier snapped.

“I don’t fucking know,” I said. “All I know is that if they do get involved, they’ll put the blame on the alliance, not just Lucian.” I glanced over at the Samaras to make sure they weren’t listening and dropped my voice. “With the threat to Elle and me already out there, it will only make matters worse. I don’t want any council members sniffing around our land again.”

Xavier eyed me for a moment, that signature scowl back on his face. Crossing his arms over his chest, he grumbled, “You’re right. That would put the Redwoods at risk.” He paused. “The Samaras don’t want that.”

He wouldn’t admit that *he* didn’t want that—or that he gave a shit—but that was a lot to verbalize for Xavier’s standards. Both relief and surprise filled me. But, of course, I couldn’t *not* give him shit about this.

“Are you getting soft on me, Xavier?” I asked. “Next thing you know, you’ll get me thinking that you care about the Redwood pack.”

“Hilarious,” he said, still frowning. “We need to contact Mace, Porter, and Duke and fill them in.”

“I’m not sure about Duke.” I shook my head. “He and Lucian are closer than Lucian is with the others. He might take Lucian’s side, so we’ll have to make sure to be diplomatic about it when we talk to him and try to gauge his position without outright blaming Lucian.”

“True,” Xavier said. He paused, shaking his head with another huff.

“What?”

“I just can’t believe we’re going through all this to save that Bitterfang scum,” he said. “Avenging blood with blood is how things are supposed to be, but…”

“Then where would we stop?” I finished evenly.

The real question hung between us, unspoken. *At what point would we turn into our father?*

Xavier shook his head. “Whatever. It’s not to anyone’s benefit if the council comes down on the alliance anyway. Let’s just get this over with ASAP.” He glanced over at his pack. “I meant it when I said that I had other shit to deal with.”

I looked at the Samaras standing behind Xavier. I had run into them just before they entered Redwood territory. “Right, the lake.”

Xavier nodded. They were going on patrol at the site of Ava’s attack, which I agreed was smart. Glancing at Ava, I said, “She’s looking much better. How did you manage to wake her up?”

I watched Xavier’s reaction closely. Was he going to admit the whole “true love’s kiss” scenario? His jaw twitched, the muscles in his neck tightening before he looked over at Ava. I didn’t know if he knew that the way his gaze lingered on her was telling.

“The Alpha and Luna connection played a role,” he said, facing me. “It was a whole thing with mind linking.” The lie sounded believable and smooth enough, but Xavier’s jaw was still set, full of tension. He hadn’t been honest with me. It wasn’t like I’d been holding my breath here, but it made me wonder about his motives.

Why didn’t he want me to know that he was in love with Ava? Did he feel that admitting to loving the girl he’d had such a complicated, jarring history with would make him look weak? Was it a stupid pride thing? Was he in denial?

But then, of course, there was Cali.

Did my brother not want Cali to know that he was in love with Ava?

Interesting. But *why*? He’d already made Ava his Luna.

Wondering wouldn’t do me any good, so I decided to let this go. For now. If I confronted Xavier about the “true love’s kiss” situation, there was no way we wouldn’t get into a fight. I needed to promote a united front while the Lucian thing remained unresolved.

“Good to see she’s okay,” I told Xavier with a nod, ending the conversation on that note. I wasn’t lying about that. Ava’s motives were always up for debate, but I couldn’t deny that she had fought valiantly and would give her life for my brother. She was loyal to him. To a fault. As a werewolf, I couldn’t ignore that.

“Thanks,” Xavier said, glancing at her again. “What happens next?”

“Since we’re on the same page, I’ll call the other Alphas,” I told him.

The little bag I had hanging from my neck vibrated. I pulled out my phone to see Aysel’s name flash across the screen. With a sigh, I picked up.

“I thought you couldn’t call me because Lucian’s always listening, Aysel.”

Her voice was a whisper. “I managed to escape him for a moment! He’s been watching me like a hawk. He’s getting paranoid, Greyson. I’m worried he might do something rash.”

“You mean something *more* rash than executing the prisoners tonight?” I asked.

“Obviously!” she hissed. “What are you going to do?”

I glanced at my brother. He was frowning at me, as ever. “I talked with Xavier. Lucian might have a problem with me, but I’m hoping he will listen to the other Alphas.”

Aysel gasped. “Excellent idea! That’s perfect, actually, because Lucian is planning on throwing a mixer tonight.”

I raised my eyebrows. “But I thought Lucian was planning to execute the prisoners tonight.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Xavier asked with a glare. He gestured at his pack. “I got shit to do, Greyson!”

“Hold on,” I told him as Aysel said, “Lucian’s still planning to go through with the executions. That’s why he wants the mixer.”

My stomach lurched with disgust. “He wants to celebrate their death.”

“Exactly,” Aysel whispered.

The victory hadn’t been enough to feed that sick son of a bitch’s ego.

“I have to go now,” she went on. “I think my brother’s coming! He’s so paranoid, Greyson, I cannot stand him when he’s like this! It reminds me of what happened with Seluna, and I…” Aysel choked. “I can’t live through that again. The Vanguards, our pack—I won’t let him ruin our reputation.”

Aysel’s words struck a chord. She *had* seen the start of this play before. We all had.

“Why’s he getting paranoid?” I asked.

“There are whispers around the castle, and Lucian’s listening. He knows that many of the Vanguards are upset about his execution plans,” she explained. “They say it doesn’t match Lucian’s rule as a benevolent leader.”

*Lucian*? *Benevolent*? *That* was how the Vanguards saw the princeling? What in the cult mentality was going on here? How much more ridiculous and surreal was this whole thing going to get?

I had to make sure not to lose my mind one of these days.

Getting a grip, I refocused and remembered the task at hand. Contain Lucian’s manic dictatorial tendencies *yet again.* It was a full-time job. I fantasized about an alternative universe where he wasn’t Elle’s mate, and I would be able to simply kill him.

Not because I was my father, but because patience had its limits.

“Is there anything else you want me to do before tonight?” I asked Aysel.

“Having the other Alphas come to the mixer is a good step,” Aysel muttered. “But there is one more thing that would help even more…”

**Episode 4485**

“Will you at least stay tonight, Artemis?” Rishika asked. The two of them stared at each other for several beats. Were they going to fight again? Was I going to witness it like the world’s most awkward third wheel?

*The suspense is killing me.*

Finally, Artemis said, “Okay. Fine. I’ll stay one more night before leaving for the Fae world. For you both.”

Rishika leaned against the wall. She and Artemis were still doing their staring competition thing—with some intense anger-smolder emanating from both of them—so I decided that it was probably time for me to leave.

“I’ll give you two some space to talk in private,” I said, standing up from the bench.

Artemis’s eyes flickered to me, but she didn’t say anything as I walked away. I exchanged a look with Rishika as I moved past her, and she gave me a curt nod. Like, *I got you*. Was she going to try and convince Artemis to stay? I doubted anything either one of us said would stop my sister from leaving.

*She’s so stubborn! Much more stubborn than I am, sometimes.*

I walked into the house and closed the door behind me. With a sigh, I took off my shoes and jacket, thoughts twisting inside my head.

*Why doesn’t she want me to go with her?*

Artemis was done discussing that as an option. She had apologized for calling me a nuisance and said that she didn’t mean all the awful things she’d said, but I couldn’t exactly forget about our fight. I wanted to fully believe that Artemis had faith in my abilities—in me as a person *and* a fighter.

But even if Artemis had agreed to let me go with her, what would happen with Greyson? Would I just leave him behind? The notion made my entire body recoil. And then I felt even worse when I realized that if I *did* leave right now, and Greyson was left behind with Elle, I had no idea how their sire bond would react. I didn’t want to fucking find out, either.

Nevertheless, asking Greyson to come with me and Artemis to the Fae world, when he was the Redwood Alpha and had a million responsibilities, would’ve been too much. We had already done that trip once, and it was a huge mess. Not to mention scary.

The Fae world was dangerous. Artemis didn’t need to tell me the details of their herb-hunting trip for me to know that. Nobody had explained to me what a “blood signal” was, not exactly. But did it sound like a good thing? Of course not. It had the word “blood” in it. Worry had a chokehold on me, and my stomach felt funny, all tied up in knots.

*I know I can’t be selfish. I have to let her go, but how am I going to cope with it while she’s gone? She doesn’t even know how long it could take to find anything about her father… I’ll be sick with worry the whole time…*

Someone’s cheerful whistling pulled me out of my thoughts. I followed the sound to the kitchen, but it wasn’t Greyson whom I saw stirring the pot.

“Cali, hey!” Torin grinned, turning to me. His face fell when he saw my expression. “Oh no, what’s wrong? Are you looking for Greyson?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Torin beat me to it, reaching into his apron’s pocket. “Here, he left a message for you,” he said, offering me a folded piece of paper. “I think he texted you, too.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t been checking my phone at all with everything going on with my sister. “Thanks, Torin.”

*A handwritten letter? For* me*? That’s kind of romantic, isn’t it?* I thought.

And then I read the note.

*Cali—*

*Our resident princeling is back at it. I have to go to the Vanguard palace, but I’ll be back ASAP. Don’t worry, I’m dealing with everything.*

*Love,*

*G*

“What’s going on?” Torin asked. I looked up to see him frowning, likely mirroring my own frown.

“Lucian’s causing problems again,” I said with a sigh.

“No, I mean what’s going on with *you*?” he asked, poking my chest.

I snorted. Even that sounded bitter. “Where do I even begin?”

Torin shook his head, smiling slightly. He picked up a small bowl and scooped a couple spoonfuls of chili into it. “Here, try this.” He gave me the bowl. “I added a few things to Greyson’s recipe. Do you like it?”

It was delicious. When I told Torin so, he smiled widely. But then he sobered up so fast, the stark change in his expression startled me. “Now, will you tell me what’s going on in your head?”

I paused, leaning against the counter. Pushing through my hesitation, I asked, “What happened while you and Adair went with Artemis to the Fae world? The other two were so vague when I asked.”

The edges of Torin’s mouth tilted downward. “Well, everything went down very fast. It started like this…”

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When Torin was done narrating the tale, I gaped.

“The blood signal spell—it alarms *bounty hunters*? And there were giant horned creatures?!”

Torin cringed. “Don’t forget Artemis’s mind manipulation magic.”

“They *did* mention that,” I said, aghast, “but I hadn’t realized how bad things had gone beforehand. You guys were there for just a few hours, and all hell broke loose!”

Torin patted my shoulder. “Now, now, don’t you worry. I’ve been in far worse situations. Artemis, too. Your sister is self-sufficient and strong.”

I fidgeted with my hands, nervous laughter bubbling up in my throat. “I *know* she is! But she’s also very intense, and that might backfire on her someday.”

Torin frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She’s practically obsessed with finding Kadmos, Torin,” I said. “I’m worried that she’ll be reckless while she’s there.”

Torin shook his head. “You shouldn’t fret too much. You know already that your sister had a fearsome reputation long before you came to the Fae world. She was the Kollector’s bounty hunter, and that wasn’t an easy title to acquire.”

Torin’s words made my throat dry out. Artemis didn’t talk much about her time with the Kollector. I’d always imagined that the situation had been dark and fucked up, but I had never considered the implications. What kinds of ruthless things had Artemis done in order to survive in the Kollector’s order?

“… anyone would be a fool to cross her,” Torin went on. “And with her manipulation magic working so well? She couldn’t be any safer, I think.”

I took a deep breath. “I get that all that makes sense in a logical way. But I can’t stop myself from worrying. She’s my only sister, and I—” I looked down at my feet. “I’ll miss her.”

Torin squeezed my shoulder. His voice was soft. “Aww, Cali. I know you will. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head at myself. “It’s stupid, I know.”

“It’s *not* stupid. It’s sweet. She’s your family.”

“Yeah. I guess I thought that after the war was over, she and I would take some time to relax and hang out. Do sisterly things, you know? I like spending time together, but she…”

*She said I would only slow her down.*

Artemis had taken it all back, but the words still hurt the more they lingered. Xavier had called me a burden as well. Was it a coincidence that they talked about me in similar terms? Was this the way that the people I loved saw me?

“Cali,” Torin muttered, squeezing my shoulder. “Look at me.”

I gazed at Torin. He gave me a fond look. “Artemis loves you. You know she does. But she’s had a different life, and she needs to take her own path right now. She’ll come back to you one day.” He smiled, offering an easy shrug. “Besides, you have me to hang out with.”

I pressed my lips together, feeling so relieved. Torin hadn’t mentioned going back to the Fae world once. And the way he’d reacted when Greyson told him he had been missed and was welcome here said only good things. Torin might not belong in the human world, but he belonged with the Redwood pack. He belonged with *me*.

“Thank you. I love hanging out with you,” I said, kissing his cheek.

“Of course you do, we’re besties,” he said, laughing. “Or is it biffles?”

Smiling, he pulled me into a side hug with one arm and stirred the pot of chili with the other. Eyeing the chili, he said, “By the way, Greyson’s made a lot of food. Maybe I can bring some to Kevin?”

I grinned. “Of course. I bet he’ll love it.”

Torin smirked. “That’s what I’m thinking.”

I snorted. “Are you using chili as an excuse to see Kevin?”

Torin gave me a sideways look. “*Everything’s* an excuse to see Kevin.”

“How are things with you two?”

“I haven’t seen him in a while, with everything that happened,” Torin said. “I guess… I miss him.”

I patted Torin’s arm. “I bet he’s missed you, too.”

Torin smiled, ready to say something else when I heard heavy footsteps behind us. I turned to see Greyson walking into the kitchen. His face was unreadable, but at least he was here in one piece.

“Greyson? What happened?”

Greyson shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Get ready. We’re going to the Vanguard palace.”

**Episode 4486**

**Xavier**

After Greyson left, the Samaras and I continued toward the lake house. I still hadn’t explicitly asked for Greyson’s permission. But my brother didn’t seem too bothered about it. He was probably distracted with the whole Lucian thing.

It was a little frustrating that he hadn’t asked me more about our plans to search the lake house, though. Shouldn’t he be more concerned about who the vampire on his property was and *why* they were there? He should’ve asked what our plan of action was, at least shown some interest in what was happening. Not that I expected Greyson to discover Adéluce or something, but was he really not suspicious about the situation at all? Like it or not, my brother wasn’t stupid.

He *had* commented on Ava’s recovery, though. He’d even asked me how I woke her up from her coma. Had he believed me when I spouted that bullshit Alpha/Luna excuse? I hadn’t been able to read him, but again, he wasn’t stupid. I didn’t regret lying to him. The idea of telling my brother about my feelings of *true love* toward Ava made my skin crawl. We weren’t close like that, and I was still dealing with it myself.

Not to mention, if I told him, he could let it slip to Cali. I knew that, according to Adéluce’s orders, I was supposed to be pushing her away, but I refused to take it *that* far. Especially now that Adéluce had her eye on Ava. One clusterfuck at a time.

Up ahead, the lake house emerged through the trees.

*Xavier?* Ava mind linked.

I paused, turning to look at her wolf. She shifted back to human and pointed behind us. “What are *they* doing here?”

I followed the direction of Ava’s index finger to spot Gabe and Mikah casually leaning against a tree a few feet away. Gabe even had some sort of leaf thing hanging out of his mouth, chewing on it as if he were in a cowboy movie. *This* was their sleuthing? Couldn’t they have at least been more subtle about it?

*Do a quick general sweep of the area to make sure nobody’s lurking out there*, I mind linked the rest of the Samara wolves. They headed off, following orders. Then I shifted back to human and turned to Ava. Glancing at Gabe and Mikah, I asked, “What about them?”

“I thought they were leaving,” Ava noted. “Did they change their minds?”

Obviously, I wasn’t going to tell her the truth—that they were acting as her bodyguards. She would ask far too many questions. Most of which I’d have to lie about. It was better to make one lie than a hundred, so in the end, I said, “You were attacked by a vampire. It might help to have Mikah around. And where Mikah goes, Gabe follows.”

My answer seemed to appease her. She turned to look at them again. Mikah was still leaning against the tree, staring off in the distance and scowling. And people said *I* brooded. Gabe, in the meantime, locked eyes with me and waved enthusiastically.

Subtle. Real subtle there.

A moment later, the patrol group was back. They all shifted back to human.

“All clear,” Marissa said. “But where did the attack happen exactly? It would probably help to be as precise as possible.”

“She’s right. Going to the exact location could trigger something in my memory,” Ava said.

I was torn about Ava remembering. One the one hand, I had no idea what she would do if she realized the truth. On the other hand, I realized once more that this could be my only shot for Ava to see that something was weird here without me telling her. Either one would put her in danger with Adéluce again.

“It’s over there,” I said. “Follow me.”

A moment later, we were at the spot where I’d seen Ava fall. I wished I could block the memory from my mind. The biting fear I had felt was the stuff of nightmares.

“This is it,” I said, gesturing ahead.

Nobody spoke for a moment as Ava stared at the area.

“Do you recall anything?” Marissa asked her quietly.

Ava didn’t speak for a moment. My heart pounded hard.

Finally, she said, “No. I only remember what I told you before—walking toward the pack house and then feeling really tired.”

I was both frustrated and relieved. Torn in the fucking middle.

Putting an arm around Ava, I pulled her close.

*I’m sorry you have to deal with this*, I mind linked.

She turned to me, sighing. *Thank you, X.*

I turned to the pack. “Scout the area again. Be careful about it this time. See if you can come up with any evidence.”

I felt like I was leading them on a treasure hunt, and I was the only one who knew where the treasure was. But I didn’t feel like I had any other choice.

“This sucks,” Ava muttered, looking down at her feet. I hated seeing her so defeated. “I feel like it’s a huge waste of time.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine.”

Her expression was bitter. “It’s not. I had hoped I would remember something, anything, when I saw the site of the attack. But it’s not working so far.”

“It was a good idea, Ava,” I said. “Worth a try.” Glancing around, I was ready to suggest bringing her back to the house. It had been a risky move to let her come here anyway. *Everything* was risky when it came to Adéluce, and I felt like I would go nuts weighing the least fucked-up among all the risks I was called to take.

“Let’s just leave,” I said. “You need to rest and—”

“Wait,” Ava cut me off. She’d gone rigid. Her eyes were fixed ahead. “I smell something.”

My throat tightened. I fought to sound casual. I doubted I’d be able to prompt her. She needed to figure this out on her own. “What do you mean?”

“Not sure,” she said, walking forward slowly. “I’m picking up the smell of death.” She looked over toward Mikah. “Maybe I’m picking up his scent?” Before I could answer, Ava shook her head. “No, I know Mikah’s scent. There’s something different about this.”

I was holding my breath. Was Ava about to reach a breakthrough here?

She paused again, turning to me. “Are you sure there was only one vampire who bit me? I feel like there’s something off about the scent.”

*Yes!* I wanted to say. *Because it’s a vampire-witch!*

“I feel like maybe I’m having trouble identifying the scent because there was a group of attackers, and their scents have mixed together,” Ava said.

“No,” I said. “It was just one attacker.”

Ava frowned. “And you’re certain you didn’t see any of their characteristics, right?”

I gritted my teeth together. My tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth, stopping me from screaming Adéluce’s name. In the end, I said, “It was dark. But I’m sure it was just one person.”

“Hey!” Knox called from a distance. “I found some fresh footprints!”

Knox should’ve yelled louder for the people in the back. Between him and Gabe waving at me like he hadn’t seen me in months, the stealth factor of this operation had gone to shit. Good thing this wasn’t an incognito mission or anything.

“These footprints could belong to anyone,” Marissa told Knox with a scowl after we all walked over. How do you know they’re what we’re looking for? Do they smell like anything?”

Knox rolled his eyes. “It was a vampire! We’re looking for a death scent!”

Marissa shook her head. “That’s what I’m saying—do these footprints smell like that?”

“It’s been a while,” Knox said stubbornly. “The scent might’ve worn off.”

“Footprints are the most useless thing we could find,” Marissa snapped. Gesturing around, she said, “The scene of the attack has been repeatedly contaminated since then. Not to mention there were so many people here the night of the party.”

Marissa and Knox kept arguing while the rest of the patrol watched them with rapt interest. Werewolves were such gossips. I was ready to step in and tell them to cut it out when Ava rested her hand on my shoulder. When I turned to look at her, I felt gut punched.

She seemed so much paler suddenly.

“Maybe we should just go home,” she muttered. “I’m feeling really tired now. It hit me out of nowhere.”

“Sure,” I told her, wrapping her hand in mine. “You should rest. It’s going to be okay.”

That was what I said, but when I looked at Ava, I felt sick with worry at the sight of her fatigue. Had Adéluce caused this? Did she feel like we were getting too close? Did she consider this foul play on my part? Was she going to put Ava back into a coma?

A feeling of dread settled over me.

The coma might’ve been mild in comparison to whatever else the vampire-witch had in store for us.

**Episode 4487**

Greyson gave me a quick summary of his little field trip to the Castle of Chaos and Doom, a.k.a. the Vanguard palace. Lucian was at it again, and I could only groan.

*Can Lucian just stop? In general! Just—can’t he just chill for one moment?! We just got out of a war!*

“Is he for real?” I huffed, closing the door behind Greyson and me. “Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“I wish it was,” Greyson said, sitting on his bed.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “He wants to kill the prisoners and celebrate with a freaking *mixer*? Does he not have any humanity left?”

Greyson sighed. “His ego’s been wounded, so he’s lashing out.”

“Hadn’t he agreed not to touch the prisoners until the alliance decided what to do with them?”

“Lucian isn’t known for keeping his promises, love,” Greyson said. “And he pulled out of the alliance, so that’s another bit of conflict to resolve.”

I rubbed my face, shaking my head. “Will he even listen to *anyone* right now?”

“He hates me because of the Elle situation, but someone else might get through to him. That’s why I arranged for all the alliance Alphas to attend the mixer and asked you to come with me. Maybe one of you will be able to influence him.”

I took a deep breath, nodding. “Okay, yes. Maybe he’ll listen.”

Greyson stood up, starting to pace. That was not a good sign.

“What?” I asked.

Greyson paused before speaking, as if weighing his words. “Aysel is convinced he’s losing it. There’s no telling what he’s going to do.”

“Lucian’s always been unpredictable,” I said carefully. “That doesn’t mean…”

“He’s lost it before, Cali. You know that better than any of us,” Greyson said. “We were there to witness the way he carried on with Seluna. And maybe he was possessed by her or whatever, but it’s still the truth that he had feelings for her.”

“So what?” I let out a shaky, disbelieving laugh. “We have to live in fear of a brand-new pack war every time Lucian’s nurturing a broken heart? This is ridiculous!”

I had told Greyson not to kill Lucian despite everything Lucian had done to me with Seluna. I had told Greyson to spare Lucian while Lucian was down and depressed, and this was how he repaid us all? Leaving the alliance, breaking his word, killing people, and celebrating it?

“Aysel’s on our side on this,” Greyson said, reaching for my hand. “She’s seen this play before, and she doesn’t want a repeat of Lucian’s darker days. Her loyalty to Lucian has found its limit.”

“At least there’s that,” I said, breathing deeply. “The last thing we need right now is the council coming back to sniff around in the aftermath of the Bitterfang war. We’ll have to figure out a way to stop him.”

“You’re coming with me, then?” Greyson asked.

I moved closer, reaching for his hand. “Of course. I’ll do everything I can to help.”

He nodded, staring into my eyes. All the trust I saw in his gaze made me feel ten feet tall. Where Xavier and Artemis’s words had wounded me recently, Greyson’s faith in me always made me feel much better.

“With you there at the mixer, and the other Alphas, I feel like we might still be able to get through to Lucian…” Greyson ran his thumb over my knuckles. “But if it’s not enough, then having Elle there will help.”

I dropped Greyson’s hand immediately.

I wasn’t even sure why I did that, or why exactly my stomach lurched at the sound of her name coming out of his mouth. But honestly, there were actual, legitimate reasons why Elle shouldn’t be there. This wasn’t about me being weirdly jealous.

“Having Elle there is a terrible idea,” I told Greyson, crossing my arms over my chest.

Greyson eyed me carefully. “But Lucian might listen to her.”

I pressed my lips together. “I get that. But…”

*I can’t let the jealousy get the better of me!*

This was ultimately about fear. And I couldn’t lie to Greyson right now.

“What about the sire bond, Greyson?” I asked. I hated how vulnerable I sounded. “What if something happens that triggers it?”

Greyson squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, nodding. “You’re right. I can’t guarantee it won’t rear its ugly head, but it’s a risk we need to take.”

“Do we? Lucian’s jealous of the sire bond. Won’t having Elle there with you only remind him? Set him off?”

Greyson raised a sharp eyebrow. “He’s already been set off, Cali. Aysel’s sure of that.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I scoffed, poking his shoulder.

Greyson’s expression melted into something softer. “I know that things with Elle are unresolved. I know that this is difficult for you. And the last thing I would want to do is make the situation worse. But think of what is at stake here. All those prisoners will die if we don’t try anything and everything we can to stop him. I led the alliance, so that’s going to be blood on my hands, Cali.”

I took in Greyson’s words, realizing the weight of them. There was a rock in my stomach, hot and heavy, but I ignored it. I would never forgive myself if I let my personal feelings and fears stop us from doing the right thing under these unfortunate circumstances. It was similar to what I was going through with Artemis. I had to put personal feelings aside.

“You’re right,” I said, sighing. “We should do whatever it takes to make Lucian snap out of this. It’s a risk we need to take.”

Greyson brushed my hair over my shoulder, stepping closer before he gently pulled me into a hug. “I knew you’d understand,” he murmured against my hair, and I shivered.

I held onto him tighter, squeezing my eyes shut, breathing in his scent. I clung to him as if that would fix everything, and the world would fade away. But that was only a wistful fantasy.

I knew the sire bond and the situation with Lucian were hard for Greyson, and I wanted to be as supportive as I could. Not only for my mate, but for the greater good of the pack as well. I was looked up to as the Redwood Luna, and being the future Luna meant making difficult decisions.

*It also means not being insecure and jealous, Cali*, a little voice in my head said.

“I hope we can resolve this quickly,” Greyson muttered, facing me. His gaze flickered between my eyes and my lips before he moved closer. His kiss was a peck—it only lasted for a couple seconds—but I still arched up toward him. He smiled against my skin, nuzzling my cheek. His voice low enough to send a chill down my spine, he said, “I still want to have our romantic weekend in Portland. What do you think?”

I trailed my hand up his chest to the back of his neck. Tracing the hair there, I faced him, my breath catching when our eyes locked. He looked at me like I hung the moon, and I couldn’t help but smile. “I’d love that.”

Greyson’s thumb reached under the hem of my shirt, tracing my hip before he leaned down for another kiss. I sucked in a breath, moving up onto my toes to meet him, when—

The door started *shaking*.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

“Greyson!”

*Bang, bang, bang!*

“What the…” I trailed off, rushing to the door.

When I answered, I found Elle standing there. Her posture was pristine, like Jacqueline had taught her. “Cali, hello,” she said. Then she informed me, “I’m here because Greyson wanted to see me.”

I blinked. “What?”

She glided past me like a supermodel mermaid Disney Princess and paused in front of Greyson. He gazed at her, looking baffled. It was adorable.

But also a smidge irritating.

I was not jealous.

“I did want to talk to you, Elle,” Greyson admitted. “But I hadn’t told you that yet…”

Elle shrugged. “You didn’t have to tell me. I could feel it.”

I stiffened.

*Here we go again, with Elle feeling Greyson’s feelings…*

This was even more intimate than mind linking, wasn’t it? Because it was one thing saying something, and it was another actually being certain of its honesty through a connection that told you how the other person was feeling.

*This damn sire bond is practically enabling them to* read *each other’s minds!*

Okay. So *maybe* I was jealous.

Even though I knew I wasn’t supposed to feel this way, it was hard to ignore the throbbing in my gut when I watched the two of them like this. Standing close, as Greyson looked down at Elle and softly said, “Oh.”

Oh.

*OH*.

Greyson had given a one-word response to the girl who could feel his feelings. I didn’t have that with him, and no matter how much I told myself that being petty about this was irrational, the emotion didn’t quit. Jealousy bit at me again, my insides recoiling with it.

And then it hit me.

*If* I *am so upset about this, how is Lucian going to react?*

**Episode 4488**

**Greyson**

“But why is Lucian throwing a party if he’s going to *kill* people?” Elle asked me after I tried to explain the situation to her. “I thought parties were supposed to be fun?”

I started with my explanation again, trying to make it make sense, but it also didn’t make sense to me what Lucian was doing. I kept stealing glances at Cali at the same time. Her eyes bounced between Elle and me. The stubborn set of her jaw told me what I’d known the moment Elle had walked into the room. Cali was upset.

I was, too, but I’d tried not to show it. This wasn’t Elle’s fault. If anyone was to blame, it was me. I was the one who’d turned Elle without reading up on the mythology, without being careful enough. A bit of superstition would’ve saved us all so much grief. I had unleashed the sire bond upon us, and now both Elle and I were struggling, right along with Cali.

I hated what this was turning into.

“But why would Lucian do this?” Elle asked me. She still looked confused, but now she was upset as well. I couldn’t only see her emotions, plain as day on her face, but I could feel them, too. I felt Elle’s heart pounding with anxiety, and it made mine beat even harder.

“I’m not needed for this conversation,” Cali cut in before I could answer Elle’s question. “I should go get ready for the murder mixer, whatever this thing is.” Her tone was subdued, so unlike her that it made my stomach drop. When I turned to look at her, she was walking out of the room without another word.

I wanted to follow her, to comfort her. I was ready to rush after her, but the moment I took a step forward, Elle spoke again. “Is it because of me? Is this all my fault?”

I stopped dead in my tracks. Did Elle realize that Cali was upset? That I was upset? Was she blaming herself? The possibility was so fucked up it made me feel even worse.

But then she said, “I would hate for Lucian to kill people because I came back to the Redwoods.” She breathed sharply, raking her hands through her hair. “He broke his word because of me. This is all so *wrong*.”

My hands moved on their own accord again, reaching for her. I felt Elle’s distress so intensely the room felt flooded with it. I couldn’t escape it. I could only grab her by the shoulders, making her face me.

“Listen to me, Elle,” I said. “Lucian does things that often have no explanation. He did that before you were in the picture, too. He’s an Alpha who doesn’t honor his word sometimes. That is not your fault.”

She frowned. “But Lucian is mad about the sire bond. He pulled out of the alliance. And now he wants to kill the prisoners. Right?”

“Yes. But—”

“He must be doing it because of me,” Elle concluded, shaking her head. She stepped away from me, out of my grasp, and the loss of contact was so jarring my fingers twitched. Her voice dropped when she muttered, “I never should have come back to the Redwood house. It’s put my mate in distress.”

I turned my hands into fists. I wasn’t about to let Elle shoulder the blame for Lucian’s fucked-up actions. She hadn’t been here when Lucian was fixated on Seluna, when he aided and abetted a demon to possess Cali’s body, and then tried to marry that demon. The princeling had been unhinged long before Elle came on the scene.

“Whatever Lucian does is his choice, Elle,” I told her firmly. She had to know I was being truthful about this. “Nobody is making him do anything. Least of all you. You shouldn’t blame yourself. Okay?”

Elle looked away. I was losing her, so I had to cut to the chase.

“Despite that, the truth is that you *do* have some influence over Lucian,” I said. “And I was hoping that you’d help convince him that the execution is a bad idea that will have lasting ramifications. It will not only be an inhumane act of cruelty, but it will also tarnish the Vanguard name.” I paused. “It will also draw the interest of the council.”

Elle’s eyes snapped back up to mine. “The council? They can’t get involved.” Taking a deep breath, she shook her head and huffed. “I just hate them.”

“Will you try and change Lucian’s mind?” I asked Elle.

She nodded, full of determination. “Yes. Of course.”

“Thank you, Elle. Keep in mind that he’ll be suspicious when you approach him,” I told her. “According to Aysel, he’s already paranoid, thinking that people are undermining him. You will need to be careful about this. Okay?”

“Okay.” Elle nodded again, looking focused. She seemed to be taking mental notes. “I’ll go get ready. I’ll try to plan what I’m going to say to him.” She smoothed her hair back. “And Jacqueline used to say that most men are dumb and would do anything for a pretty face, so I’ll try to use that, too.”

I almost choked on my own spit. Of *course* Jacqueline would’ve told Elle that.

Honestly, she wasn’t wrong.

I opened my mouth to say… *something*. I had no idea where to start with unpacking that one. But Elle had already taken off. Over her shoulder, she called, “See you soon, Greyson.”

I hoped that Lucian could be persuaded without Elle’s involvement.

It would make things less… complicated.

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I walked down the hallway, heading to Cali’s room. I hated that, once again, she had been put into this kind of position. We both knew that I had to find a way to break the sire bond, but how could I prioritize that when there was a tragedy waiting to happen?

Nevertheless, I needed to remind Cali that everything would be okay.

This wasn’t a game. This was our life together, and I loved her more than anything.

Taking a deep breath, I paused by her door and knocked. She didn’t respond, but I could hear ruffling and shuffling inside. When I opened the door, I found her frantically going through clothes. Some were strewn on the bed, and others were on the floor. It was like a hurricane had swept through the room, and she was going back to her closet again, fetching more.

“Cali?” I said her name cautiously. “What’s going on?”

I knew what was going on, but I needed her to say it. To talk to me. Take it out on me, even, if she was angry about Elle saying she’d *sensed* that I needed to talk to her. But Cali didn’t even glance at me. It was like she hadn’t even heard me.

“Are you okay, love?” I asked, walking toward her. That was a stupid question, obviously. She was clearly not okay, and it was my fault.

Fucking hell.

“Cali—”

She still ignored me, moving up and down like a tiny tornado.

“*Hey*.” I spoke firmly, blocking her way. “What’s happening right now?”

She looked up at me, over the three dresses she was carrying in her arms. Her gaze was sharp enough to cause a pang in my chest. To make things worse, she pushed past me. “I have to find something to wear to the Vanguard palace tonight. I’m still invited, right?”

Her voice was calm, but her ire was obvious.

“Of course,” I said. “I want to do this with you.”

She said nothing. Just grabbed another dress from her closet, her movements rigid. She took a step, ready to walk past me again, when I gripped her arm. She paused. Her skin was warm, and I could feel goosebumps rise up on her flesh at my touch. We still had this.

We had each other, dammit.

“Cali,” I said softly, taking the dress from her. “This isn’t about finding the right thing to wear, is it?”

She eyed me, eyebrows arched. “Did you guess that, or did you *sense* it?”

I was struck.

Ever since we’d gotten together, Cali had never once spoken to me like this. Like she didn’t trust me. Like she doubted me. Like what we had was on shaky ground, and she wanted to scream at me but held back. This wasn’t my Cali. My mate.

Or… Was it?

Was this Cali now?

Was this who we’d become? Short, cold, mistrusting?

I placed her dress on the bed while Cali waited for an answer. Her arms were crossed over her chest again. She was barricaded behind her defensive posture, as if ready to attack. I fucking hated it. How did we end up like this?

We *couldn’t* end up like this.

“This isn’t fair,” I said. My voice was quiet.

Cali’s gaze burned through me. I could see the fire and hurt in there, mixed together. My mate was hurting, and I despised the fact that I was the reason for it. “I’m sorry,” I muttered. When I moved closer, she didn’t move away. When she let me touch her, pull her into a hug, I could breathe again.

I realized that how I was feeling was likely how the *due destini* made Cali feel a lot of the time… Fuck.

I held her tight, and she held me back. Her nails dug into my back, and I could feel them through my shirt. Despite everything, this felt good. This felt necessary, like a need.

Cali was what I needed.

I reached for her chin, tilting her face up. Our eyes locked. Her lips parted, breath coming out sharp. Her gaze blazed and glistened at once, and my pulse was drumming in my throat.

“We will get through this, love,” I said.

When I leaned closer, she didn’t move away. I brushed my lips over hers for the briefest moment. I thought I shouldn’t push my luck here. But she surprised me.

She grabbed me and kissed me back so passionately that it knocked the air out of me.

**Episode 4489**

**Artemis**

Cali always said that packing was a headache, but I found it interesting. I enjoyed weighing the value and usefulness of items before securing them into a bag. My trip to the Fae world wouldn’t be easy, so I had to be prepared.

I started with packing my knives, of course, and a few pairs of leggings. Probably the best human invention ever. Then I selected a few items that would be good to barter—human money, an electric toothbrush, a battery-powered fan, a flashlight, batteries, nail polish, and a few skin creams that Cali had given me.

I knew she was hurting that I was leaving. I was going to miss her, too.

Shaking my head to clear it, I resolved not to think about Cali. It wouldn’t do me any good. I needed to do this alone—for myself. Even if Cali was sad or disappointed about my departure, I couldn’t let that sway me.

I eyed my bag, realizing it was getting a little heavy, and decided not to add any more items. If I had to stay longer at the Fae world and needed money, I could always pick up a couple of bounty hunter gigs and use my brand-new magical arrows. Adair’s knife would be useful for that as well, so I picked it up from my nightstand and dropped it in the bag.

It wasn’t the only thing on my nightstand.

The framed picture of Cali, Orla, Tom, and me stood there. I picked it up, giving it a closer look. My eyes felt funny when I did. I never imagined when I first met Cali in the Fae world that we were sisters. That I had a family.

But finding my mother had made the instinct to seek out my father grow, in a way. I knew that my mission to discover Kadmos would be dangerous, and I understood Cali’s reservations, but I needed to do this. There was a force pushing me forward, and I couldn’t ignore it.

“Hey,” Rishika said from behind me.

I had been so absorbed in my thoughts that I hadn’t heard her walk into the room. She was always light on her feet, anyway. Graceful. When I faced her, she walked over to me, her expression calm. Gently, she took the framed picture from my hands and gave it a look. When she smiled at the sight of my family, my heart skipped a beat.

“Can we talk?” I asked. I hated how my voice sounded like a croak, but I couldn’t help it.

“We should,” Rishika said, placing the frame back on the nightstand.

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, all I did was stare at her. I couldn’t leave without us reaching some kind of understanding. Rishika meant too much to me.

I took a step forward, but she took one back, stepping closer to the bed.

I gulped.

“Are you almost done packing?” she asked.

“Almost,” I said.

“Make sure you bring enough clothes for different weather,” she said.

“I got it covered.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

Rishika’s serious expression broke into a laugh. It didn’t sound happy, though.

“Fuck, look at us,” she said, sitting at the edge of the bed. “Were we *ever* this awkward around each other?”

Shaking my head, I took a seat next to her. “No. But I guess… this is different.”

Rishika looked down at her lap. She folded her hands there, fidgeted with them. Her tone lowered. “I know we once had a disagreement about whether Kadmos was alive, but we got past it. Right now, though, when you’re ready to leave us all behind to search for him, I have to wonder…” She looked up at me. Her lips were parted. “Are you prepared for the possibility of returning home empty-handed, Artemis?”

I shrugged, biting the inside of my cheek. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. Don’t worry.”

“Of course I worry.” She turned her whole body toward me, reaching for my hand. “You’re treating failure as if it’s not an option. I can’t even imagine what you’re going to do if things don’t turn out the way you’re hoping for.”

I shrugged. Again. “It’s going to be fine.”

“Artemis—” Rishika slid closer to me. I could see the freckles sprinkled over her nose now. I could smell her shampoo, citrus and lavender. I thought about touching her mouth, kissing her right now. Just to stop her from saying more things aimed to poke holes in my decision.

She spoke again before I could.

“Even if Kadmos is alive, what if he isn’t who you want him to be? What if something goes wrong between the two of you?”

My mouth was dry when I swallowed. “He’s my father…”

“I know,” she said. “All I’m saying is that this situation is very unpredictable, so I… I want to come with you. I want to be there with you when you find him, act as your safety net.”

“Thank you so much for always having my back,” I said, looking at our joined hands. The words felt bittersweet. “But it feels like this is the one thing I need to do alone. There’s this gut feeling urging me forward to find answers about who I am and what I’ve been missing from my father’s side of the family. If there’s a chance that my father is alive, if he’s been in danger all this time…” I met her gaze again. “I want to be there for him. To save him.”

“But who’s going to help you if you get in a bind?” Rishika asked. “That’s what I’m worried about. If I’m not there, you might—”

“I’m going to be careful,” I told her. I meant that. With a confidence that I hoped eased her worry, I flashed my magic arrow. “I’m fully armed and ready to fight.”

Rishika took a deep breath. “Are you *sure* about this?”

“I’m not telling myself this is going to be easy, Rishika. During our most recent trip to the Fae world, the Dark Fae tried to bring Adair back to their court. During our trip to New Orleans, I saw how tricky it was to find any kind of information at all about Kadmos. This is a risk, but…”

“You’re willing to take it,” Rishika breathed, finishing my sentence.

I nodded. She stared at me for a beat. Her hands moved from my wrists and up, cupping my cheek. “What about us?”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Do you think…” She took a deep, shaking breath. “Do you think we should take a break?”

“What?” I asked, dumbfounded. “A break from… us?”

She nodded. “It’s not that I want to do that—I mean, fuck, *I love you*,” she said, her voice breaking. “But I don’t know how long you’re going to be gone, Artemis, and I want you to just dive into this without anything holding you back. Even me.”

“Rishika…” It was all I could get out. Was she being serious right now? “I don’t want to do that.”

“Me neither. But I think maybe we should.”

I looked at her, feeling my heart breaking. I wanted to argue with her, to explain to her why this idea had no grounds. But I’d be lying. I didn’t know how long I’d be gone. The last thing I wanted was to hold Rishika back either from, well, anything.

“A break?” I said again.

She nodded, wrapping around my shoulders before she pulled me into a hug. “I’m going to miss you,” she whispered in my ear. “So. Much.”

My eyes felt funny again. This time, they burned, and I felt like scratching them. I needed to ease some of the pressure I felt on my chest right now, but I didn’t think it was possible. I felt like crying. I wasn’t like this, normally, but nothing about this moment was normal. The words flew out of my mouth, and I couldn’t stop them.

“I don’t want you to get over me,” I whispered.

Her breath caught.

“I don’t want you to forget about me,” I said. “I want you to… wait for me. If you can. I’d understand if you can’t.”

She wiped a tear that escaped the corner of her eye. “I’d never forget about you, no matter what happens.”

 I didn’t wipe my tears. No use pretending this didn’t hurt. Nothing had ever hurt like this.

“I love you, Rishika. I never thought I could feel this way about anyone. You know that, right?”

“I love you too,” she muttered, cupping my cheek. The kiss she gave me was soft, almost tentative, but it still struck like lightning. I needed more of this, more of her. I didn’t want to give her up.

When I kissed her back, I made it count, licking into her mouth. She whimpered, and I broke it off just to hear her make that sound again, more clearly this time when I threaded my hand in her hair, tangled my fingers there to feel the silky texture. I kissed down her neck, over her pulse while she reached under my shirt. Her hands were shaking, brushing up my stomach, my chest, stopping over my pounding heart.

I pulled back to stare at her. Her swollen lips, her burning eyes.

She was so beautiful it hurt.

I missed her already.

“We have tonight,” I said. “Let me make you feel good.”

*One last time.*

A moment later, all our clothes were gone. We were bare, in this bed—*our* bed—where we’d spent so many nights together. I didn’t stop kissing her. I swallowed her every moan like it was a treat. I felt like I needed to imprint her taste in my memory, the heat of her skin under my hands, the way she writhed and arched toward me, gripped my wrist and led it between her thighs. She was trembling, spilling all over my fingertips, saying my name. Her whole body vibrated, her gasps shooting through me, electric.

I missed her already.

It would be so easy to stay here, in this bed, in the pack house, to be happy with Rishika and Cali and my family. But my happiness could never feel solid when I felt like I had unfinished business. When I *still* didn’t know who I was. I had to figure out my identity, on my own.

This moment with Rishika was amazing, the best night I could wish for.

One incredible last night.

Because in the morning, I was leaving for the Fae world.

**Episode 4490**

Greyson gasped the moment I kissed him. The groan that escaped his throat when I brushed my tongue against his made my toes curl. He grabbed and pushed me up against the wall, kissing me back like he’d break without me. And how good this was, how right his roaming hands felt all over my body, had me trembling.

I kept one hand at the back of his neck, and dragged the other down his chest. I slid it up his shirt, felt the muscles there heave and shake under my touch. He groaned again and picked me up, pressing my back against the wall. A second later my feet weren’t touching the ground.

I locked my legs around his waist, kissing him with all I had, tugging on his blond hair. When he rubbed up against me, between my thighs, the friction made my hips arch and twitch. I broke the kiss to choke out a gasp, and he whispered my name. He kissed down my neck and grinded into me. The added pressure there left me open-mouthed and quivering.

 “I think…” He left a kiss over my pulse. “You should wait to get dressed for the party a little while longer.”

His words shocked my brain out of its lust-dizzy stupor.

*The party, he says*,I thought while Greyson slid his hand up my shirt. *The execution party, he means*, I thought as Greyson nuzzled my collarbone. *Lucian’s party*, I thought, while Greyson called me gorgeous in that husky, scorching voice of his, but the thoughts didn’t stop.

My thoughts didn’t fucking stop.

*Lucian’s execution mixer, that he’s throwing because he’s lashing out, because of Elle, because Elle and Greyson—*

Had a sire bond and could feel each other’s feelings.

Oh my god.

*Does Elle know what we’re doing right now? Can she sense how turned on Greyson is? How far does their connection go? Is our privacy violated, our intimacy being spied on, while we have no ability to block Elle from Greyson’s senses?*

I went rigid.

*No. No fucking way.*

“Cali?” Greyson breathed in my ear. “Everything okay?”

I could not do this. Not under these circumstances, when another woman basically had a spy cam into Greyson’s mind and emotions. How long had Elle been able to feel my and Greyson’s moments of intimacy? Moments that I used to cherish so much as our own?

I didn’t even know if I wanted the answer to that.

“Put me down,” I said throatily.

He did as I asked. Without looking at his face, I pulled out of his embrace, away from his blazing lips.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. He was still breathing hard.

He wanted me. I could feel it, see it, but that wasn’t fucking enough right now. It didn’t ease my insecurity or my anger. An anger so irrational it made me want to scream and stomp my feet. The kind of anger that could turn me into something I’d never been before.

A jealous, possessive girlfriend who lashed out. A mate who was threatened. I didn’t know about the sire bond, but *my* bond with Greyson felt like it was vibrating with indignation right now. Greyson was supposed to be mine alone. He was supposed to be the one I trusted, the one who understood, the one who’d never betray me, but now—

“I need a moment,” I said, taking another step back.

“What is it? Talk to me.”

His face was a mixture of confusion and worry. The fact that he didn’t know what the fuck the problem was right now, even though it was staring right at him, made my irritation bubble up and overflow.

“You can’t come to me like this every time I’m upset about Elle,” I said sharply. “You can’t just fix everything with a kiss or sex. *Especially* when we both know right now that Elle has an inside look into your emotions!”

He flinched, aghast. “That’s…” He shook his head. “Cali, I’ve promised you I’ll do everything in my power to shut down the sire bond. I never thought—”

“What did you think? That things were going to be normal from now on? They can’t be!”

*What’s happening to us?*

I knew he felt it, too. The change in the air, the animosity, the fury. And before my eyes, he froze up. His gaze turned sharp, and he tilted his head to the side. In an even, low voice, he said, “You were shutting down on me before, Cali. But then you kissed me back, and I thought that you wanted me. Right here, right now. What *I* wanted was for you to feel that we were connected, that I’m here for you, no matter what’s happening with the sire bond,” he said. “But I get what you’re saying right now, so I won’t be crossing that line again. Because I understand why you feel the way you do, Cali.”

He paused.

“I know what it feels like on your side of things. We’ve been through something…similar.”

Greyson didn’t say Xavier’s name. He didn’t mention the *due destini*.

He didn’t have to.

I was not breathing.

And I watched him, Greyson—*my* Greyson—how he turned into ice. He had simply spoken, but his words had cut me so deep that I was almost seething now. If he understood because of the *due destini*, then why was he acting this way? Didn’t he see now how difficult this was on both sides of things?

I couldn’t believe this was happening to Greyson and me.

I realized that we were one word away from this fight turning into a battle that could bring this entire house down. And there was a part of me that knew that Greyson would have far more ammunition for it. Xavier had dumped me , and I *still* hadn’t chosen, after all.

I had allowed Greyson’s love and devotion to compete with Xavier’s.

And now I was mad about a situation that Greyson couldn’t control either.

*Well, what Greyson* can *fucking control is not kissing me like that while Elle is able to feel it.*

“I think you should go,” I said in a quiet, cold voice. “I need to get ready for the event. The murder party.”

Greyson didn’t move. He stared at me, and a moment later, the sharpness in his expression was gone. Melted away, regret painting his face. “Cali, please…” He took a step closer. “We’re all under a lot of pressure and stress right now. I don’t want to fight with you. You know the way I feel about you is—”

“Just go,” I said, cutting him off. “I want to get dressed.”

He didn’t say anything else. But his eyes were downcast, and I felt a lump grow in my throat at the sight. I felt my eyes water. He left quietly, closing the door behind him. The moment he did, the tears spilled. I wiped them quickly, sitting on the bed, on top of the dress I’d chosen to wear.

*What are you doing, Cali? How is this happening?*

There were people who were about to be executed, and I couldn’t control my jealousy and insecurity long enough to remember that and avoid a fight with Greyson.

Greyson, who I’d once thought would always be there for me. No matter what.

More tears started to fall.

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I washed my face, used eye drops, and patted enough concealer over my puffy under eye area to pretend that everything was fine. When I was done getting ready, I stared at myself in the mirror. I was dressed in black, like I was going to a funeral. Which I might be if we didn’t stop Lucian from going down that dark, sinister path.

*You’re going to stop him, Cali. Don’t lose hope.*

I wished I had more confidence about this, but I was having trouble concentrating. The fight with Greyson was all I could think about. The lingering bitterness I felt was acidic, spreading all over me like pins and needles. I felt sick to my stomach, burning bubbling jealousy overwhelming the pit of it.

But how could I *not* feel jealous when my mate was being pulled toward another woman?

When that other woman seemed to have a deeper connection with him?

*I can’t believe this is who I am now*, I thought, looking at myself in the mirror. The scowl there, the anger that wouldn’t go away. *Where did all this spite come from?*

Greyson was no longer only mine.

*He’ll break the sire bond, Cali. You need to stop being so irrational and paranoid and—*

It wasn’t paranoia that made me think that Elle could feel it when we kissed. It was logic. And the idea of her knowing how Greyson’s desire felt made me want to start a fire in here.

I forced myself to push all that aside. I had to act like a Luna at the mixer tonight, even if I didn’t feel like one right now. I didn’t want another bloodbath. There had been far too many.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

A loud banging on the door startled me.

When I opened the door, Elle stood there, staring. “It’s time to leave.”

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was not Elle’s fault.

It wasn’t her fault that she looked divine in her dress, or that Greyson had turned her into a werewolf without realizing the implications. Elle was the most blameless one among us all. I should not be mad at her.

But Greyson was another issue.

“How come Greyson sent you instead of coming himself?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“Greyson was nervous about seeing you. So I thought I would help him and come bring you down myself,” Elle explained with a shrug. “He didn’t ask me to.”

Her shrug was the final nail on the coffin of my composure. I wanted to start drilling her with questions. For example, how much did Elle know about Greyson’s and my fight? Or, to be exact, how much had she been able to *sense*?

It felt that in this situation, I was forced to share parts of myself, too.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Elle followed me, forever calm. “Did you get everything?” she asked. “Jacqueline once gave me a checklist of things to bring to a party. A compact, lip gloss, and clutch.”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I said, neutral. “Let’s just get tonight over with.”

**Episode 4491**

**Xavier**

“You’re sure you’re okay?” I asked nervously as I helped Ava up the stairs.

“I’m okay,” she insisted, but I wasn’t fully convinced. She was pale and wan, and leaning on me heavily. I was practically carrying her up the stairs. This wasn’t good.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked as we started down the hall toward our bedroom.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t need anything. I just want to rest, Xavier.”

She sounded almost breathless, like the effort of climbing the stairs had been too much for her. That wasn’t normal. None of this was.

I helped her into the bedroom, then picked her up so I could lay her down on the bed.

“Xavier…” she protested, but feebly. It was clear she was too weak to really try to stop me.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told her. I pulled the covers up around her and laid my hand on her forehead. “Just try to get some sleep.”

She nodded, and I’d just turned to leave when she spoke.

“I was so close,” she whispered.

Frowning, I turned back to her. “Close? Close to what?”

She looked frustrated. “I was so close to remembering more about the vampire attack.”

Shit. She was still fixated on that. I nodded, though I felt my stomach knot with worry. I didn’t think it was any coincidence that Ava had just *happened* to get weak and tired when we’d started looking around the area where she’d been attacked. I wasn’t an idiot, and I had a feeling that Adéluce had played a hand in it. I figured she was determined to fix her mistake and do whatever she needed to do to ensure that Ava didn’t remember what had happened to her.

Though my bigger fear at the moment was what Adéluce might do to Ava if she *did* happen to remember. Was she somehow able to prevent that from happening? Or was that out of everyone’s hands except Ava’s?

“It’s just so frustrating,” Ava was saying. “I hate not remembering something like that.”

“Yeah,” I said vaguely. I just wasn’t sure whether to encourage her or not. The last thing I wanted was to set her on a collision course with the vampire-witch. “You know, I don’t think you should worry about that. Not now. You should just focus on getting some rest.”

“Xavier?”

I turned again. “Yeah?”

She gave me a searching look. “Are you sure you can’t think of anything that would help me remember?”

I didn’t know what to say. I remembered everything, but I couldn’t say a word about it. That wasn’t allowed.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t see much of anything. I wish I had.”

She looked at me for a moment longer, then nodded. “Okay.”

Stepping back toward her, I pressed a kiss to her lips.

She kissed back for a moment, then she yawned and lay back on the pillows. “Wake me in half an hour so I can get ready to head over to the palace.”

“Sure,” I promised.

I watched as she turned onto her side and closed her eyes. I was almost sure she was just taking a nap, but it still freaked me out to see her lying so still. I couldn’t shake the fear that she wasn’t going to wake up.

I headed downstairs. I hadn’t eaten, and I doubted this “party” at Lucian’s would have food. I also doubted I’d be hungry whatsoever given the circumstances, so I made a quick sandwich and then poured myself a cup of coffee.

That was where I was a half an hour later when I heard someone coming down the stairs. Then Ava appeared in the doorway. I was glad to see she was okay—and not in a coma—but I was surprised, too. She looked… great. Awake and full of life. Her cheeks had color, and her eyes were as bright as I’d ever seen them. She’d changed clothes and was now wearing tight black jeans and a black turtleneck that hugged every curve she had. She looked like a sexy assassin.

“Hey,” I said, bemused.

“You were supposed to wake me up,” she teased.

“Doesn’t look like you needed my help,” I said.

She smiled, and I was wondering if I was imagining this sudden return to perfect health. Was it just wishful thinking? Then again, Ava was strong. She’d fought her way back from the spirit world after death, after all. If anyone could recover from a vampire-witch bite, it was her.

“Ready?” she asked.

I drank the last gulp of my coffee—which had gotten cold as I’d sat there ruminating—and nodded. “Yep. Ready.”

We walked toward the front door, and I pulled it open for her.

“I’ve coordinated with Greyson,” I started, “and the Alphas and Lunas from the alliance are going to rendezvous outside the palace before we go in.”

“Why?” she asked.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I thought Lucian might be slightly more reluctant to do anything drastic if he was confronted by everyone from the alliance as a united front.”

She looked up at me in surprise. Then she started to laugh. “Do you seriously think that’s going to work, X?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe, maybe not.”

Truthfully, now that the pack war was over and the Bitterfangs had finally been eliminated, I really wasn’t all that interested in staying in the alliance. I was definitely much less interested in its potential strategic advantages than Greyson was. But I also wasn’t going to do anything that would jeopardize the Redwood pack. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to do anything that would put the Samaras in danger or weaken us in any way.

We got into the car, and I headed down the drive, then turned toward the palace.

We were quiet as we drove, and I knew that neither one of us was looking forward to seeing the palace again.

We weren’t the first to arrive. As we parked, I saw that Greyson was already standing at the bottom of the steps that led up to the front doors. Cali was with him, but she was standing a little ways away from him. Elle, meanwhile, was hovering nearby, standing nearly hip to hip with my brother.

I sat in the car for a moment, eyeing the three of them curiously. I could tell something was off, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on what. I could see tension and stress in Cali’s face—even now, I could still read her like a book. My gut was telling me that Cali was upset, and—based on the shifty way Greyson kept stealing glances at her—I got the very distinct impression that he was responsible.

“Let’s do this,” Ava muttered, climbing out of the car.

I did the same, and I had to admit that there was a part of me that was enjoying whatever drama was going on between Greyson and Cali. I knew it was petty as hell, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t be with Cali, but that didn’t mean that my brother should get to.

Maybe I’d get lucky and Greyson would screw things up with her all on his own.

Though I ultimately knew I didn’t want that. I didn’t want anything to happen that would hurt Cali, ever. My own selfish desires be damned.

We stepped away from our car, and Mace, Porter, and Rowena pulled up in their own cars. I looked down at Ava before we joined the group. The cold air had made her cheeks and nose pink, and her eyes looked as sharp as they ever did. She looked fully recovered, and it was amazing to see her looking so healthy.

I took her hand and led her toward the others.

“—and I don’t know if we should go yet,” Mace was saying. He looked over at me as I approached. “What do you think, Xavier?”

“About what?” I asked.

“Duke. He’s not here yet.”

“I think the Aspen Alpha and Luna are already inside,” Greyson said, before I had a chance to respond myself. “Don’t forget, Duke is probably taking Lucian’s side on this.”

“That’s true,” I said.

Greyson glanced up at the palace, then back at the group. “Thanks for coming, everyone. I’m glad we’re able to show some unity on this issue. And we *are* unified, right? We’re all in agreement that we can’t allow Lucian to go through with executing the prisoners?” He looked around to confirm this.

Everyone nodded.

“Yeah, he can’t do that,” Porter said.

“It’s a slippery slope,” Rowena said with a shudder.

Greyson looked at me, and I nodded. “Agreed.”

“Okay, but what if Lucian doesn’t listen to us?” asked Mace—always the voice of pessimistic realism.

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“What then?” Mace asked. “If Lucian refuses to listen to reason and insists on going ahead with the executions, how far will the rest of us go to stop him?”

**Episode 4492**

The assembled alliance Alphas and Lunas had been talking, but I was standing a short distance away and hadn’t really been paying attention—at least not until Mace asked his question.

*How far will the rest of us go to stop Lucian?*

I looked at Greyson, wondering what his answer would be. This wasn’t something we’d discussed, but it was an important question. It seemed very likely that Lucian would be resistant to our interference, so how far *was* the rest of the alliance willing to go to keep him from executing the prisoners?  
 I was technically standing next to Greyson, in that there was no one standing between us, but it felt like there was a football field’s worth of distance between us. Elle, on the other hand, was right by his side, practically bumping elbows with him as he spoke. It looked like *she* was his Luna, which was crazy.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I knew that what was happening between Elle and Greyson wasn’t something either of them had chosen or could easily control. The sire bond was pulling them together, whether they wanted it to or not.

But knowing all that didn’t do much to ease how I felt—which was jealous and hurt.

Porter shook his head. “Listen, I don’t want these prisoners to be executed any more than the rest of you do, but we have to be realistic here. They’re Bitterfang wolves, and Bitterfang allies, and I’m not willing to start another pack war for their sake. We just finished a pretty devastating series of battles. My pack needs time to recover. I’m not looking for another fight.”

“Me neither,” Mace said. “Which is really what I’m asking. What *are* we looking for?”

Xavier chuckled. “Okay, fine, you two don’t want another pack war. But that doesn’t answer Mace’s original question.” He looked around at the other Alphas, his gaze searing. “If Lucian refuses to stop the executions, you know the only thing we can do to *make* him stop is fight.”

Porter rounded on him angrily. “So you’re willing to sacrifice your pack to save the Bitterfangs who were captured when they were fighting to destroy us?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I’m saying—”

“So what *are* you saying?” Porter hissed.

An argument ensued, with no one actually listening to anyone else. This whole thing was such a mess already. Why did Lucian have to do any of this? If he weren’t being such a selfish, spoiled dick, then none of us would be dealing with this execution thing at all. At least not like *this*.

I rubbed my head, feeling a headache forming. I knew I needed to focus on the issue at hand—Lucian and the prisoners. The sire bond had been dominating my thoughts, but I knew I wasn’t here to solve that issue—that wasn’t why I’d come. I had to push what had happened between me and Greyson out of my mind for now.

“Stop!” I snapped, putting up my hands, and—amazingly—everyone *did* stop. “Listen, I don’t know what the answer is. I suspect there’s no easy option here, but I do know that if we’ve come here in an attempt to show Lucian a united front, we are *failing*! Miserably. We can’t go in there when we’re arguing with each other. Lucian will see it, and you all know what he’s like. He’ll sense that division, and he’ll take advantage of it—and us.”

My words were met with silence as everyone took this in. I could see that they agreed with me, though none of them were about to admit it. But they all *did* know what Lucian was like, and that he’d use any division he could find as a foothold to make everything worse.

“Okay,” Mace said, sounding slightly more reasonable. “Greyson, you’re the leader of the alliance—what do you think? How far are you willing to go here?”

Greyson looked grim. He rubbed his jaw, which was scratchy with stubble. “We need to be smart, here. We all know Lucian isn’t just going to roll over on this. But if he can’t be persuaded to see our side of things, then we go to Aysel. She’s on our side—she’s determined to stop the executions, too. If we end up having to restrain Lucian, then Aysel will be in charge of the pack, and able to make decisions in his absence. If that happens, then we’ll be able to arrange a transfer of the prisoners. We can either split them up between our pack houses, or we can send them directly to the council to be dealt with.”

I cleared my throat. “When you say *restrain* Lucian…” I said. “What exactly would that involve, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a quick glance at Elle, “but it would probably involve some degree of force.”

“I just said—” Porter started, but Greyson held up a hand to stop him.

“I’m not calling for a pack war,” he clarified, “but I did need to know that we’re together on this. I need to know that the rest of you will have my back and be willing to step in if it becomes necessary.” He looked at the rest of the Alphas. “I need to know that you’ll help me remove Lucian from power.”

No one spoke for a moment.

“This could go badly,” Mace muttered.

“What other options do we have?” Xavier asked.

“None,” Porter said, after a long moment. He sighed. “Okay, I’m in.”

Mace nodded. “Me too.”

Xavier nodded. “We’re in,” he said, tipping his head toward Ava.

“Okay, let’s talk logistics,” Porter said, though he looked grim.

As they began to discuss the details of what would come next, I glanced at Ava. She and I were standing somewhat close to each other, and—looking at her—I realized I hadn’t seen her since she’d woken from her coma. My stomach tightened as I thought about what had brought her back from the edge of death—true love’s kiss.

When Greyson had told me about that, he’d been dismissive. He’d rolled his eyes and said he thought it sounded like a bunch of bullshit. But I wasn’t so sure.

I certainly knew how *Ava* felt about *Xavier*. She loved him deeply—she always had. Was it possible that Xavier felt the same way about her?

The idea made me feel sick to my stomach. He was still my mate, and if there was any *true love* between Xavier and Ava, I just had a feeling that there was something sinister at the root of it. Maybe even dark magic.

What I didn’t know was how to find out for sure.

I looked over at Rowena and remembered the vision she’d had of the *due destini*. Was that affecting me and Greyson, too? Or was it just the sire bond?

“Hey,” I said quietly to Ava. “I heard what happened. How are you feeling?”  
 She looked started, then her expression grew cold. “I’m fine. Nothing to worry about.”

I was surprised. Ava and I had a troubled history for sure, but it wasn’t like I was trying to antagonize her. I was asking how she was. I’d thought things were at least civil between us—but so much for that.

“You know, Cali, maybe your time would be better spent worrying about yourself and your own Alpha. I have Xavier to look after me,” she said haughtily, and stepped away.

I stared after her, shocked. And annoyed. And frustrated.

Then I looked over at Greyson and saw that Elle had managed to move even closer to him, which made me feel upset all over again.

Greyson looked over and caught my eye. He gave me a small, intimate smile, and I felt my heart skip a beat. Despite everything, I loved him.

“We should go inside,” he said authoritatively to the assembled Alphas and Lunas. And Elle. “We know what we’re doing, so let’s go do it.”

He stepped toward me and offered his arm. A flash of my frustration returned, and I hesitated—not sure if I wanted to take it. But I looked around and realized that if I refused, everyone would know it. The unity of the alliance was delicate at the moment, and I knew we needed to present a strong, united front. So I slipped my arm though Greyson’s.

He held it tightly as we walked up the steps.

As we approached the carved wood and stained-glass doors, I took a deep breath. I needed to remember what was at stake tonight. This was about the prisoners and the alliance and avoiding a *second* pack war. Greyson and I would just have to settle our differences later.

The guards stationed at the doors watched us approach. When we were a few steps away, they moved, darting inside. And then—with a resounding crack—they slammed the doors in our faces. We all stared in shock.

*What the hell?!*

**Episode 4493**

**Greyson**

First, I was shocked. Then I was furious.

Slamming the door in our faces? What the fuck? Was this Lucian’s idea of a joke?

I was burning with rage, but I was also working hard to control myself. We didn’t need this situation to spiral out of control right from the start.

But just as I had this very reasonable thought, Xavier stepped forward and punched the door.

“Open the fucking door!” Mace shouted.

“We see you in there,” Porter yelled, peering through the stained glass at the guards. “Open up!”

“Okay, everyone calm down,” I said, trying to swallow my own rage.

I glanced over at Cali, who was looking around pensively. If it weren’t for her, I might not even have decided to bother with any of this. Part of me wanted to just throw up my hands and let Lucian do whatever the hell he wanted with the prisoners. Not that I wanted to be the kind of heartless man Silas had been—but none of this was my idea. If Lucian wanted to kill the prisoners, then he would be the one responsible for their deaths, not me. Their blood would be on his hands—

But no. I needed to stop thinking like that. It wouldn’t only be on Lucian’s hands. Doing nothing to prevent evil was no different than being the person who pulled the trigger.

I gritted my teeth with determination. We Alphas had the means to stop this madness of Lucian’s, and we needed to act. Because it was the right thing to do.

Even as I thought this, I knew it was possible that we could fail. Failure would make me look incompetent in front of the others, but that was a risk I was going to have to take.

I’d just raised my hand to join Xavier in pounding on the door when a small window in the door slid open, revealing a guard’s face.

“Password?” he asked coolly.

I frowned at him, then looked around at the others, who looked just as confused. “What password?”

The guard sighed. “I’m under strict orders not to allow anyone into the palace without the password.”

“How’s this for a password?” Xavier snarled, putting his face right up to the guard’s. “If you don’t open this damn door and let us in, I’ll shift and rip your fucking throat out.”

The guard’s eyes widened, and then—an instant later—he slammed the window shut.

“Great,” Mace muttered. “Nice work, Xavier.”

“Very diplomatic,” Porter said. “We should really send you to the UN. You could broker world peace single-handedly.”

Xavier looked stormy and stepped back to stand next to Ava.

I turned to look at Cali. She was pale and worried-looking, but when she caught my eye, she gave me a forced smile. She was clearly trying her best to pretend that everything between us was fine, but I wasn’t fooled.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. If we’d been here at the palace for a less important reason, I would’ve walked away then and there. I wanted to whisk Cali away from this cold, angry scene and take her somewhere where we could be along to talk, and to fix things.

But there were literal lives at stake, and that wasn’t an option. But she was here with me, by my side. That had to mean something.

“What do you think we should do?” she asked me quietly, as Xavier, Porter, and Mace traded angry words.

I took a deep breath and turned to the feuding Alphas. “Okay, stop. We need to stop yelling at each other. That’s not getting us anywhere. I’m going to try to get ahold of Aysel. She’ll let us in.

I pulled out my phone and dialed her number.

No answer.

I shot her a text.

*It’s Greyson. We’re outside, but the guards won’t let us in without a password. Call me now.*

No reply.

I felt irritation turn to anger as I waited for Aysel to respond. What was she playing at? This had been her idea. Was this some kind of game she was playing?

Had she set me up?

It was Aysel I was thinking about, so I *did* have to consider the possibility, but it was hard to believe that she’d been anything other than sincere when she’d begged for my help.

Ethical concerns aside, it wouldn’t be good for anyone if Lucian killed the prisoners, but Aysel had the most to lose if the council found out her pack had murdered them. It didn’t matter that it was Lucian’s idea—his whole pack would suffer the consequences of his decision.

Xavier jogged down the front steps and looked up, taking in the palace’s soaring stone walls. “We need to find another way in, that’s all,” he said, shrugging, like he’d just suggested something easy. “We’re getting in there. We’ll storm the damn castle if we have to.”

Mace snorted. “And I forgot to bring my battering ram. Imagine my embarrassment.”

Xavier scowled and was about to reply when Rowena spoke.

“I can get you in,” she said quietly.

Everyone turned to stare at her.

“What?” Xavier asked. “How?”

She shrugged. “I’m a witch, remember?”

“So what do you suggest?” Xavier asked.

“I could blip you in,” she said calmly. Then she looked at me. “What do you think? It’s up to you.”

I considered her offer for a long moment. “I’d rather be let in—invading will only make Lucian angrier,” I admitted.

“They slammed the door in our faces,” Mace pointed out.

“*But* since that’s no longer an option,” I went on pointedly, glaring at Mace, “I think blipping is the way to go.”

“Okay,” Rowena said, rolling her neck to warm up.

“But just so that everyone’s clear,” I said, “blipping isn’t something we’ve got permission to do. Once we get inside, we might find that we’re not welcome, so we need to go in prepared for anything.”

Everyone nodded, including Cali, who looked like she was steeling herself for a fight. I really wished she hadn’t come, and that she wasn’t part of this at all. There was just no way of knowing what was waiting for us inside the palace. Lucian was naturally erratic, and if he’d grown as unhinged as Aysel feared, then there was no telling what he’d do when he saw us. There was every chance that he’d bring down the full force of the Vanguard pack down on us the moment we invaded his precious palace.

This was the man who’d decided to throw a cocktail party to celebrate a mass execution, after all.

I knew that there was no real possibility that Cali would agree to go back to the pack house, but I wanted her to know that she had the option.

Putting my hand on her arm, I guided her a step away from the others.

“You know, you don’t have to do this, love,” I said quietly.

“What?” she asked, clearly surprised.

“It’s going to be dangerous, and—”

Her eyes narrowed, and I stopped talking when she started to glare.

“I’m not going back to the house, Greyson,” she said, shaking my hand off her arm. “I can’t believe you’d even ask.”

I wasn’t surprised by her reaction, but I still sighed with disappointment.

“Okay,” Rowena said as she raised her hands. “Is everyone ready?”

“Ready,” Mace said.

“Ready,” Porter said, giving her a reassuring smile.  
 “Let’s do this,” Xavier said, though he looked grim, and I remembered how much he hated being blipped.

Rowena looked over at me, and I nodded.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I told her.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. For a moment, nothing happened, but then there was a disorienting blur of movement, and the air crackled. I felt the world press in against me, like I was being crushed, but the sensation only lasted for a second, and then we all found ourselves on the other side of the door, inside the palace.

We all took a breath, and Rowena leaned against Porter. I knew it took a lot out of witches to blip large groups, and I wondered if she was feeling the effects of it.

I took a moment to get my bearings. I didn’t hate blipping as much as Xavier, but I didn’t exactly enjoy it. Then I looked around the palace’s entrance hall. The place looked grand and opulent and ostentatious—the same as it always did—but it felt unnatural to be here. I knew the place well enough, but it didn’t feel comfortable being back. It was strangely unsettling.

A guard—the one who’d slammed the door in our faces—stepped forward. “Stop! In the name of our Alpha, Lucian!”

“Here we go,” Mace muttered.

The guard stepped toward Xavier. “I demand that you—”

He didn’t want to hear the end of the demand before he threw a powerful right hook. The guard spun like a dancer, then crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

“Alright,” Mace grumbled. “Let’s get this over with.”

I nodded, but as we stepped forward, I stopped and looked around, confused. “Where’s Cali?”

**Episode 4494**

When Rowena had raised her hands, I closed my eyes. I always did. I didn’t like being blipped at all, but it was slightly less disorienting when I didn’t watch the world shift around me.

I felt the air crackle and knew it was happening, but amazingly, I didn’t feel the sick feeling that usually came from being blipped. Maybe I was getting used to it.

But when I opened my eyes, I was still outside the massive Vanguard doors—and I was alone.

“What the hell?” I said aloud, looking around in total confusion.

I frowned. Greyson had just told me that I could stay back if I wanted to. Of course I’d refused, and for a moment I had to wonder if he’d told Rowena to leave me behind.

No, that was crazy. Greyson never would’ve done like that to me.

But then what had happened? I couldn’t figure it out. I’d never been left behind during a witch blip before, and I couldn’t make sense of it.

I stepped forward and pounded on the door. “Hello? Greyson! Rowena! Can anyone hear me? Let me in!”

I tried to peer through the stained glass, but I couldn’t make anything out. Were they in there? Had they been blipped inside, or had they ended up traveling somewhere else by accident?

“Hello? Let me in!” I raised my hand to pound on the door again when it suddenly opened. My hand was already moving, and Xavier caught it just before I could hit him in the face.

I gasped, startled by his sudden appearance.

He must have been startled too, because for a moment, when he looked at me, his expression was unguarded and open. For a moment, I saw the Xavier I recognized, rather than the cold, aloof version he’d been presenting to me. For a moment, I saw the Xavier I was still deeply in love with.

His eyes flashed, and a slight smile curved his lips. The feeling of his hand grasping mine sent tremors of electricity down my arm, which traveled throughout my body, making me feel weak and disoriented.

I blinked, confused, as he slowly lowered my hand and stepped aside to let me into the palace.

“Oh my god, Cali! I’m so sorry!” Rowena rushed over to me, looking apologetic.

“It’s okay—”

“I don’t know what happened,” she said in a rush. “That’s never happened to me before. I can’t figure out what went wrong, and I—”

“Rowena!” I said loudly, cutting her off. “It’s fine. Really. I’m here. We’re good.”

“Are you sure?” she asked nervously.

“Of course.” Honestly, I had to wonder if what had happened was actually *my* fault. Had I done something? Stepped away? Had I let go of Greyson’s hand? Had he let go of mine?

It had happened so fast, I just couldn’t remember.

Greyson stepped over to me and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into a hug. “I’m so sorry, love,” he murmured into my ear. “I was worried when I didn’t see you.”

I hugged him back, though I could feel how stiff I was. I patted his back awkwardly, still aware that I wasn’t ready to forget what had happened between us. And I had to admit that at least part of the awkwardness I was feeling had something to do with how Xavier’s brief touch a moment ago had made me feel—and how Greyson’s arms around me didn’t make me feel the same electricity as normal.

*We’ll get through this. You know that, Cali*,I told myself.

As if he’d heard my thoughts, his mind link came through.

*Are you really okay, love?* Greyson asked via mind link.

I nodded as I stepped away from him, but I wondered if he was asking because he could tell I was upset. My head was starting to ache with the effort of parsing everything he was saying to me.

Mace cleared his throat. “Okay, now that we’re all here, let’s go.”

Porter looked around. “Okay, but where? This place is huge. Where the hell are we supposed to start looking for Lucian?”

Greyson smiled. “Let’s just follow the music.”

And then—just like that—I suddenly became aware of the music floating through the air. Wherever that was coming from had to be where Lucian was holding this… whatever it was. I shook my head. It made a horrible kind of sense that Lucian would want a soundtrack for his gruesome plans. The guy was so dramatic—he’d truly missed his calling as a theater director.

So we started walking, with Greyson leading the way, pausing every now and then at the crossroads of hallways to listen for the eerie music.

He shook his head as he led us down another passageway, this one lined with paintings. “Aysel was right about one thing—Lucian’s gone off the deep end.”

“Why? The music?” Porter asked.

“That and—Well, just look at these,” Greyson said, waving his hand toward the gold-framed paintings that lined the hallway.

I looked over and was surprised by what I saw. I’d been in this hallway before, and back then, the paintings had all been classical oil portraits. The subjects had been dark and brooding, but they’d been pretty standard portraits, and in tune with the whole fancy vibe of the house. But now, as we passed the frames, I saw that the portraits had been replaced with strange, abstract works. The colors clashed and the paint seemed to have been splashed haphazardly onto the canvases. I looked at the paintings for a while, but eventually I had to look away. There was something dark and unsettling about them, and they made me feel a little sick to my stomach.

“Let’s try this ballroom,” Greyson said, moving toward a set of double doors.

When he opened them, I gasped.

Strung across the far end of the ballroom was a huge, brightly colored banner.

“WELCOME TO EXECUTION EVE!”

“Okay, not that I ever really disagreed, but I want to state for the record,” I muttered to Greyson, “that Lucian has officially lost it.”

“Yeah. I’ll say,” Greyson breathed, his eyes on the banner as well.

I couldn’t look away from it. It was so disturbing and sinister. What was Lucian thinking? Who in their right mind would want to *celebrate* such a horrible thing?

“We really need to stop this,” I said.

Then I heard a rustling noise. My eyes had been trained on the banner, and somehow I hadn’t realized that the room was full of people—and they were dressed for a party.

They’d noticed us, though.

There was a long, excruciating moment of silence, and then the guests began to move. They created a pathway down the middle of the ballroom, and Lucian strode toward us.

My eyes went wide as I took him in. He looked as handsome as he’d been the first time I’d met him—and just as dangerous. He was dressed in a blue velvet jacket with a matching ascot, and for a wild moment, his outfit was all I could think about. Was it a bathrobe or a suit? I honestly couldn’t tell.

But either way, it was the wrong color for Lucian—and the wrong thing to wear to an execution.

Lucian walked toward us, looking annoyed. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. And then, without waiting for us to answer, he looked at the guards flanking the doors. “See that they’re thrown out of here. They are *not* welcome.”

I felt the Alphas around me tense, the same way they did in battle, and my stomach tightened with fear. What the hell was going to happen here tonight?

My magic was tingling inside me, no doubt summoned by the tension in the room. I wiggled my fingers, ready to use my power, if it came to that.

“Stop!”

We all looked over as Aysel emerged from the crowd. She was wearing a dress in the same blue as her brother, and she looked pale and edgy as she strode toward him.

“Excuse me?” Lucian asked icily. “These party crashers were not invited.”

Aysel gave her brother a hard look. “Yes, they were. *I* invited them.”

The assembled Vanguard pack members started whispering to each other at this rare moment of division between the siblings.

Even Lucian looked stunned, and he stared at his sister in shock. “What are you talking about? *You* invited them?  
 “Yes,” Aysel said, without a trace of fear.

“But… Why would you do such a thing?” he demanded. “When you know how I—”

“This is not only your pack, brother—or your house. I have the right to make decisions—”

“You have *no* right to make this kind of decision without consulting me! I am the Alpha of this pack, and I do not want them here—”

Elle stepped forward, interrupting the argument. “Lucian.”

Lucian stopped glaring at his sister and looked over at his mate. “Arielle?” he breathed.

“If you kick them out, you’ll be kicking me out, too.” She gave him a stony look. “Is that what you want?”

**Episode 4495**

The music we’d followed into the ballroom had stopped, and the musicians at the other end of the room were still as statues, watching us with trepidation.

And I understood why. Lucian was looking at Elle, and a range of emotions were playing out on his face.

I had to give Elle props for stepping up at the right moment. It couldn’t have been easy, especially not with the way Lucian was acting. But… I was beginning to realize just how big a risk she’d taken. In the past, I’d seen Lucian falling all over himself to give Elle what she wanted, but now, he looked torn and unsure. He hadn’t spoken yet, and I wondered if he’d become so untethered that he would reject his mate in front of everyone.

Elle stepped toward Lucian, despite the horrible, awkward air of everything. I tensed as she did, not sure how Lucian would react. But I saw his expression soften as she came closer to him.

Then, surprisingly, he smiled. “Hello, my forest rose,” he said softly. “You are welcome to stay—of course you are. You’re always welcome, but the others—”

“No,” Elle said firmly. “No conditions. Either you accept all of us, or I’ll leave… And I’ll never come back.”

Lucian looked shocked by this ultimatum—I didn’t blame him—but he recovered in record time.

“If these are your guests,” he said, giving Elle a tight smile, “then I have no choice but to welcome them to my home.”

It was insincere as hell, but it seemed to have done the trick, and the tension in the room faded slightly. Who knew how long that would last?

The band began to play again, but I wasn’t blind, and it was impossible to miss the remaining tension in Lucian’s jaw. It was clear he was capitulating only because Elle had given him no other choice.

Well, whatever. At least the immediate threat of a werewolf brawl had passed.

I glanced over at Greyson, surprised that he hadn’t said anything. His face was tight, and I had to wonder if he was struggling with seeing Lucian and Elle together, if the sire bond was acting up. I was tempted to ask, but Duke and Paige walked over before I could say a word.

“Greyson, Cali!” Paige smiled at me. “Hello! It’s so nice to see you.”

“Glad you came,” Duke said, shaking Greyson’s hand.

*We’re going to need to find out where they stand*, I said to Greyson through the mind link.

*Yeah, we do. It could help us*, he said. Then he turned to Duke. “Yeah, Lucian throws a good party.”

“I’ll say, have you tried the crab cakes—” Paige started, but Greyson cut her off.

“How are you both feeling about the execution… situation?” he asked, taking care to keep his voice low enough that no one else could hear.

Paige gave a sigh of disgust. “Well, it’s awful, isn’t it? I’m sick over it. We’ve been trying to talk Lucian out of the whole thing, but he isn’t listening to anyone anymore.”

“You know what I think it is?” Duke said, looking grimly at Lucian, who was standing next to Elle a little ways away. “Ever since Lucian killed Malakai, he hasn’t been the same. Have you noticed that? It’s like the victory went to his head or something. Like he thinks he single-handedly won the whole fucking war.”

“Yeah, that’s true…” Greyson said, glancing Lucian’s way.

“Hell yeah it’s true,” Duke said. “And it’s pissing off a lot of my pack members. You know, the wolves who actually *did* a lot of the fighting while Lucian was barking orders at the rest of us. No one likes to see someone taking all the credit for shit they did.”

“And I don’t suppose Aysel hasn’t made much progress with her brother either?” I asked. “Given that fight we just saw?”

Paige shook her head. “You saw them going at it. It’s clear they’re not exactly seeing eye to eye at the moment. I don’t think he’ll listen to her either.”

“I don’t suppose the rest of you have come up with a plan?” Duke asked.

Greyson gave him an even look. “That depends. If you and your Luna agree to stand with the rest of the alliance, then I’ll talk to Lucian. Try to get him to see where we *all* stand on this issue.”

Duke ran a hand along his jaw. “I don’t know,” he said slowly. “Lucian and I are friends, and, really, I’ve tried talking to him multiple times. I’ve gone at it every way I can think of, but nothing seems to be getting through to him.”

“Fantastic,” Greyson said darkly.

Duke glanced over at Elle, who was leaning toward Lucian, speaking quietly. “When she left the palace, it was like the final straw for Lucian. He just lost it.”

Anger flared in my chest. I didn’t like to be put into the position of having to defend Elle, but this seemed unfair. Even if it were true, we couldn’t all scapegoat her like that. It was completely out of her control.

“Elle wanted to go, and she’s allowed to,” I pointed out, an edge to my voice. “She’s not a prisoner to the mate bond, or this palace. She should be allowed to go wherever she wants without Lucian throwing a temper tantrum—especially not one that could result in a literal execution—because he can’t control her. That’s not even how a mate bond should work, one person controlling the other.” They all stared at me, saying nothing, so I continued. “None of this is Elle’s fault. And I have to say, the whole thing is giving me big Lucian-marrying-Seluna vibes, and I don’t like it. We *need* to do something about Lucian. He *has* to be kept in line. You don’t want this to be the beginning of something even worse—”

“Cali,” Greyson said quietly, putting his hand on my arm.

I stopped my tirade and took a deep breath, taking a moment to calm myself.

“Listen, Cali, I’m not saying that what he’s doing is right,” Duke said, “I’m just telling you what I know. That’s all.”

*You’re right about this, love, but we need to stay focused on our next steps for exactly the reason you’re saying*, Greyson said.

I nodded, and looked over at Lucian, who had stepped away from Elle and was now speaking with Armin. Their heads were bent together, and they seemed to be talking about something serious. Probably the prisoners. That was what the whole party was about, wasn’t it?

“Do you know when the executions are supposed to take place?” I asked, turning back to Paige.

“I have no idea,” she said. “Lucian’s being very vague about it, and it wasn’t like I was peppering him with questions.”

“Even if you had, he wouldn’t have told you,” Duke said. “Lucian seems to be keeping that information from everyone. It’s a classic power play—only he knows what he’s going to do, which means no one can do anything to stop him.”

I sighed. This was even worse than I’d thought it would be. “Okay, we need to find out what the timeline is. I mean, what if he’s planning on doing it as part of this stupid party?” I shook my head. “You both know him well—would you put that past him?”

“No,” Paige admitted, though she looked pale at the thought.

Greyson looked around. He caught Aysel’s eye and tipped his head, motioning for her to come over.

She walked toward us. “Greyson,” she said, her tone low. “Thank you for coming. I’m glad you’re here. You need to stop my brother.”

“Why can’t *you* stop him?” I asked, with a flash of annoyance. Aysel had never had a problem getting exactly what she wanted from the people around her, her brother included.

She rounded on me, her eyes flashing angrily. “Do you think I haven’t tried, Caliana? I talked until I was blue in the face, trying to talk him out of this terrible plan, but he won’t listen to me. He won’t listen to anyone. He’s completely shut himself off from any advisors—he’s working completely unilaterally. Nothing I say is getting through to him.”

She was so angry and spoke with so much conviction, I had no choice but to back down. It was clear that she’d really tried, and that calling in the reinforcements had been a last resort.

“Fine,” I said tightly. “You must know the plan for tonight, at least. How is this thing supposed to go down?”

Aysel looked away from me, glancing up at the huge carriage clock that sat on the marble mantlepiece. *Where does he get this crap?* A cheery fire roared below it, but Aysel’s face was pale as she read the clock.

“We have less than two hours,” she said miserably. “He’s planning on executing every single prisoner, starting at the stroke of midnight.”

**Episode 4496**

**Xavier**

“*Midnight?*” I repeated. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Aysel looked at me. “What?”

I shook my head with a derisive scoff. “What? Are we in a fucking fairy tale? If he doesn’t do it at midnight, all the prisoners turn into pumpkins? God, that’s such a Lucian thing to do.”

Aysel pressed her lips together, but she didn’t respond.

I ran a hand through my hair. “So how’s he going to do it?”

“Do what?” Aysel asked.

“How’s he going to execute the prisoners?” I doubted he was actually planning on doing it himself. Lucian didn’t like to get his hands dirty—jumping in to kill Malakai himself had been in the middle of the war. An entirely different context than his fucking ballroom. So unless the prisoners were tied down and unable to offer up any resistance—or messy blood splatter—I didn’t think he intended to get his precious palace dirty.

“He’s planning to use a silver knife,” Aysel said tightly.

“*Silver?*” Greyson repeated incredulously.

“Not messing around, is he?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He said the Bitterfangs gave him the idea.”

“The silver capsules,” Greyson said.

Aysel nodded.

“Bastard.”

Greyson looked grave. “Using silver to kill a werewolf is unbelievably cruel. I can’t even believe he’s considering it.  I’ve seen it, and it’s an extraordinarily painful way to die—”

“It’s painful to survive, too,” I added.

“I know all of that,” Aysel snapped, her cheeks flaming. “That’s the reason why I brought you all here to stop him. I’d hate for that kind of cruelty to be part of Vanguard history.”

Honestly, I wasn’t all that surprised to hear Lucian’s plan. There’d always been something medieval about his approach to the world. He was a throwback to when kings ruled with iron fists and no accountability, doing anything and everything to prove their power.

I glanced over at Ava. *I think I have an easier solution to this problem.*

She raised an eyebrow, looking intrigued. *And what’s that?*

*How much better off would we all be if Lucian were dead?* I asked.

Ava’s eyes widened for just a moment, then a slow smile spread over her face. *It’s a nice thought, X, but I doubt it would fly. You heard the argument everyone got into earlier. They’re soft; they won’t do it.*

*No, probably not*, I admitted.

She was right, unfortunately. And I knew Aysel would never go for it—no matter who much we needed to just grow up and take the little prince out. Anyway, who knew what the Vanguard pack would do if we tried anything? They were a powerful pack, and deeply loyal to their Alpha—for reasons unknown—and I really wasn’t up for another pack war. I knew Greyson and the other Alphas felt the same. Our packs had all been through a lot recently. We’d all lost people, and none of us had come here looking to start anything.

“Should we get a drink?” Ava said quietly, as Aysel and Greyson kept talking.

I shrugged. “Yeah, sure,” I said, and followed her across the room to the bar.

“It’s a party,” Ava said with a smile. “I figure there’s no reason we can’t have a drink while they scheme, right—”

She gasped and tripped, and I reached out to grab her, holding her steady.

“You okay?” I asked.

She gave me a strange look. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just slipped on a napkin.”

My heart was beating hard. I’d worried for a moment that something was wrong with Ava—and that maybe Adéluce was here at the party.

She eyed me warily. “What’s up with you, X?”

“What?” I asked.

“You’re jumpy. You’ve been edgy for a while. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, deflecting. “I’m just worried about you, because of the coma. I’m just trying to keep an eye on you.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, like she didn’t fully believe me. “Well, I’m fine. I just slipped. There’s nothing else going on.”

“Good,” I said, trying to sound normal. I wanted to believe this, but I just couldn’t be sure. Not about this, and not about anything else.

Ava wouldn’t lie to me—not knowingly. But Adéluce could’ve sent that stumble as a little warning. She’d made it very clear that she didn’t like it when I stopped thinking about her.

I needed to remember to keep my eyes open, though I sort of doubted that the vampire-witch would dare to try anything overt in the palace.

As we approached the bar, Ava got the bartender’s attention. We weren’t dressed for the party, and the man didn’t bother to hide his irritation, but Ava didn’t even react to his contempt.

“Jack and coke. Make it a double.” She looked over at me.

“Whiskey. Neat.”

The bartender turned away and started pulling bottles. Lucian never spared any expense for his parties, so at least I was guaranteed a good drink in exchange for dealing with all this bullshit.

As we waited for our drinks, I surveyed the ballroom, taking in the formally dressed party guests, and eventually landing on Cali. She was standing near Greyson, but she was standing stiffly, almost like she was trying to lean away, but also trying not to be obvious about it.

The more I watched them, the more certain I became that something was wrong between them. They just seemed… *off*.

I thought about the moment when I’d caught her hand at the door. My heart pounded as I thought about the look on her face—that surprised, flustered look she got whenever she was caught off-guard. I’d liked seeing it. My heart had been racing in that moment too, and my hand still felt the echo of her skin.

I looked over at my brother, who was still speaking with Aysel, and I wondered if he’d noticed anything pass between Cali and me.

Ava accepted our drinks from the bartender and handed me mine, then she followed my gaze to Greyson.

She laughed. “Aysel’s really giving it to Greyson.”

“I’ll say,” I muttered.

We couldn’t hear her from across the room, but she was clearly speaking stridently. She was leaning toward him, looking hard into his face, frantically gesturing as she spoke.

I took a sip of my whiskey and sighed. “I guess I’d better go bail him out. Again.”

“Better you than me,” Ava muttered.

Still carrying Lucian’s cut crystal tumblers, I headed over to where Greyson and Aysel were standing. As I approached, I started to hear what Aysel was saying.

“—and what I am asking is that you and the other Alphas make good on your promise,” she said, half-demanding, half-imploring. “And that you do what you set out to do. The longer you wait to act, the worse this situation will become, and the more confident my brother will grow.”

Greyson heaved a sigh, but he nodded. He looked around at the assembled group of Alphas. “We might as well try to talk to him.”

As a group, we began to move across the ballroom toward where Lucian stood. As we did, I found myself next to Cali and—after a moment—our arms brushed against each other as we walked.

I looked down at her quickly. Had she just gasped?

Then I looked over at Ava, on the other side of the room, hoping she hadn’t noticed. But her eyes were on Lucian.

I looked over at the princeling, too. He’d just noticed the group of us walking toward him, and it was immediately obvious that trying to reason with him was a lost cause.

Lucian’s expression had darkened, and the look in his eyes was hard as stone. “I suppose you’re here to plead for the lives of that trash,” he said contemptuously.

“We want to talk to you about your plans for the prisoners of war you have in your dungeons,” Greyson said, clearly trying to keep the conversation civil.

“They’re trash, and they deserve what they’re going to get,” he said savagely. Then his expression brightened in a strange way. “And I will be the one to deliver their well-earned punishment.”

“Lucian,” Cali said. “Don’t you see what a mistake it would be for you to do this? Apart from being cruel and heartless, there’s the possibility of creating too much distance between packs you live next to. You can’t let this horse out of the barn—”

“I don’t know to which horse you are referring,” Lucian said coolly, “but my decision has been made. Please know that the only reason why any of you are standing in my presence is because of my dear forest rose and her too-tender heart. But I warn you now,” he added, narrowing his eyes, “that if any of you persist in attempting to change my mind on this, I will have you thrown out.”

“Lucian—” Duke started, but he wasn’t listening.

“Or perhaps you’d rather join the rest of that trash as prisoners,” Lucian said flatly.

That was enough for me.

“Are you threatening us?” I snarled.

His eyes blazed with a wild kind of light. “That I am.”

**Episode 4497**

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. I couldn’t believe how quickly the mood had shifted from tense to downright electric. Not that it had been sunshine and daisies to begin with. One moment we’d been talking to Lucian, trying to convince him what a horrible mistake he was making, and the next moment everyone was ready to shift and fight.

But it wasn’t like our conversation with Lucian had been going particularly well. He’d been completely resistant to what we were saying, but at least there hadn’t been any overt threats. Until now.

As the Alphas around me began to snarl, Greyson grabbed my arm and positioned me behind him, ready to shield me from whatever came next. The move shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did, and I stumbled a little. But when I got my feet back underneath me, I tugged my arm from his grasp and stepped forward again. I wasn’t about to stand back and let my mate—or any of the other werewolves—take Lucian’s bait. He was trying to get a rise out of the other Alphas, and they were falling for it. It was absurd. We needed to be better than this.

“Stop,” I said firmly, stepping between Lucian and the other alliance Alphas. “I think everyone should just take a deep breath. We didn’t come here to fight. We just did that with the Bitterfangs, and we don’t need another war. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

Lucian glared at me, then turned on his heel and stormed away.

“Go after him!” Aysel urged the Alphas. “You have to! You have to convince him—”

“I think that ship has sailed,” Xavier snapped.

Aysel stared after her brother, looking miserable. I really felt for her, and for the first time, I wondered what it was like to be in her shoes. She had to be feeling so torn.

Then I shuddered at the thought of being in Aysel’s shoes. That would make Lucian my brother—no thank you. I’d stick with my knife-happy Fae sister, thank you very much.

“What do you think we should do?” I asked, turning to Greyson.

Greyson looked like he’d had enough. He shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m not sure what options we have left. Duke was right—he’s not listening to a word anyone says. He’s refusing to even consider that he might be wrong. I don’t know what we *can* do.”

The group was quiet for a moment.

“I think Lucian feels threatened.”

We all looked over at Elle in surprise.

“Threatened?” Greyson asked. “What do you mean?”

She looked around. “I think he feels attacked. There are too many of you walking over, telling him that he’s wrong. He’s alone right now. No wonder he got upset.”

Despite how I wanted to rage against Elle’s comment, I knew she was right. Lucian wasn’t someone who always acted rationally. He felt like we were all ganging up on him, so he was continuing to double down. It wasn’t *healthy* or *helpful*, but it was definitely a factor at play. Lucian didn’t like being told he was wrong, period. And he was acting out of attention or maybe power. Control that he felt he was losing.

“She might have a point,” I noted.

“Yes. I do have a point,” she said firmly. “I know him better than most of you. I’ll talk to him. I might be able to convince him. We are mates, after all. Aren’t mates supposed to listen to each other?”

She looked around, like she was waiting for us to answer her, but no one said anything.

I glanced at Greyson. Elle was right—mates *were* supposed to listen to each other—but that wasn’t always the way it worked out. It definitely didn’t feel like my mates always listened to me.

Though—in fairness—I supposed I didn’t always listen to them, either.

Elle’s jaw was set. “I will go talk to Lucian. Alone,” she added pointedly.

She started to turn, but Greyson grabbed her arm. “No!”

Elle looked up in surprise. We *all* looked up in surprise.

“I’m going to go with you,” Greyson said.

That surprised me even more. Why did Greyson feel like he had to go with her? It wasn’t like Elle was going to be in any danger—she was going to speak to her mate. Lucian would never hurt Elle.

But maybe that wasn’t what Greyson was worried about. Maybe he was insisting on going with her because of the sire bond. Was that what was going on here? Was Elle’s connection to Lucian making Greyson jealous?

I put my hand on Greyson’s arm. “Greyson, let Elle go. She needs to talk to him alone.”

Greyson looked determined. “I really think I should—”

Then he stopped himself and pressed his mouth shut. Letting go of her arm, he took a step back.

“Thank you, Cali,” Elle said quietly. Then she turned and walked across the ballroom, toward Lucian.

It seemed strange that the party was still going on around us, but the band kept playing, and people around us were dancing and drinking and apparently having a good time. Even Xavier and Ava had gotten drinks somewhere.

Greyson hadn’t gone with Elle, but he was watching her carefully as she approached her mate.

With a sigh, I pulled him back. “Stop.”

“What?” he asked, frowning. It looked like his mind was a million miles away.

“You can’t just… loom over them,” I said, nodding toward Elle and Lucian. “Elle’s going to talk to him, and it might be the only option here. She knows what she’s doing”—at least I hoped she did—“and you just need to trust her.”

It felt very strange to hear those words coming out of my mouth. I couldn’t quite believe I was saying them.

Greyson frowned at me. “Why did you stop me from going with her?”

I gave him a long look. “Come *on*.”

“What?” he asked, still looking baffled and a little annoyed.

I rolled my eyes. “I think you know why I stopped you, Greyson.” I crossed my arms. “Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

His grey eyes looked stormy. “Yeah, maybe you do.”

“Greyson—”

“I was only looking out for Elle,” he protested.

I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“And why is it that you can’t see what a terrible idea it would’ve been for you to join Elle as she tries to appeal to Lucian’s better nature? She just got done pointing out that he feels ganged up on—why are you acting like you don’t know that there’s a reason why Lucian’s so angry? And that most of that anger is directed at you?”

“I don’t know—”

“*And* that he’s so angry because of Elle,” I added. I shook my head. “You going over there would only antagonize him. It would make a bad situation even worse.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched as he looked away from me. “Is there any other reason why you stopped me?”

My stomach was twisted up tight, but I figured there was no reason to deny it. “Seeing how quickly you tried to stop Elle from talking to her mate made me…” I took a deep breath. “It made me jealous. I’m not proud to admit it, but if we’re going to be honest here, that’s how I felt.”

When Greyson looked back at me, his expression had softened. “Cali, I’ve told you so many times, there’s no reason for you to be jealous of Elle. I’ve made that clear. I love you, Cali. You, and only you. Forever.”

“And I believe you,” I said, my heart aching. “But we both know there are other factors at play here. The sire bond, Greyson.”

My words hung in the air between us, and I watched Greyson carefully, waiting for his reaction.

“Cali, I’ve told you that I’m not—” He stopped himself again and shook his head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m not blaming you, Greyson, but I’ve got eyes,” I said. “I’m not blind, and I can’t just pretend that the sire bond isn’t a part of your relationship with her. And you can’t live in that fantasy world either. It’s not fair to any of us.”

Greyson took this in. After a moment, he nodded. “Yeah, I hear what you’re saying. And maybe there’s some truth to it. I can’t just pretend that bond away.”

Over Greyson’s shoulder, I saw Elle approaching Lucian.

“There she goes,” I said quietly, and Greyson turned to watch her.

I tried to interpret her expression, but Elle had always been hard to read, and right now she was inscrutable.

Greyson must’ve felt the same. “I don’t know what we’re going to do if Elle can’t change Lucian’s mind. We’re running out of options here.”

I nodded, feeling the tension mount as Elle began to speak to her mate. “If he won’t listen to Elle, there’s really only one thing left to do.”

**Episode 4498**

**Elle**

My steps slowed as I approached Lucian. There was a party going on around me, but I couldn’t pay attention to any of it. Besides, it wasn’t like anyone was actually having a good time. My head was spinning as I tried to figure out what I was going to say to him.

Lucian was being so stubborn about this, and while I thought maybe I could have an edge everyone else didn’t… I didn’t really feel it might help. I also didn’t understand why he was wearing such strange clothes. I’d never seen him dressed in this way or acting this way with everyone else. It was like I didn’t recognize him. It felt like my mate had become a completely different person since I’d left the palace to return to the Redwood pack house.

I didn’t need to turn around to know that all the alliance Alphas were watching me. I could practically feel their eyes on my back. I knew there was a lot at stake, and despite what Greyson had said, I couldn’t help but feel responsible for this. There was no doubt in my mind that Lucian was acting out of jealousy, and that the jealousy was fueled by the sire bond between Greyson and me.

Greyson was right when he said it wasn’t my fault that he and I were connected by the bond—I knew that—but I couldn’t help but feel responsible in other ways. After all, I was the one who’d asked Greyson to turn me from a natural wolf into a werewolf. That had been my choice.

I’d also chosen to return to the Redwood pack, though I hadn’t realized how upset Lucian would be. But I didn’t regret leaving the palace. It had been a difficult place to live in, even for a short time. I hadn’t liked the way Lucian had smothered me while I was here, either. I knew his heart had been in the right place, but he’d always been right there, watching me, monitoring me, trying to keep me safe all the time.

He’d meant well. I knew the council had been looking for me—and probably still were—and if they found me, they would take me. It had been a relief then, and it was still one now at the Redwood house, that I had somewhere to hide.

But it had just gotten to be too much, and he hadn’t always been acting out of fear. Sometimes the way Lucian treated me was out of instinct, the wolf inside of him wanting to protect me. To keep me close. Maybe too close.

And I’d liked returning to the Redwood house. It was nice to be back with the first werewolf pack I’d known. And with Greyson.

I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder at him. I wished he’d come with me to talk to Lucian, but thanks to Cali, he’d stayed back. With *her*.

It was for the best—it would probably be easier for me to talk to Lucian alone—but I couldn’t help but feel a little resentful about her interference. Actually, I’d been finding everything Cali did pretty annoying lately. I liked her and respected her, but I didn’t need her interfering in my relationship with Greyson.

Lucian looked over at me, and his face lit up. The anger that had flared in him when he was speaking to the Alphas a few minutes ago seemed to vanish.

He reached for my hand and pulled me into an embrace, wrapping me in his arms. He bent to press a kiss to my lips as he caressed my face.

“My forest rose,” he murmured. “I’m so happy to see you, so happy that you have decided to return to your own devoted mate.”

In his arms, I felt my resolve weaken a little. Despite everything, I was still attracted to Lucian. He was an attractive man—and I was drawn to him. And I liked his kisses. A lot.

And seeing him being so strong and so determined and so *Alpha* with the other members of the alliance had sparked something inside me. It was like a fire had been lit in my stomach… But I tried to temper my enthusiasm.

When I used my brain to think—instead of my body and emotions—I knew this moment with my mate wasn’t right. *Lucian* wasn’t right. Greyson knew how to be an Alpha. Even Xavier knew how to be an Alpha. They made hard choices and looked after their packs.

But Lucian seemed to use his position in all the wrong ways.

Lucian looked into my eyes. “My love, I can see that you’re not entirely pleased with me in this moment, but I hope you understand that I am not only an Alpha, but I am also a prince of a very old, very respected, and very powerful pack. That comes with a great deal of responsibility, and sometimes it requires me to draw a hard line in the sand.” He took my hand. “I hope you see that I am doing all of this for you, my dear one. For us—”

I pulled my hand away as he tried to bring it to his lips.

“I *don’t* understand,” I said, my voice tight. “Why is it that you’re the only Alpha who wants these prisoners dead?”

Lucian frowned, clearly confused. “But my dear, surely you can understand? You were in those battles, and the prisoners in my dungeons wanted nothing more than to kill you and your friends. The only reason they didn’t succeed was because I killed their leader.” His expression hardened. “And now they must pay the price.”

I shook my head, still feeling baffled. “I still don’t understand, Lucian. They lost. Their Alpha is dead, their pack is gone. They have no home to go to. They’ve already suffered. What good will killing them do?”

Like flicking a light switch, Lucian’s expression darkened. “Did *he* send you?”

I was taken aback by the sudden sharpness of his tone. “What? No! No one sent me. This was my idea. I wanted to talk to you—I’m only trying to understand—”

“I’ve done all I can to make you feel welcome, my sweet Arielle,” Lucian said, clearly not listening to me. It was like my voice didn’t even register. “I’ve become a better Alpha since you have become my mate. I know that we are a match made in heaven, and if you would only stop trying to please Greyson, you would see it, too.”

Anger flared in my chest, making it suddenly hard to breathe. I hadn’t even brought up Greyson, and I hated the implication of Lucian’s words.

“I’m not trying to please *anyone*,” I snapped, shoving him back. “Only myself. I’m here because I care about you, and I’m worried for you.”

“*Worried?* For me—”

This time, I interrupted him. “I’m worried that you’re going to make a terrible mistake by killing those prisoners. You’re going to turn everyone against you.”

He shook his head. “You’re overreacting, my sweetheart. After all, I am the hero of the pack war. It was I who finally killed our great enemy Malakai when no one else was able to do the deed.” He glanced over my shoulder at the alliance members behind me, and his face twisted in contempt. “These so-called allies might be upset with me for a while after this, but eventually they will come to see things my way. They will see that what I am doing tonight is the best thing for all of us. Tonight, I am serving the alliance, and soon they will see it. Then, they will revere me as the prince that I am.”

Lucian’s voice was rising, and his face was flushed. His eyes were wild, and it was like he was in another place completely, in another world than the rest of us, where he was all-powerful.

I was terrified by his speech, and all the talk of his own glory. The whole idea of raising oneself up was very foreign to me. That wasn’t how wild wolves thought at all. Everything was done for the good of the pack. Keep the pack safe, keep the pack fed, keep the pack together—that was all anyone ever worked toward. The idea of competition within the pack was something entirely unique to werewolves—and humans.

“But what if you’re wrong?” I whispered. “What if they don’t come to see that you were right? What if they turn against you, leaving you all alone? Then what will you do?”

Lucian’s expression darkened even further. It was like watching a high-speed sunset, and when he looked at me, his eyes were pure midnight. “I am *never* wrong.”

“But you could be—”

His fingers found my chin, and he easily tilted my face so that I was too close to look away from his dark, bottomless eyes.

“My beautiful forest rose,” he said, his voice a frightening rasp. “I know *exactly* what you’re trying to do.”

**Episode 4499**

**Greyson**

Cali looked up at me, waiting for me to respond to the idea she’d just pitched.

I frowned, then thought for a moment, then deepened my frown. “Wait, I need to make sure I heard you right. Let’s just go through this slowly.” I lowered my voice, ready to repeat the plan Cali had just offered up. “You want to break the prisoners out of the dungeon? Ourselves?”

“Yes,” Cali said simply.

“When did you think of this plan?” I asked, stalling for time as I tried to figure out how the hell to respond to it.

“It only just occurred to me,” she admitted. “But I think it’s something we should try. I mean, isn’t it better than just doing nothing and letting Lucian kill them at midnight?”

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I understand your logic, love, but there are a lot of moving parts in that plan that would need to be addressed before we did anything like that.”

“Like what?” Cali asked.

I blew a breath out my nose. “Well, for starters, even if we did somehow make it down to the dungeons and get the prisoners out, how are we going to be able to split them up between the pack houses without Lucian coming after us? Or get them to the council in time? I don’t think I need to remind you that these are the same werewolves who were trying to kill you for being a *due destini* mate. They’re not exactly our friends.”

“I know that,” she said quickly, “but I still think there’s got to be a way to get them out.”

She was looking up at me, and I knew she was waiting for me to figure out a way to pull this off.

I ran a hand through my hair. “Well, I’d have to talk to the other Alphas. We’d need their support to pull off anything like that—if it’s even possible,” I added.

“Listen, this wouldn’t actually be as difficult as you’re imagining,” Cali said. “Remember, we already know our way around the dungeons, and we could probably get Aysel to help. She’s desperate to stop Lucian. And Elle can distract him, so he won’t figure out what we’re doing.”

That stopped me. “How would Elle be able to distract Lucian long enough for us to pull off a freaking *heist*?”

Cali suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. “Well, you know. They *have* kissed…”

She trailed off, letting the words hang in the air, and I felt my stomach twist into a knot as I realized what she was suggesting. I knew I needed to be very careful in how I responded, though the sharp sting of jealousy at the thought of Lucian and Elle being together romantically was pricking at every inch of me.

But I knew that if I reacted negatively to this idea, it was only going to upset Cali and serve to underscore her point that I didn’t have as much control over the sire bond as I claimed to possess. That was *not* the outcome I wanted.

However, I wasn’t about to tell Elle that she should try to seduce Lucian in order to save the Bitterfang prisoners. That just wasn’t going to happen.

I opened my mouth to respond when I felt a sudden jolt of primal fear. The emotion confused me for just a moment—until I realized it wasn’t my own fear I was feeling. It was Elle’s.

I whipped around and scanned the room for her. There she was, still standing with Lucian. He had his hand on her face and was leaning in close to her. What the hell was going on? Was that asshole *threatening* her?

I’d just started toward them when Cali grabbed my arm.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment. I’d been moving purely on instinct, and my mind reeled as I tried to remember what I *had* beendoing. “I don’t think the conversation between Lucian and Elle is going well.”

Cali looked past me at the couple. “What are you talking about? You can’t even see either of their faces. How do you know that things are going—” She stopped talking as realization dawned. “Wait a minute. You know because you can sense Elle’s emotions, can’t you? Because of the fucking sire bond.”

I registered how bitter her voice sounded and it hit hard, but I didn’t have a choice—Elle was in danger, and I had to go to her.

“I’m sorry, love,” I said. “I have to go deal with this. I hope you can understand.”

Cali crossed her arms. “You’re not asking for my opinion, but I really think you should let Elle sort this out on her own. She’s a big girl.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I’m just not willing to take that chance.”

Cali’s expression darkened, and it hurt my heart to see it, but something inside me was saying that I *had* to get to Elle. The Lucian I’d known before wouldn’t have hurt Elle, but this new version of him was a total wild card, and I refused to take any risks.

I started marching toward them, but then Xavier, Ava, Mace, Porter, and Rowena stepped in front of me.

“Hey,” Xavier said. He glanced over his shoulder at Elle and Lucian. “Any idea what’s going on over there?”

“What?” I asked sharply.

“Has Elle made any progress?” Ava asked.

I took a shallow breath, fighting not to look as freaked out as I felt. My heart was racing, and it felt like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room.

“No,” I said, clearing my throat. “No, it doesn’t look like the princeling is going to bend. Not even for Elle.”

Mace looked furious. “Well, this is just great!” he snapped. “Just perfect. You’re telling us that this was all just a freaking waste of time?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Porter muttered, looking mutinous.

I glanced over at Elle, then back at the Alphas. I felt torn between helping Elle and dealing with the beginnings of what looked like a minor revolt.

Cali had walked over to hear this exchange, and she shook her head. “I think we need to change our strategy.”

“What do you mean?” Rowena asked.

“I think we need to forget trying to convince Lucian—that’s not getting us anywhere. We need to focus on freeing the prisoners.”

Duke laughed. “Yeah, I know, right?” He shook his head. “But seriously, what are we going to do?”

“I think Cali has a point,” I said. “We’re not getting anywhere going through Lucian—it *is* just a waste of our limited time.”

“And we’d have the element of surprise,” Cali pointed out. “We have a witch,” she said, looking at Rowena, “and we know the palace pretty well at this point. I know it might sound a little crazy, but I really think we can do this.”

It wasn’t hard to see the skepticism on every Alpha’s face.

I glanced nervously over at Elle.

“Okay, say we go with this plan—which I’m going on record as not being a fan of,” Mace said. “Say we manage to get into the dungeons and free the prisoners.” He stared at Cali. “Now we have a bunch of Bitterfang prisoners on our hands. Prisoners who—unless I’m very much mistaken—still want to kill us all.”

“And it’s not just the Bitterfangs we have to worry about down there,” Rowena said. “The prisoners include Malakai’s allies, too. The Northwind Alpha is down there. So is the Hackberry Alpha. And the Bitterfang Luna.”

“Those are some big players,” Paige noted.

“I’ll say,” Rowena agreed. “If we free them, who knows what might happen? We might be setting ourselves up for another war.”

“I don’t think that’s an absolute certainty—” I started.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mace snapped. “That’s *exactly* what’s going to happen if we let that bunch of lunatics out of—”

“We have to consider—”

“I don’t think anyone is thinking about the consequences here—”

As the alliance members bickered, I tried to both listen to them and keep an eye on Elle and Lucian, who were still too far away to see clearly.

Finally, Xavier broke through the arguing.  
 “Why are we wasting our time with this shit,” he said harshly. He looked pissed, and this time I couldn’t really blame him.

“What do you suggest, Xavier?” Mace demanded.

“What do you think?” he snapped. “The best thing to do at this point is right in front of our faces, but you all are too soft to admit it.”

He looked around and then made a subtle, quick gesture across his neck. We all saw, but it was quick enough that it was likely that the room full of Vanguard wolves hadn’t. Still, as small and fast as the gesture had been, my brother’s message was very clear.

He wanted to take Lucian out.

**Episode 4500**

I stared at Xavier, stunned.

“Wait… You want to *kill Lucian*?” I asked, mouthing the last two words. I shook my head. “Do I even need to point out that trying anything like that would not only be suicidal, but it would also start another pack war? Or have you forgotten how close we came to war with the Vanguards before?”

Xavier looked over at me and raised his eyebrows. “Did I say anything about *killing* Lucian?”

“No…” I said, feeling suddenly flustered. “But, I mean, what you did was pretty clear…”

Technically he hadn’t said anything. He’d gestured. But he’d clearly been suggesting that we kill Lucian, had he not? That’s kind of what the slash across the throat with your index finger meant. Universally, I was fairly certain. I wasn’t an idiot. I’d seen enough mob movies to know that meant killing someone… If he’d meant something else, then he was going to have to speak up and actually use his words this time.

Mace was holding a drink, which looked untouched. A passing server had probably handed it to him, and he hadn’t had the wherewithal to refuse. “I mean, killing Lucian would solve more than a few of our problems—though things would probably get a little sticky.”

I looked over at Mace. “I can’t believe you’re even willing to consider that!” I hissed.

“Everyone needs to just cool it,” Xavier said. “We have options, and I’m just making us face the one everyone wants to keep dancing around. Remember what Cali said—we have a witch. Another option is that we ask Rowena to use a spell to *literally* take Lucian out of here.”

I released the breath I was holding. Okay. That, we could work with. He was suggesting that we literally take Lucian out of the palace—he wasn’t suggesting murder. Yet.

But Porter just scowled, looking less than impressed by this plan. “No way, Xavier.”

“Why not—”

“Because you’d be risking my mate, that’s why,” Porter said sharply. “What are you suggesting she do? Just blip Lucian away?”

“Yeah, why not?” Ava asked. “I don’t see the harm in that.”

“Oh *really*?” Porter said scathingly. “And then what? What happens when Lucian realizes what’s happened and who was responsible for it? What then?”

Everyone thought about this for a moment.

“I guess we could restrain him,” Mace offered. “Maybe a couple of us could go with them?”

“The only problem is dealing with anyone in the Vanguard pack who’s loyal to him to a fault,” Porter said. “We should be careful where we’re talking about this. We’re in the ballroom with them.”

“Maybe we should ask Rowena what she thinks?” I asked. “Just in case all of this is a moot point anyway before anyone literally bites our heads off?”

At this, everyone toward Rowena, who shot me a smile.

“Well, I’m no fan of Lucian,” she said. “If you want me to blip him out of here, just say the word.”

“Hang on,” Porter interjected, looking unhappy. “Let’s just slow down a little. Ro, you’re not blipping anyone anywhere until we get this all sorted out. This isn’t a plan—”

“It’s the *beginning* of a plan—”

“We’re never going to come up with an *actual* plan if everyone keeps shooting down every idea—”

“We need something that doesn’t sound like the Scooby gang thought it up—”

“Oh, that’s real cute—”

“Excuse me!” Aysel had glided over during the argument and was now staring at everyone expectantly. “Would someone please explain to me what the hell is going on, and why it looks like all you’ve been doing is arguing? We have *things* at stake here!”

“Because it *is* all they’ve been doing,” I muttered.

Aysel’s eyes glittered dangerously. “Why are you fighting among yourselves at a time like this?” she demanded. She pointed to the clock on the mantelpiece, which was ticking ever closer to midnight. “Time is running out. What ideas do you have to stop my brother?”

No one else was speaking up under Aysel’s glowering look, so I took a deep breath and jumped right in. Better get this over with.

“We’ve got a couple of ideas. One involves distracting Lucian while we get down to the dungeons and try to release the prisoners. We were also thinking that we could blip Lucian away from the palace, giving us as much time as we need.”

Aysel considered my suggestions for a moment, then shook her head. “No.”

I stared at her, shocked by her immediate dismissal. “Why not?”

“I’m not saying they’re bad ideas—they’re pretty good, at first glance—but they won’t work. There are still many wolves here who are loyal to my brother,” Aysel said, lowering her voice. “And if they suspect that Lucian’s been hurt or kidnapped, they will rip this place apart looking for him. They’ll stop at nothing until he’s located. And I don’t think the prisoners will stand a chance once that gets started. The loyalists will kill them out of sheer frustration.”

Greyson pressed a hand to his eyes, looking stressed. “What about you? Can’t you control the loyalists? Aren’t you next in line around here?”

She rolled her eyes. “Perhaps, but only technically. I’m not an Alpha. I’m not even a Luna. I’m just a princess. That title doesn’t come with a lot of actual power.”

“But maybe that’s not actually a disadvantage,” I pointed out. “I mean, doesn’t your royal status mean something to your pack? That’s the impression I always get from Lucian.”

Aysel pressed her lips together, and when she spoke, I got the impression she would’ve preferred to stay silent. “I believe my brother might’ve given that aspect of our pack… undue emphasis. This is a werewolf pack, and we respect werewolf traditions as much as any other pack. Lucian can play prince without any real detractors. He is the Alpha, after all—people listen to him because of that, not because of his royal lineage. But I’m not the Alpha, or even the Luna.” Tears filled Aysel’s eyes. “I’m just the princess.”

“But…” I said, feeling a little lost, “I thought that meant something to your pack. I’ve seen—”

“It does mean something, but not what you want it to mean. Not what you need it to mean right now,” Aysel said firmly.

I opened my mouth to ask more questions, but just as I did, Elle walked quickly toward us. At a glance, it was clear that she was upset about something. And not just upset—*distraught*. She was pale, and there were tears in her eyes.

Greyson started to reach for her, but then he stopped himself.

I saw this, of course, and it made my heart hurt. But at least he hadn’t wrapped her in his arms and hugged her tight.

“Well?” Mace asked, looking at Elle.

She shook her head, looking more miserable than ever. “No.”

“He wouldn’t listen to you?” Ava asked.

“No. I tried, but he wouldn’t listen to a word I said. He accused me of trying to manipulate him, said that I was like everyone else, and that you were all against him.”

“Well, we are,” Xavier noted. “He’s got that part right. You gotta give the princeling credit for calling that one.”

I shot Xavier a dark look. “*Not helping*.”

Elle had closed her eyes, and tears were leaking down her cheeks. I couldn’t help but feel for her. She was upset, and clearly felt betrayed. And I knew how she felt. The way she looked made me think of how I’d felt when Xavier had turned on me. Elle’s situation wasn’t exactly the same, of course, but I knew what it was like when a mate betrayed you—it really sucked.

My instinct was to reach out to her, but I was torn between wanting to comfort her and needing to focus on the bigger picture. Aysel was right—we were running out of time to make a plan.

But before I could suggest that we just pick a plan and stick to it, I heard something that stopped me in my tracks.

Lucian’s booming voice sailed over the crowd. “I will have your attention!”

We all turned to look at him. He was on the far side of the room, sitting on what looked like a throne. Lucian was—if nothing else—a consummate host at parties, and he was usually found smiling and flirting as he moved through the crowd, but now he glared out at his guests, his eyes like shards of ice.

“I have made a decision,” he continued, his voice as harsh as his eyes. “I will wait no longer.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Mace muttered.

But we didn’t have to wait long to find out. Lucian pulled a dagger from his belt, and the room’s bright candlelight danced off the blade—it was silver. Like Aysel had predicted.

“Forget midnight,” Lucian boomed. “Bring me the first prisoner!”

**Episode 4501**

“Please, Lucian, don’t do this,” I shouted as a couple of Vanguard wolves moved toward the doors to likely go grab the first prisoner from wherever they were being kept. “This is wrong! You’re better than this!”

I thought back to the time when Lucian would’ve done anything I asked. Back then, I’d been disgusted by how much Lucian doted on me, but I couldn’t help but think how useful it would be if he felt even a sliver of that impulse right now.

Lucian gave me a dismissive wave. “Caliana, I can’t believe you think so little of me that you consider me incapable of killing the very wolves who nearly decimated our packs.” He turned his attention to the rest of the room. “I want you all to watch as I kill the first prisoner. It’s going to be quite the spectacle. Truly something to remember.”

I was horrified. I felt the same anger Lucian did at what the Bitterfangs and their allies had put us through, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to watch them be murdered right before my eyes!

*What’s wrong with him? Why is he being so cold? So cruel? Lucian’s always been unpredictable, but this is bad, even for him!*

I grabbed Greyson’s arm. “You have to stop him.”

Greyson gave me a tight nod and then moved toward Lucian—only to be blocked by a line of Vanguard wolves.

“If you take another step toward our prince, you’ll share the prisoners’ fate,” one of the guards said. “The prince doesn’t want to resort to that, but he’ll do what he has to if you force his hand.”

I was stunned.

“Is Lucian really threatening to kill us, too?” I looked up at Lucian, resisting the urge to blast him right off his throne.

Greyson put a gentle hand on my arm as his mind link came through to me.

*Careful, Cali*,he said. *Lucian isn’t thinking straight. He’s capable of just about anything right now. I can see it in his eyes.*

*But we can’t just let him do this! If you’re not going to stop him, I will.*

I tried to pull away, but Greyson tightened his grip on my arm.

*Cali, I understand how you feel, but we’re badly outnumbered. One wrong move on our part, and this could turn into a bloodbath*, Greyson said. *Aysel’s already arguing with her brother—let’s just see how this plays out. Maybe she’ll be able to get through to him.*

I glanced at Xavier. I knew that he didn’t want to see the prisoners killed, either—so why wasn’t he doing anything to stop it?

I was disappointed in my mates, but I also knew why they were being so cautious. We were in the Vanguard palace and, as Greyson had said, vastly outnumbered. But that didn’t make me feel any better about just standing by and watching the prisoners die. If we did that, we’d be just as responsible for their deaths as Lucian. I didn’t want that, and I knew my mates didn’t, either.

I looked around, searching for anyone else who might be able to stop this—either by convincing Lucian that he was making a mistake, or by other means. Even by force, if necessary. At this point, I was ready to do just about anything to stop him.

*What if it comes down to having to kill him? Would I be willing to go that far? Hopefully it won’t come to that…*

Then I spotted Rowena. She was a witch. Maybe she could cast a spell or do the blip thing—anything to interrupt Lucian’s plans long enough for someone to knock some sense into him.

*Magic might be our only way out of this. We have to try, at least.*

I slipped away from Greyson and hurried over to Rowena, who looked just as upset as I felt.

“I can’t believe he’s doing it,” she whispered to me as I approached. “I wanted to hope that he might be bluffing, that it all might be for show. I shouldn’t be shocked, but I can’t help it.”

I shook my head. “I know. He’s beyond irrational right now. Is there anything you can do?”

Rowena looked at me. “Porter warned me not to blip him, and I’m inclined to listen. I’m not looking to get thrown in with the rest of the prisoners.”

“But is there something else you can do? Something that doesn’t involve blipping?” I pressed. “We can’t let him do this. You know that. You’re a witch—there must be something.”

“What do you have in mind?” Rowena asked.

“I’m not sure. Anything that might buy us a little time? If we don’t, we’re all going to be forced to stand by and watch him perform a mass execution—and I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself if I didn’t at least try to save the prisoners.”

Rowena glanced at Porter, and I wondered if she was about to say no, but then, to my surprise, she lifted her hand discreetly and mumbled something, her eyes focused on Lucian.

I saw magical energy spark at her fingertips, and moments later, Lucian stopped mid-sentence as his body drifted off his throne and into the air.

A collective gasp passed through the room. A few of the Vanguards stepped toward Lucian, only to stop in their tracks and watch him helplessly.

“Don’t just stand there, help me!” Lucian barked at his guards. “Get me down from here!”

They snapped out of it and rushed to action. Several of them reached for his arms and legs to try to pull him down, but they weren’t fast enough. Whenever they got close enough, Rowena lifted Lucian just out of their reach. I was impressed. Rowena seemed totally unbothered, and her concentration remained steady as she lifted Lucian higher into the air.

One guard managed to latch onto Lucian’s foot, and he too was lifted a few feet off the floor before he lost his grip and crashed to the ground.

Another round of guards started leaping up into the air, trying to catch hold of him, but he was too high for them to reach.

I looked at Rowena out of the corner of my eye. I hoped they wouldn’t turn on her. She was the only witch here, and it wouldn’t take long for them to figure out who was responsible for this.

I reached out to Greyson via mind link.

*Get ready to protect Rowena*, I said. *She’s doing what she can to delay Lucian.*

But Porter was already at Rowena’s side. “What are you *doing*?” he hissed at her.

“What I should’ve done a long time ago. We have to stop this madness. Lucian doesn’t have the right to act as judge, jury, and executioner, but that’s exactly what he’s going to do if we don’t intervene!” Rowena whispered, her eyes still on Lucian, who was rising higher and higher into the air.

“Get me down from here!” Lucian snarled, his eyes wild with anger. His head was almost brushing his vaulted ceilings, now.

I figured it was now or never. It wouldn’t be long before Lucian turned his ire on Rowena, and I couldn’t let that happen.

I stepped forward, working overtime to keep the quiver out of my voice. I didn’t think I’d ever seen Lucian so angry, and I wasn’t convinced that he wouldn’t make good on his promise to throw us in with the other prisoners, even if he was a prisoner himself right now.

“Lucian, we’ll happily release you—once you turn all the prisoners over to the alliance,” I said sharply. “Do the right thing, and all will be forgiven. We’ll put you back on your throne, and we’ll discuss how to handle the prisoners in a civilized manner.”

Lucian’s eyes were cold when he looked at me. “No,” was his simple reply. He motioned to his guards. “Do something! This is Vanguard business, and the Redwoods and their cronies have no say in it!”

A few uncertain looks passed between the Vanguard wolves. I was hopeful that enough of them might see our side of things that Lucian’s threats would be rendered worthless, but I wasn’t holding my breath. The Vanguards were fiercely loyal to Lucian, for better or worse.

“Lucian, stop this. You have to give in. You must!” Aysel cried out. “You’re not acting rationally, brother. Please, take a moment and really think about what you’re doing!”

Lucian wasn’t thrashing about anymore. In fact, he looked calm. He stared down at his sister, his expression absolutely dark.

*Oh no. This isn’t good. I’ve never seen him look at Aysel like that.*

“Guards, since my sister obviously values her relationship with the alliance over the one she has with her own *brother*, she must be stopped. Restrain her! In fact, restrain them all!” Lucian roared as he slowly revolved in the air above us.

In the blink of an eye, the Vanguards had us surrounded.

**Episode 4502**

“Should I release Lucian from the spell?” Rowena asked. “Maybe I’m only making things worse?”

“No, I’m not ready to give in yet,” I replied. “Besides, how much worse can this situation get? We need to keep the one small advantage that we have. You’re doing the right thing, Rowena. Keep him up there.”

As long as Lucian was suspended in the air, he wouldn’t be able to hurt us—at least not directly. I was sure that the alliance Alphas would be able to fend off the Vanguards until we were able to think of a way to calm Lucian down and get everyone out of this alive.

“Lucian!” Greyson shouted. “Are you really willing to risk an all-out pack war? What do you think will happen if the alliance packs find out that you’ve imprisoned their Alphas? Threatened to execute them? Really think about what you’re doing.”

“Oh, I have. I’ve thought long and hard about this, and my decision still stands,” Lucian shot back.

“Lucian, don’t!” Elle shouted. “Listen to us!”

“So you really want to throw away everything we built? When we started the alliance, it was to protect each other, to have each other’s backs. What do you think will happen to you once the others find out that we defeated Malakai only for you to take his place as a power-hungry dictator?” Greyson demanded.

“I’ll deal with them when the time comes!” Lucian shouted defiantly, though it was hard to take him seriously while he hovered high above us, unable to match actions to his words. “As for right now, I’ve already made my decision. I’m going to kill the prisoners, and anyone in this palace who isn’t a Vanguard wolf is to be taken into custody!”

One of the Vanguard wolves grabbed me from behind.

“Let her go right now, or I’ll kill you,” Greyson snapped coldly.

The man hesitated for a moment before releasing me.

“Coward!” Lucian shouted. “You don’t take orders from him, you take them from me—and don’t you forget it! You’ll pay for your weakness!” He shook his fist in the air.

“We didn’t come here to fight, Lucian,” Xavier said, before Lucian could order another Vanguard to attack. “We definitely don’t want to start another war—no one wants that. Why don’t you just turn the prisoners over to the council? Why are you so hell-bent on killing them? What will that accomplish? Not that I care whether the prisoners live or die—but it’s not on you to make that decision. It’ll create more problems than it solves. You have to see that!”

I looked between Xavier and Lucian, hoping that his words would resonate, but my hopes were quickly dashed when Lucian’s face twisted into a sneer.

“The audacity of you all, to come in here and make demands under *my* roof! I should be the one who decides the fate of the prisoners! Not you, not Greyson, not the council, and definitely not the alliance! *I’m* the one who killed Malakai. Me!” Lucian fired back.

Greyson and Xavier scoffed and shared a look.

“I hate to shatter your inflated ego—wait, what am I saying? I’m *thrilled* to shatter your overinflated ego—but you had some help with killing Malakai,” Xavier said. “Our win over the Bitterfang army was the culmination of all of our hard work—the work of the alliance that *you* were a part of. You never even would’ve gotten close enough to kill Malakai if it weren’t for all of us working together! For fuck’s sake, Greyson, Cali, and I had him pinned and were about to kill him ourselves when you swooped in out of nowhere and stole the final blow!”

Lucian glared at Xavier, fighting to keep himself from flipping over as he hovered in the air. “Why are you even still here?” He waved frantically at the Vanguard wolves around us. “Lock them up!”

A scuffle broke out as the Vanguards rushed to restrain us. They closed in, only to be knocked back by Xavier, Greyson, Elle, and Porter, who stood their ground and angled their bodies to protect the rest of us.

“This is madness!” Lucian screamed.

“You can stop this!” Elle called to him. “Just say so!”

“No!” he said as he was slammed repeatedly into the ceiling.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rowena smirk.

“Who is responsible for this?” Lucian howled. He looked around wildly, then pointed at Rowena. “It’s her! Get the witch! Now! Stop her so I can get down from here!”

In the jumble of pushing and shoving that ensued, Porter bum rushed a couple of Vanguard wolves who were heading for Rowena, knocking them to the ground.

I struggled to keep my footing as someone shoved me, too, since I was all that stood between that person and Rowena. I quickly summoned my shield and thrust it against the lunging Vanguards, throwing her back before she could tackle Rowena.

Another one of Lucian’s men was booking it toward Rowena, too, and the witch dove out of his path. The wild movements disrupted her spell and sent Lucian spinning. He knocked into the ceiling again before dropping a few feet and crashing into a wall.

In the confusion, I collided with Xavier, who threw his hands out to keep me from falling. Our eyes locked as he released me, but the moment was short-lived. Seconds later, we were pulled apart by the scuffle still surging around us.

Rowena yelped as a Vanguard threw her to the ground, finally breaking the spell.

Lucian yelled as he plummeted to the floor. He was crawling back on his feet, his eyes ablaze with anger. “Get them! Capture them all! They all will pay! Vanguards, attack! Now!”

“Lucian, be careful what you’re doing!” Elle said.

“Listen to her, please stop this, Lucian! *Please!*” Aysel shouted. “This isn’t what the Vanguard pack is about!”

“And how would you know?” Lucian spat. “All you do is lie around and reap the benefits of being a Vanguard! When’s the last time you actually did the work required to keep our pack thriving? To keep our pack functioning? I’m the one who’s made all the sacrifices, which means *I’m* the one who gets to call the shots!”

“How *dare* you!” Aysel hissed. “Look around you—I keep this place running! I keep it organized, fashion-forward, dazzling… All just so you can run around, throw all your parties, and take all the credit! Usually, I don’t care, but I’m not going to let you do this terrible thing that will affect us all!”

“How dare you imply that I have no input in the design decisions?” Lucian wailed.

Porter rushed to Rowena’s side. “I told you not to get involved!” he said as he helped Rowena to her feet.

“I had to do something!” Rowena retorted. “He’s a madman!”

“That’s exactly my point!” Porter said, hustling her out of the fray.

I ran after them, ready to shield them from Lucian in case he tried to launch another attack, but once again, a Vanguard shoved me. This time, I collided with Armin, who stumbled backward and crashed into Lucian.

Lucian grabbed him and spun him around to face Aysel. “Stop messing around, Armin, and do your job! Restrain Aysel. She’s nothing more than a traitor!”

I was shocked. Lucian was really turning against his sister. I’d never thought I’d see the day. Was Lucian really letting his anger about Elle’s decision affect his behavior so severely? I truly didn’t understand why he was reacting this way.

Armin stood between Lucian and Aysel, hesitating.

Lucian partially shifted and slashed Armin across the chest. “Let that be a taste of what awaits any Vanguard who defies my orders!” he bellowed.

Armin dropped to his knees, clutching his bleeding chest.

“Armin!” Aysel shouted, rushing to his side.

“Does anyone doubt how serious I am, now?” Lucian screamed. “Vanguard wolves, hear this—arrest all the alliance Alphas and their enablers, or I will punish you all!”

In the rush to heed Lucian’s command, one Vanguard shoved me roughly into the arms of another.

Greyson reacted quickly, tearing me out of the Vanguard’s hold and pulling me out of the crush of moving bodies.

“I have to get you out of here,” he said. “This is only going to get worse.”

“No! I have to stay!” I shot a blast of magic at a Vanguard wolf who was charging toward us, and he went flying backward and slammed into a wall. “I’m here to represent the Redwood pack, and that means that I’m going to fight by your side! There’s no way I’m leaving now.”

Lucian had retrieved his silver dagger and was rushing toward Rowena, who was cowering in Porter’s arms.

“And now, witch, you will pay for daring to tamper with official Vanguard business!” Lucian shouted.

“Stop!” I shouted, rushing to block Lucian’s path to Rowena and Porter. There was no way I was going to let him harm either of them. “Stop right now, Lucian, or I’ll blast you! I don’t want to do it, but you’re forcing my hand. End this right now and put the knife down so we can all talk like rational adults and *fix this*!”

Lucian hesitated, the blade glinting in his hand as he turned his full attention on me. “What a pity, Caliana, that you have chosen the wrong side.”

In a second, Lucian lunged, grabbed me, and pressed his blade to my neck.

**Episode 4503**

The fighting stopped as everyone turned to me and Lucian. He had his knife pressed so tightly against my throat that I was afraid to swallow.

*How the hell am I going to get out of this? Is Lucian really serious? Would he slit my throat just because I don’t want him to mindlessly murder a bunch of prisoners? How did we reach this point?*

“How can you do this to me, Lucian? You wanted to *marry me* a few months ago,” I said, trying to appeal to any shred of compassion that might still be lingering deep inside him.

But Lucian wasn’t listening. He was too busy staring at his reflection in a mirror across the room from us.

*Great. Even in the grip of his rage, he’s so enamored with himself that he’s not paying me any attention! Me! The person he’s holding hostage!*

Greyson stepped forward, his expression dark. “If you don’t let Cali go right the fuck now, you’re going to regret it.”

There was a danger in his voice that I hoped Lucian would respond to, but he barely reacted as he tore his gaze away from his reflection to focus on my mate.

Xavier stepped up beside Greyson. “I’ll tear you limb from limb if you so much as *scratch her*.”

I wanted so badly to reach out to Xavier and thank him for standing up for me, but he wouldn’t even meet my eyes, so I figured that reaching out via mind link probably wasn’t the best idea.

“I didn’t want to do this, but you forced my hand,” Lucian said. He gestured with his knife-holding hand for just a second to point it at Greyson, still clutching me in his other arm, then returned it to my throat. “This is all your fault, you know. You just couldn’t let me be in charge. You had to do it all. You had to have all the glory and lead everyone to victory. But what about me? I killed Malakai, and I didn’t get so much as a thank-you!”

“Lucian—” I started, but he charged on.

“What do I get? My mate leaving me to join another man’s pack!” Lucian wailed. “A travesty! All of it! Well, it ends today. I’m going to make things right. Tip the balance back in my favor, where it belongs.”

So I was right. This had little to do with the prisoners and everything to do with Lucian’s belief that he wasn’t getting the respect he deserved. This was nothing but jealousy, born out of the effects of the sire bond. It occurred to me that I could, on some level, relate to his anger about this new, strange link between Elle and Greyson—but I knew that anger would never drive me to the lengths that Lucian was going to.

*I have to try to reason with him again. It’s the only thing I can do right now. I have to at least try to talk some sense into him.*

“Lucian, I don’t think you want to do this,” I said. “You’re confused and upset. Hell, we’re all upset. The war really did a number on us. We all wish we hadn’t lost the palace, and that we hadn’t lost any of our packmates—”

Lucian pressed the blade harder against my neck, causing both Greyson and Xavier to take a quick step toward us.

“You’d better keep your distance!” Lucian warned them. “I assure you, this isn’t the time to crowd me.” Lucian looked back at me. “I know what you’re trying to do, Caliana. You want me to release you, to say that this was just a misunderstanding. But I know you three so well. The moment I let you go, both of your beloved, rabid mates will be at my throat.”

Lucian scanned the room until his eyes found Ava.

“Ava, I apologize for this,” he said. “You, out of everyone here, must know exactly what it’s like to have your mate pulled away from you, lured into the clutches of an unworthy peer.”

“Pissing me off isn’t going to help your cause,” Ava shot back immediately.

I was a little surprised that Ava hadn’t taken the bait, there. She was probably just trying to keep her distance from this insane version of Lucian, even though I imagined his words had hit a nerve.

I sucked in a shuddering breath, still doing my best to stay calm, and as motionless as possible. The dagger was still digging into my throat, and Lucian wasn’t letting up, even a little. Nothing anyone of us had said seemed to have softened his resolve.

“You left the alliance,” Greyson reminded Lucian. “It was your choice to isolate yourself. That’s no one’s fault but yours.”

Lucian nodded. “You’re right. I left the alliance, and I’d do it again. I did what was in my best interests. It’s not as though any of you ever cared about the Vanguards. Not really. The pack war showed me how little you value me. Why the hell would I stay attached to a group of pedestrian werewolves who don’t treat me and my pack with the respect we deserve? I had no choice but to remove myself!”

“But what about your pack?” I asked. “Is this really in the Vanguard pack’s best interest? Because it looks to me like you’re setting them up for a nasty fall.”

I glanced around the room. The Vanguards looked just as troubled as the alliance pack members, and I knew they had to be just as confused by this turn of events as the rest of us.

Lucian’s eyes flashed. “How *dare* you question me? Everything I do is for my pack. Always has been, and always will be. But I wouldn’t expect you to understand, Caliana.”

Lucian began to move, pulling me back toward his throne.

I bit my lip, wishing he’d let up just a little, so that I could break away from him. At that moment, more than anything, I wanted to point out how full of shit Lucian was. He claimed to have always acted in service to his pack, but how had his obsession with me and Seluna served his pack’s best interests? Lucian was out for himself, and no one else. That was the reality of it.

I just couldn’t wrap my head around how far Lucian was taking this. He had his faults—too many to list—but when had he become a *villain*?

*What this guy really needs is an intervention. He’s so easily confused and manipulated. Not a good trait for a prince, if you ask me… Or is his behavior actually historically accurate?*

I glanced at Lucian, who was concentrating on keeping the knife steady as we walked. I could’ve tried to use my magic against him, but if I managed to hurt him, it would probably set off a chain reaction. The Vanguards would fly into a frenzy. They clearly weren’t one hundred percent behind what Lucian was doing, but that didn’t mean they’d stand by and watch their Alpha be killed right in front of them.

*We’re so outnumbered… If I make the wrong move, my mates could be hurt. I have to do something, but I have to be smart about it. I’m not going to let anyone I love get hurt, here—and I’m not going to let myself get hurt, either.*

*Hang in there, love*,Greyson mind linked. *I’m going to stop him. Just hold on a little longer.*

*I don’t know what to do*, I said.

*Just keep looking at me*,he said. *If you get any opportunity to use your magic, do it. But don’t worry, I’m going to get you out of this. I swear.*

I took a deep breath and tried to ignore the press of cold metal against my throat as I locked eyes with Greyson. I believed him. He was going to get me out of this, I just needed to be patient and hope that Lucian wouldn’t do anything rash before my mate had a chance to act. And I would’ve loved to use my magic if Lucian didn’t have me pulled in so tightly…

Suddenly, everyone turned to watch as a Vanguard wolf came walking in with one of the Bitterfang prisoners.

“Come, Cali, let us execute the first prisoner together,” Lucian said, his mouth close to my ear. “Maybe it’ll remind you of the sweeter times that you mentioned before.”

Disgusted, I wanted to struggle against Lucian’s hold, but there was no way I could without slitting my own throat. If we weren’t going to be able to stop him from killing the prisoners, I definitely didn’t want to stand by Lucian’s side while he did it. I also didn’t want to die in the process of it all.

Lucian partially shifted just as a growl cut through the air. I expected it to belong to one of my mates, but instead I spotted Elle, shifting as she charged toward us.

**Episode 4504**

**Greyson**

Fully shifted, Elle slammed into Lucian and Cali, knocking them both to the floor. The dagger clattered to the floor, and Cali rolled free of Lucian as the princeling shoved Elle off him. The scent of blood filled the air—Cali’s neck had been nicked by the blade.

“You shouldn’t have done that, my forest rose,” Lucian snarled, just before he shifted and started moving toward her.

He was looking at Elle in a way I’d never seen before. Gone was all the love and adoration, replaced by the same wild rage he’d been showing from the moment we’d rebelled against his plan.

Without a thought, I shifted and charged at Lucian, slamming into him with every ounce of strength I possessed. I knew exactly what was driving Elle—it was the same force that was driving me: the sire bond. There was no way I was going to let Lucian hurt Elle.

*Lucian threatened Cali, and Cali’s my mate. Elle thinks she’s protecting me. Now, I have to protect her. Elle has shown time and time again where her loyalties lie—now it’s time for me to show that same loyalty to her.*

The sire bond might’ve driven Elle to attack, but it was still surprising to see her turn against her own mate so harshly—even though Lucian was asking for it.

Everyone rushed out of the way as Lucian and Elle went at it in a flurry of snarls and growls. I rushed them, hesitating only long enough to wait for an opening to attack without Elle getting hurt.

*Take it easy!* Cali mind linked. *I’m okay! The knife barely got me!*

I didn’t respond. Part of me felt like I’d taken it too easy on Lucian. The asshole had put a silver dagger to my mate’s neck—how could she expect me to just “take it easy”? That option was long gone. Lucian had upped the ante the moment he’d threatened Cali’s life, and I wasn’t about to let him hurt Elle, too.

In a rush of blind anger, I bolted toward Lucian, just as Cali’s voice rang out.

“Greyson, stop!”

I stole a glance at her and saw that Xavier was holding her back from jumping into the fight. It was a smart move. Cali usually knew better than to get in between two werewolves, especially when they were going at each other like Elle and Lucian were.

*But I don’t like that Xavier is the one who has to protect Cali, yet again. It should be me.*

The thought only made me angrier, and I lunged into the fray and sank my teeth into Lucian’s shoulder, drawing first blood.

Lucian howled and turned to try to bite me back. I moved out of his way just in time—he missed me by a *hair*. Hell-bent on keeping Lucian away from Cali and Elle, I kept my teeth buried in the princeling’s shoulder.

A strange sensation was starting to bubble up in the pit of my stomach. The taste of Lucian’s blood had ignited a deeper hunger inside me, and I wanted more. I wanted Lucian to pay for what he’d done—not just to Cali, but to Elle. I wanted to ensure that he could never threaten either of them again. He had to be stopped, and I wanted to be the one to do it.

Lucian snarled and growled as he struggled to jerk out of my hold. In a quick move that I didn’t see coming, he tore into my side. My blood spilled onto the floor, but I didn’t let go. I was ready to go in for the kill. All I cared about was ending Lucian, right then and there.

*If I end this now, I’ll stop Lucian once and for all, and I’ll sever his mate bond with Elle. Then everything will be back to normal, and everyone will be happy. What has the Vanguard pack ever done for us, anyway? We’d be fine without Lucian.*

Ignoring Mace and Duke, who were shouting at me to back off, I tightened my hold on Lucian’s shoulder, trying to plot out the move that would allow me to release it and go for his throat.

Flashbacks of how I’d gone berserk on Ethaniel tore through my mind. I’d stopped just short of killing the Northwind Alpha, and now I was starting to think that that had been a mistake. I shouldn’t have stopped. I should’ve taken it all.

*If I don’t kill Lucian, will I be making the same mistake?*

Before I could make the final decision, I realized that most of the alliance Alphas—Mace, Porter, and Xavier—had shifted, and had us surrounded.

Mace’s mind link infiltrated my racing thoughts. *Enough, Greyson. This isn’t the way to resolve this! Don’t stoop to his level. If you kill him, he’ll turn into a martyr. You know how these things go!*

Elle was still trying to get to Lucian, but Duke was fending her off.

*It would be so easy to let Elle finish Lucian off*,I thought to myself. *Why won’t they let us take care of him? All our problems will be solved if Lucian dies. Why are they protecting him so fiercely?*

I felt someone tugging at my fur, trying to pull me away. It was Cali.

“Greyson, stop! The other Alphas can handle Lucian. Let him go!” she pleaded.

I hesitated. My hunger to tear out Lucian’s throat was so strong that I wasn’t sure if I was *capable* of leaving things unfinished. I wanted Lucian dead, and I wanted him to suffer in the process.

I looked at Elle, who was still growling angrily at Lucian, trying to evade Duke and get to him. We were both obviously on the same page—but then I suddenly realized that I didn’t want Elle to go down this road.

Finally, I released Lucian, knowing that if I didn’t, I would kill him. And if I didn’t stop, I knew that Elle would follow my lead and jump in to *help* me kill him. I didn’t want her to have her own mate’s blood on her hands. A thing like that would haunt her forever.

I stepped back, Lucian’s blood still dripping from my mouth.

“Greyson, please calm down. Please,” Cali said, her gentle hands stroking my fur. “It’s okay, we’ll figure this out, okay?”

I was only half-listening. Lucian was standing right in front of me, still growling, clearly not ready to back down.

Begrudgingly, I shifted back to human, surprised to see that more of the Vanguards seemed to be hovering around Aysel than before.

“He’s not well,” Aysel was telling them, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Don’t judge him for this, not in this moment. He’s not himself!”

Lucian and everyone else shifted back to human, and a group of Vanguards ran up and grabbed Lucian, restraining him. Still, Lucian directed his ire at me and Elle.

“How dare you!” he hissed at Elle. “How dare you attack your own mate! It’s clear that you’re not a true werewolf—if you were, you’d respect the bond between mates! I regret ever laying eyes on you! You—you—*cow!*”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I closed the space between me and Lucian in moments and punched him, knocking him to the ground. Breathing hard and using all of my self-control to keep from hopping on top of Lucian and beating him to death, I turned to Aysel.

“Get your brother out of here before I kill him,” I growled.

Aysel gave me a stunned look before she burst into action. “Armin, you and the others, take Lucian to his quarters and then stand guard to make sure that he stays there until I can get him the help he needs!”

“Right away,” Armin said. He and a group of Vanguard wolves quickly carried the princeling out of the room as he kicked and screamed and cursed them all.

As soon as Lucian was gone, the tension in the room broke.

“Are you okay?” Elle asked me.

I glanced at the still bleeding wound in my side. “Yes. This’ll heal in no time.”

I was relieved to see that Elle was unscathed. For a moment there, I’d thought that Lucian was going to tear her apart. I was sure that my intervention had kept things from reaching that point.

“Thank you for listening to me,” Cali said. “Killing Lucian might’ve felt good in the moment, but it wouldn’t have helped matters.”

I said nothing, wondering if she was wrong about that. I knew that if Cali weren’t a part of my life, things would’ve gone very differently just now, and I wasn’t sure if that would’ve been such a bad thing.

“What are we going to do about the prisoners?” Mace asked. “They can’t just be left here.”

“Let’s divide them up between the allied pack houses like we said,” Xavier said.

“How long would we keep them with us?” Porter asked.

The Alphas descended into a heated discussion, but then I spoke up.

“Divide them up however you want,” I said, “but Ethaniel is mine.”

**Episode 4505**

I shot a worried glance at Greyson. I hadn’t expected him to single out Ethaniel, though I should’ve predicted it. Ever since he’d attacked the Northwind Alpha, I’d gotten the sense that Greyson felt like he’d left behind a bit of unfinished business.

Greyson refused to meet my eyes when I went up to him and pulled him aside.

“What’s the plan for Ethaniel?” I gently nudged Greyson’s chin, forcing him to look me in the eye.

“I want to keep an eye on him, for obvious reasons. He knows enough about me and Elle to cause trouble with the council. I can’t let that happen,” Greyson said. “You know what he said, what he threatened to do. If I let him go with any of the other Alphas, how am I supposed to know that he won’t start talking, or escape and go running to the council to out me?”

I thought back to the shock and terror I’d felt, watching Greyson beat Ethaniel to a pulp. “Are you really just going to keep an eye on him? And I want the truth, Greyson. Are you planning to kill him?”

“I’m not planning anything,” he said evenly. “It’s just to protect Elle.”

He looked away. I could tell he was antsy to get back over to the other Alphas so that he could stake his claim on Ethaniel once again. It made me uneasy, seeing him like this.

“And what will happen to Ethaniel if he threatens you again?” I asked.

“I think we can persuade Ethaniel that it’s in his best interest to keep his mouth shut,” Greyson said. “But I need to have him nearby to do that.”

I studied Greyson’s face, watching for his reaction as I asked him my next question. “And how are you planning to persuade him?”

“I told you, I’m not planning anything!” Greyson snapped. He angled his body away from me, almost like he was about to run away to avoid any more of my questions.

I was taken aback by Greyson’s outburst. The fact that he couldn’t even talk about him without losing it didn’t make me feel very confident in his claim about keeping Ethaniel alive. Greyson was so good at keeping his cool, but ever since the sire bond had come into play, he’d become a lot more unpredictable. I didn’t like it.

“Sorry,” Greyson said tersely. “Anyway, I’ve got to go sort out the handling of the prisoners with the others.”

I watched him walk off, wondering why I felt like he was hiding something. I rarely ever felt that way about Greyson, and it was troubling, to say the least. He always told me everything, but right now, I got the sense that he was something holding back.

A few minutes later, I followed everyone down to the dungeons, where the prisoners were being held. I was trying to follow the Alphas’ conversation about handling the prisoners, but I was still distracted by the conversation I’d had with Greyson. I wanted to talk to someone about it, but who?

*Xavier’s out of the question. Ava’s sticking to him like glue, and I doubt she’d let me take him aside and speak with him alone. She’ll probably insist on coming with us, and Xavier wouldn’t tell her no, and I have no desire to share Greyson’s private business with her. And even if I did get him alone, I doubt that Xavier would be sympathetic to my concerns.*

I was still trying to push away how I’d felt when Xavier had rushed to my side to save me from getting between Elle and Lucian. Between that and the heated glance we’d shared when he’d helped me after I was shoved, I was feeling overwhelmed. But I’d been down that road one too many times. It led nowhere. At least for now.

And as for Elle… Well, talking to her about what was going on with Greyson would be foolish, since I suspected that she was the reason behind not only Lucian’s crazy behavior, but also Greyson’s violent attack on Lucian. She was too close to this. And Elle wasn’t big on talking, anyway. She probably wouldn’t take my concerns seriously.

I stopped short when my gaze landed on Honora. The Luna was sitting in her cell, looking defeated. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. She’d lost so much in such a short amount of time. I could only imagine what was going on in her head.

I broke away from the others and approached her cell. She looked up at me, clearly confused.

“What are you all doing down here?” she asked. “I heard that Lucian was about to begin the executions.”

“We stopped him,” I said. It felt good to say the words.

Honora shook her head, shocked. “You stopped him? That’s… great. But what happens now? I doubt the alliance has any plans to just release us.”

I shook my head. It felt weird to be talking to a prisoner about her fate like I was a judge or something.

“They’re still figuring everything out,” I said. “We’ll probably end up turning you all over to the council.”

*At least I hope that will happen. The only issue with doing that is Ethaniel. He’ll tell the council what happened with Elle and Greyson, and we can’t have that… And I don’t want more reason for Greyson to do something he regrets.*

Honora nodded slowly. “The council, huh? So we might still suffer the same fate Lucian had in store for us.”

I wished that I could offer the Luna some hope, but really, I had no idea what the council would do with them.

I started when Honora grabbed my arm through the bars. “Cali, I need a favor,” she whispered.

Wary, I gently pulled out of her hold. I felt for the woman, but I wasn’t about to strike some kind of bargain with her. This was the same person who’d been willing to kill her own daughter, the same woman who’d blindly backed her evil husband for years.

“You should know that I have few regrets,” Honora said. “If loving my husband ends up being the reason for my death, so be it. The only real regret I have is that I let my love for my husband overshadow my love for my daughter.”

Her voice caught in her throat as she spoke the last word. She dropped her head, pausing to collect herself.

“I want you to tell Julia—” She hesitated. “Please, tell my daughter that I love her. That I give her and Russell my blessing—”

I shook my head hard, stopping her mid-sentence. “I’m not going to be your messenger, Honora. I’m sorry. Especially when I’m not even convinced that you mean any of it. This is something you should tell Julia yourself.”

“How? I’m in a prison cell, probably days or even hours away from my execution,” Honora said.

“No,” I said. “Whatever happens, I’ll bring Julia to speak to you beforehand.”

I was sure that they both needed some kind of closure, and I wanted to help them get it.

Honora’s expression brightened for a fraction of a second. “Thank you, Cali. I know I don’t deserve even that much, but thank you.”

I turned away from Honora just as Rowena came walking up to me.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

Without really thinking about it, I rested my hand on my neck. I was still pretty surprised that Lucian hadn’t even managed to break the skin with his dagger.

“I’m okay,” I said. “And thank you for what you did, taking on Lucian. I know that Porter didn’t want you getting mixed up in this—and for good reason. Lucian’s always been a bit of a loose cannon, but this was something else altogether.”

“It was scary. He literally seemed to have lost his mind,” Rowena said. She looked up and down the rows of cells, where the prisoners waited. “But we did what we set out to do—we stopped him. A man like Lucian can’t be the one to decide these prisoners’ fates. They’re not innocent, but they deserve more than what Lucian had planned.”

I nodded my agreement, turning to watch as the alliance Alphas started ushering the prisoners out of their cells and herding them upstairs. It was a somber scene, but not nearly as somber as it would’ve been to watch Lucian kill them all.

I spotted Greyson talking to Elle, and the tight feeling that I’d had in my chest after talking to Greyson about Ethaniel returned full force.

*Just how much more trouble is the sire bond going to cause? And when will it end? If it’s anything like a mate bond, it’s not like it’s going to just wear off over time. Will the three of us have to deal with this forever?*

My thoughts went to the three sisters, and Greyson’s plan to get their help to break the bond.

Abruptly, I turned to Rowena. “Rowena, do you think you’d be able to break a sire bond?”

**Episode 4506**

**Xavier**

We all stood in a heavy silence as we waited for help to transport the prisoners to the assorted alliance pack houses. Honora was going to go with Mace and the Blue Bloods, Andrew was coming with me and the Samaras, Ethaniel was going with Greyson and the Redwoods—according to my brother’s staunch demands—and the others were to be scattered between the packs.

It was a strange affair, and I hated that Lucian’s crazy behavior had forced us into this corner.

In the back of my mind, I kind of wished we could’ve killed them—it would’ve been so much easier. They’d made our lives a living hell and had put everyone we cared about in danger, after all. But I knew that wasn’t the right move. Killing a bunch of defenseless prisoners wouldn’t have sat right with me, no matter how much easier it would have been.

“I’m not crazy about taking on a bunch of prisoners,” I said to Ava. The last thing I needed was to have to watch over a bunch of people who hated me. I had enough trouble keeping my allies on my side without inviting enemies into my orbit.

“I can see why. You’re an Alpha, not a warden.” Ava replied. “Seems like more trouble than it’s worth. But that’s normal, with this group—getting wrapped up in things that only further complicate our lives.”

“Wow, you’re really not happy about this, huh?”

“No,” she said bluntly. “Are you? I just want to be done with this whole Bitterfang mess so we can get on with our lives. Taking on a bunch of Bitterfang prisoners was *not* in my plans. Why did you even suggest it?”

I thought about her question. Her complaints weren’t unfounded. “I guess I just wanted to defuse the situation. It’s obvious that the princeling’s just done a nosedive off the deep end and can’t be trusted with them. It’s a bad idea to leave them here any way you look at it.”

Ava smirked and shot a look at Greyson. “And judging by the way your brother was acting about taking Ethaniel, looks like he might be following Lucian right off the diving board.”

“I know, I saw that,” I said. “Greyson’s losing his shit, too.”

Ava eyed me. “He’s not the only one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. “I tried to *stop* Greyson from killing Lucian.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I saw how quick you were to jump to Cali’s side,” Ava retorted. “Typical. I’m just wondering how many times I’m going to have to see you going batshit over her, as if she doesn’t have a mate who’s perfectly capable of watching her back. It’s getting old.”

I heaved a sigh. “This again? I already explained to you that part of that is instinct. You can’t blame me for that. Besides, what was I supposed to do? Just stand by and let Lucian kill her?”

Ava held my gaze for a long beat before turning away. “We should collect our prisoners and get the hell out of here. This place is giving me the creeps. The longer I stay here, the more I just want to leave and forget this place even exists.”

I realized that she was probably changing the subject on purpose, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t have explained anything to Ava, even if I’d tried. Best to drop it for now.

We both watched as Greyson took possession of Ethaniel. Both men were staring at each other with so much hate in their eyes that I was a little worried that they’d start fighting.

“Wow, look at them,” I muttered to Ava. “Greyson looks like he wants to tear Ethaniel to pieces.”

“Yeah, it’s weird. Why does your brother want the Northwind Alpha so bad, anyway?” Ava asked.

“I don’t know. Just Greyson being weird. And who cares who takes which prisoners? I think in the end they’ll all be handed over to the council, anyway,” I replied.

*And hopefully that happens sooner rather than later. I’m not looking forward to having a bunch of pissed-off Bitterfang prisoners hanging around the pack house. Seems like a recipe for disaster.*

A Vanguard soldier approached with Andrew, the Hackberry Alpha.

“This is the one you’re taking, right?” he asked me.

Andrew was staring daggers at me. I returned the look and shrugged.

“I really don’t care who I take. Do you?” I asked Ava.

I figured that if I gave Ava an equal say in this, she might stop analyzing my reactions to Cali so deeply. That, and I truly didn’t care which of the prisoners we took with us. “None” was the only option that seemed attractive, and that wasn’t even an option.

“Whatever. Just as long as he doesn’t make our pack house his new home for very long,” Ava said with a bored expression.

“Then take him and whoever else we’ve got room for and gather them up,” I told her. “As soon as a few more Samaras get here, we’ll take them back to pack house.”

*And put all this craziness behind us.*

Before the Vanguard soldier could lead Andrew away, I stopped them both.

“I’m curious, Andrew,” I said. “Why did you and your pack follow an asshole like Malakai? Surely you could see that he was crazy as shit and didn’t give a damn about any of you.”

Andrew snorted. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“I suggest you try to *help* me understand,” I replied. “Or I can guarantee that your stay at the Samara pack house will be unpleasant.”

Andrew sighed and rolled his eyes. “Malakai promised that all who followed him would have unlimited power.”

Ava chuckled. “And you *believed* him?” She looked at me. “He’s a bigger idiot than I thought.”

Andrew surged forward and snarled, trying to break out of the Vanguard soldier’s hold and get to Ava.

I grabbed him and slammed him into the wall. “Look around. You and your friends have lost in a major way, and now you’re my prisoner. That means that you can’t afford to make that kind of mistake, because I guarantee that it’ll be your last. *Try me*.”

I released Andrew with a shove, hoping that my little outburst would put Ava’s concerns to rest. Sure, I’d defended Cali, but it wasn’t like I didn’t make a habit of defending Ava, too. I had enough anger to go around.

I glanced at Ava.

*Is that a smile? I hope so. I’m not in the mood to be raked over the coals tonight. Keeping Ava happy is the only way I can get even a sliver of peace, these days.*

Greyson, Mace, Duke, and Porter came walking up.

“We should discuss the plans,” Mace said.

I arched an eyebrow at them. “What plans? My only plan right now is to make sure that these prisoners are transported safely out of here—without incident,” I said, shooting Andrew a look as the Vanguard hauled him away. “Beyond that, I don’t have any plans.”

“But which one of us should approach the council about the prisoners?” Mace asked. “I could do it and show that the alliance is still intact, but make it clear that we want to offload the prisoners to them to deal with.”

“Would it be best if Cesaries just came here to handle it?” Porter asked.

Duke shrugged. “Maybe. Either way, seems better to go talk to them and explain first instead of springing the prisoners on them. Ultimately, we don’t want them to get the wrong idea—we’re still under their jurisdiction, after all.”

As the others continued their discussion, I watched my brother. He wasn’t saying much. Something was definitely up with him. It wasn’t like him to miss a chance to throw his two cents in.

“Just a second, guys,” I said, pulling Greyson aside.

“What?” Greyson grumbled, already tense. “I don’t have time for any of your bullshit right now.”

“The feeling’s mutual, so answer me straight and we’ll get this over with. What the hell was that about, with Lucian?” I searched my brother’s eyes, looking for any indication of what was bothering him.

Greyson looked away. “Nothing.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What, sire bond got your tongue?”

“Don’t start,” Greyson snarled.

*Oh, looks like I hit a soft spot. I should’ve known that the sire bond had something to do with this.*

I wasn’t about to back down. Greyson wouldn’t have given me that luxury if the tables were turned.

“The council’s been asking questions about you and Elle,” I said, actually trying *not* to sound antagonistic. “It’s only a matter of time before they figure out what you’ve done. Is that why you’re all wound up?”

Greyson sighed. “I’m handling it. It’s none of your concern.”

He pushed past me to return to the others.

“Fine,” I called after him. “Blow me off all you want—it doesn’t matter. But you’d better handle the problem soon, brother, before it’s too late.”

**Episode 4507**

“Sire bond? What sire bond?” Rowena asked. “You can’t have one, so… Is it one of your mates?”

I hesitated, wondering how much I should tell her. “Rowena, I’ll tell you everything, but first I need to know if you know how to break a werewolf sire bond.”

Rowena had proven herself to be a capable, powerful witch, and she was also a Luna, so I was hoping she might know a little more than Big Mac when it came to managing werewolf bonds.

“I’ve never looked into it, because I’ve never had cause to. Though I suspect they’re probably pretty tricky to disrupt, just like a mate bond,” Rowena said.

I was intrigued. “So… It can be done?”

A spark of hope flickered to life inside me. If Rowena was able to take care of the sire bond, we’d be able to avoid dealing with the three sisters entirely.

“Oh no, slow down, I didn’t say that. First, why don’t you tell me what this is all about… Though I have my suspicions.” She glanced behind her. “It’s Greyson and Elle, isn’t it?”

My eyes went wide. “What makes you say that?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

She shrugged. “Because of a few things I’ve seen between them. And when I did the *due destini* spell, I sensed some stuff. Remember those other threads I mentioned? The things that I saw branching off from *both* Xavier and Greyson?”

I nodded slowly, realizing that my suspicions about that had been right, too. New threads had grown from the *due destini*, and one of them had definitely formed between Elle and Greyson. That didn’t sit right with me at all, which was all the more reason for me to figure out a way to dissolve the sire bond.

“Plus… I’ve heard some things,” Rowena added. “You know werewolves—they love to gossip.”

It was very concerning to know that people were going around talking about what had happened between me, Greyson, and Elle. Ethaniel had discovered what happened with Greyson turning Elle all on his own, and everyone tonight had just had a front-row seat to the sire bond at work. There was no telling who might say something. Rowena was right, werewolves were terrible gossips—and living together in a pack house ensured that secrets were incredibly hard to keep.

*I’m lucky that my packmates at least have the decency to pretend they don’t know what’s going on… Silver lining?*

“I won’t deny it,” I said. “I’m just worried about Greyson. We all saw how he lost it with Lucian earlier—and that wasn’t the first time. He did the same thing to Ethaniel, during the war. Both times, Elle was involved. And me, but it’s never gone that way before. I’m afraid that if the sire bond keeps going like this, something really bad might happen.”

Rowena sighed. “I understand why you’re worried, I really do, but I think it’d be better to just let them work it out,” she said. “It seems complicated, and bonds between werewolves are better left untouched.”

“But that’s the thing—I don’t think Greyson is *capable* of working it out,” I pressed. “He’s as thrown off by this as I am. I know he wants the bond gone. We just need someone to help us do it, someone we trust. And I *trust you* with this, Rowena.”

“Thanks, Cali, but I don’t know. This seems like something that might be a little too dangerous to mess with. I’d hate to make things worse, somehow,” Rowena said. “It’s not like Greyson will blame *you* if any attempt to fix this blows up in our faces. And who does that leave?” She shook her head. “I don’t want your mate coming for me if I mess things up. Not to mention how annoyed Porter will be if I get involved.”

“No, I promise that I’ll take full responsibility for whatever happens,” I said. “Besides… Greyson and I kind of already tried to do something to negate the effects. Big Mac gave us this magical facial thing when our mind link wires kept getting crossed with Lucian and Elle’s. It fixed the problem with the mind linking, but it did nothing to dampen the sire bond.”

But Rowena still looked skeptical. “I’m telling you, Cali, if you keep trying to mess with this or ‘fix it,’ you could end up making it worse. Take it from me—some things are better left as they are, even if they seem really bad.”

“But if Greyson’s behavior is any indication, I think it’s already getting worse,” I said. “How much worse could it possibly get, given everything that’s happened? Greyson’s like a raw nerve… He hasn’t been himself for a while now.”

“Well, at least Greyson listened to you when you asked him to calm down. He backed off before he could seriously harm Lucian. That has to count for something, right?”

“I guess,” I said, though I wasn’t convinced. We’d stopped Greyson from killing Lucian, but only just.

“If you try to mess with the sire bond, Cali—if you could even find a witch who was willing to try—the next person Greyson targets as a result of the bond might not be so lucky,” Rowena warned me. “I don’t know how many ways I can tell you that this bond isn’t something to play with.”

I took in Rowena’s words of caution, deciding not to tell her that the three witches had offered to take care of the bond—for a price.

“So I guess that means you’re not willing to help?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but no,” she said. “This isn’t something I’m willing to mess around with. I don’t know enough about it, and I won’t risk making it worse. And I know you didn’t ask for my advice, but I’m going to give it to you anyway—leave this be, Cali. These sorts of things always seem to work themselves out. You shouldn’t always feel the need to intervene.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And I guess I understand where you’re coming from—but isn’t there *something* you can do? You didn’t see what Greyson did to Ethaniel. It was awful. What if Greyson loses it again?”

I winced as I replayed the image of Greyson ripping into Ethaniel in my head. It was way worse than what he’d done to Lucian, but that was only because we’d stopped him before he’d had a chance to take things further.

Rowena shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t have an answer for you on that, though I truly wish I did. But I promise to let you know if I think of anything that might help. In the meantime, though, be careful, Cali. I’ve learned that even when things seem bad, they can always get worse.”

She hugged me before heading off to find Porter.

I hung back, frustrated. Big Mac had been dubious about Hypatia’s research into the sire bond and had refused to get involved, and now Rowena was warning me not to pursue it, which meant the three witches were the only option left. We had to get rid of it; we had no choice.

*But what price will they demand for a spell like this, that no other witch seems to want to touch? Will Greyson lose an eye, like Jay did for Lola? Or could it be something worse? And what if the witches perform the spell and only make things worse, like Rowena said would happen? What will we do then?*

The sudden rumble of Greyson’s voice startled me. “Hey, Cali, we should head back to the pack house with the prisoners. The other pack members are arriving.”

I followed him for a few steps before he stopped and turned to face me.

“And I’m sorry about snapping at you earlier,” he said. “I was just upset. I didn’t mean to take it out on you—really.”

Greyson pulled me into a tight hug. While I enjoyed the feeling of being in his arms, I wondered if being upset was a good enough excuse for the way he’d acted. Xavier had anger problems, and I was used to it, but I’d never thought I’d have to worry about the same thing with Greyson. It was kind of overwhelming.

*I’ll let it slide for now. It’s not like the Vanguard dungeon is the right place to have a deep conversation about this… But I’m going to have to talk to him at home, when we’re alone.*

Back up on the first floor, we ran into Rishika, Zainab, and Ravi.

“Hey, Cali, Greyson,” Rishika said as she came walking up to us. “Point us in the direction of our prisoners and we’ll escort them back to the pack house.”

“I’ll show you the way,” said a passing Vanguard wolf.

As the prisoners were being handed off, Mace came over to Greyson.

“So, we’ve figured out the prisoner part of this whole mess, but there’s still one thing left to talk about,” he said. “What the hell are we going to do about Lucian?”

**Episode 4508**

**Greyson**

*Maybe we shouldn’t do anything but let the princeling cool off for a bit*, I thought to myself. *If we’re lucky, maybe he’ll come to his senses and realize that he needs help from the rest of us.*

I almost said as much to Mace, but I stopped myself. I probably wasn’t the right person to be making any suggestions about Lucian. Not after I’d lost it in front of everyone. For all I knew, everyone thought I needed as much help as Lucian did.

At least when I’d beaten Ethaniel, only Cali and Elle had been privy to it. But tonight, I’d gone off the deep end in front of everyone. I’d never felt so out of control, and now I was going to have to deal with the fallout. Especially when it came to Cali.

*How are the others looking at me after tonight? I’m supposed to be their leader, someone to look up to. I didn’t present myself as the Alpha I want to be today. Far from it.*

I almost felt ashamed, but my anger at Lucian hadn’t subsided enough for any other emotions to get through.

“Aysel seemed sincere about keeping Lucian under guard,” Duke said. “It wouldn’t be to Lucian’s benefit if she turned him loose—I don’t think there’s anyone among us who wouldn’t kill him if he tried to interfere with the prisoners again.”

“I think you’re right about that,” Mace agreed. “Let’s just hope Aysel’s up to the task. As we saw today, Lucian can be a handful.”

“I’m sure she can handle it,” Duke said. “They’re family. Aysel gets Lucian—I’m sure she’ll be able to talk him down if he gets riled up again.”

“What, like she did today?” I shot back.

“Fair enough… So, do you have any other suggestions?” Duke asked, his voice even.

“No, I don’t.” I didn’t add anything else, too afraid of letting my emotions get the better of me, yet again.

Mace eyed me for a few seconds before he spoke again. “I think that settles it. Let’s leave Lucian under Aysel’s care, and we’ll check in with her later to see how things are going. I’m sure she won’t hesitate to call us if something else happens. She’s on our side when it comes to the prisoners. We saw that today.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Duke said.

Everyone was in agreement, but I wasn’t feeling optimistic.

*If things keep going the way they have been, the sire bond’s only going to get worse for me. Tonight, the only thing I wanted was to kill Lucian. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt so much hate. So much anger. I would’ve ripped Lucian to shreds if Cali and the others hadn’t stepped in.*

There was no longer any question in my mind—the sire bond was growing more intense by the day, just like it had with Helix.

“Should we reconvene tomorrow to talk about how to approach the council?” Porter asked. “It’ll be better to do it once we have all the prisoners secured.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

The Alphas all said their goodbyes before moving off with their prisoners in tow.

Once Rishika and the others returned with the Redwood prisoners, we set off, too.

By the time we reached the pack house, I realized that Cali hadn’t said more than two words to me. As we crossed the yard to the porch, I considered asking her if everything was okay, but she went straight inside without even giving me a second glance.

I stared after her for a few moments, confused and sad about how royally I’d messed up.

“Hey, Greyson, where should we put these folks?” Rishika asked. “I already called ahead and asked Torin to put something together for them to eat, once they’re settled.”

“Good thinking,” I said absently, my mind still on Cali. “I think they’ll fit comfortably enough in the basement. Just make sure to post enough guards.”

I watched as the prisoners were marched into the house before I let out a breath of exhaustion and sank down onto the porch steps.

I knew I needed to talk to Cali, but I was worried that right now, I’d only be able to offer her empty promises.

The hard truth was that the sire bond was getting worse by the day. There was no way I could lie to Cali about that. She needed to know the truth.

I heard the door open behind me and turned to see my mother coming out of the house. She sat down beside me on the steps.

“How’s it going?” she asked gently.

I shrugged. “Just another day in the life of an Alpha.”

She sighed. “That isn’t going to work on me. I already heard what happened between you and the Vanguard Alpha. You want to talk about it?”

I quickly sifted through the day’s events in my mind. Bad on top of bad. “No, I’d rather not.”

“Greyson, I understand if you don’t want to talk to your mother about this, but you do have to talk to Cali. She seems very upset.”

I winced. “Great. Cali doesn’t deserve to be torn up over this.”

“Then you have to make things right,” my mother said. “Go talk to her.”

I stood up and started toward the door, but then stopped and looked back at her. “Maybe you should take your own advice and go talk to Big Mac.”

She looked away. “In due course. Right now, we both need a little space.”

I nodded and then made my way inside. I felt bad for my mother. I wished that there was something I could do to fix things between her and Big Mac—short of talking to Big Mac myself, of course. That was out of the question. It would only make matters worse. Big Mac wasn’t one to talk about her feelings, least of all with anyone outside of her relationship.

I went into the kitchen, searching for Cali. I found Torin standing over a pot, stirring it slowly, his eyes glued to a cooking video playing on his phone.

“Hey, Torin,” I said. “You seen Cali?”

Torin looked up at me. “Yes… I offered her something to eat, but she said no and went right upstairs. Is everything all right?”

I shook my head. “No, not in the least. But it will be.” *I hope.*

Torin smiled at me. “Good. If anyone can work their way through a problem, it’s you two.”

“Why, because we have lots of practice?” I joked.

“Exactly. Practice makes perfect.” Torin smirked before turning back to his cooking show.

I left the kitchen and headed upstairs, wondering if I was becoming a natural liar. I’d told Torin that everything would be okay between me and Cali, but I had no way of knowing if that was true. The sire bond was taking over my life, and it wasn’t going anywhere. How could things get any better with Cali when there was something like that hanging over my head?

Cali’s door was closed. I knocked gently before cracking it open and peeking inside. Cali was sitting on the bed with her back to the door. I quietly entered and shut the door softly behind me.

I lowered myself down onto the bed beside her. Neither of us said anything for what seemed like an eternity before I finally broke the silence.

“I’m really sorry about what happened, Cali,” I said. “I’d give anything to go back and do some things—everything—differently. I wasn’t angry with you. I hope you know that. It might’ve seemed that way, but really, I wasn’t. The truth is…”

I hesitated. *Admitting this out loud will somehow make everything feel a lot worse. I just know it.*

“The truth is, you’re right to be worried about the sire bond.”

Cali whipped around to face me. Her cheeks were red, and it looked like she was on the verge of tears, but I could tell by the set of her jaw that she had no intention of crying.

“I thought that being an Alpha would somehow shield me,” I continued. “That I’d be able to fight the sire bond. But I was wrong. Tonight made me realize that I’m not immune to the sire bond, no matter how much I wish that I were.”

I paused as my voice seemed to get stuck in my throat. I hadn’t even admitted any of this to myself yet, but, just like my mother had advised, I was about to lay it all out on the table for the woman I loved and valued more than anything in the world. I had no other choice, If I didn’t do this, I was afraid that the sire bond really could tear Cali and me apart.

“I thought before that I could control it,” I said. “In fact, I was certain that I could. But now, Cali, I’m sure that I *can’t*.”

**Episode 4509**

I was angry at Greyson—not so much for snapping at me as for refusing to be honest with me. I valued honesty above all with my mates, and I wasn’t keen on him shutting me out for any reason. But now that he was being vulnerable, I couldn’t bear to be cold to him.

“What can I do to help?” I asked, pulling him into a hug.

I didn’t have any answers, and I didn’t want to tell him about my conversation with Rowena, but the least I could do was be supportive and see if we could work something out. There had to be a way to defeat this stupid sire bond. We just needed to find it.

*And if we can do it without the three witches, all the better.*

Greyson held me tight for a long time before he finally spoke again. “The reason I asked for Ethaniel wasn’t just to make sure he doesn’t talk to the council. I took him because I was considering a more drastic solution,” he admitted. “You were right to question me.”

I pulled back, alarmed. “You were thinking of killing him?”

Greyson nodded. “I was, but I know now that it’s the sire bond making me feel this way. As soon as those dark thoughts about Ethaniel started crossing my mind, that was when I knew it was all becoming too bad for me to handle on my own.”

I lifted my hands to caress his face, then I cupped his chin and turned him to face me head-on. “Then we’ll handle it together. Maybe the next time you feel the sire bond pulling at you in a way you don’t like, the next time you get an urge you can’t control, you should come to me. I’ll help you, Greyson. You know I will. Will you promise me that you’ll do that?”

Greyson looked away. “I’ll try, Cali. I really will. But the thing is, sometimes I don’t even realize it’s affecting me until it’s too late. That’s how it was with Ethaniel and Lucian. I saw red, and that was it. I was lost.”

I took his hands and stroked my thumbs across his knuckles. “I know. I saw it happen. The important thing is that you recognize it now.”

“But that’s not enough,” Greyson said. “I lied to you… I pretended that it wasn’t a big deal. I hate that this bond is making me lie to you! I’m sorry, Cali. I really am.” He met my eyes. “What can I do to make it up to you? Tell me. I’ll do anything.”

I pulled him close. “Greyson, don’t worry. I still trust you. Not for one moment did I doubt our mate bond. The love between us is stronger than ever, and it’s already endured so much.”

“I know,” Greyson said. “I hate that I’m putting any strain on us.”

“It’s not your fault, Greyson. And besides, don’t worry. As long as you promise to always be honest with me and tell me when you’re having doubts and not to block me out when you are, then you have nothing to worry about. Can you do that?”

Greyson nodded. “I think I can. I promise to try, at least.”

“That’s all I ask,” I said.

He brushed a soft kiss across my lips. “Thanks for not giving up on me.”

I laughed. “Did you really think you could get rid of me that easily?”

Greyson smiled at me. “I have no intention of getting rid of you. Ever.”

His kiss came again; firmer this time. He moved to pull away, but before he could, I drew him close again.

“And I have no intention of ever getting rid of you, either,” I whispered.

Greyson stood up and lifted me in his arms. He stalked over to the door and turned the lock.

“I don’t want anyone interrupting us,” he said.

He strode back to the bed and laid me down gently, already busy tugging my shirt off and tossing it onto the floor.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said, straddling me and gently squeezing my breasts in his massive palms.

“Thank you?” I said with a laugh, looking up at his chiseled body, hovering over mine. “So are you.”

A roguish smile appeared on his lips before he leaned over and kissed me with even more passion, his firm tongue making its way into my mouth and swirling in concert with mine as I reached up and pulled his shirt over his head.

He pulled away and sat up straight, and I took a moment to admire the hard ripples of his abdomen, the way his pecs flexed as he unbuttoned his jeans before climbing off the bed to work his way out of them.

He wasn’t wearing any underwear, and I relaxed into the bed, enjoying the sight of his erection bobbing out from the chiseled V at the apex of his thighs. Without warning, he dropped to his knees and ran his hands up and down my legs, slowly parting them.

“I’m so lucky to have you,” he said, dipping his head low, his tongue darting out to taste me.

I jerked against the bed as his mouth followed his tongue, his warm breath tickling my sex and blotting out all the worries and fears that had been plaguing me for hours.

“You taste so good, love,” he said as he looked up at me, that same crooked smile playing on his lips.

I moaned when I felt his tongue dive inside me to lap at my wetness before sliding up between my fluttering folds and then drifting back down to enter me again.

I reached down to grab his hair, unable to stop myself from pressing his head tighter against me so that his tongue could tunnel deeper.

“I want you inside me, Greyson,” I whispered when I felt the jolt of electricity that signaled a fast-approaching climax. “Please.”

“Not until I make you come like this.”

I gasped as his head dipped back down between my legs, and his tongue surged against my clit. I moaned at the slow advance of first one finger and then the other inside my tight channel.

“Fuck!” I said, rising off the bed and bucking against his mouth as my climax came. I fell back, writhing on the bed and grasping at the sheets as Greyson’s tongue pushed in and out before he swirled it around my clit. Then he dove back in again.

My eyes still closed, I felt Greyson’s heavy body slide on top of mine. My legs opened wide to accommodate him, and then, as his tongue plunged into my mouth, his cock slid deep inside me and rested there for a few beats.

I thrashed against him, overcome by how good it felt to have him filling me up. But I needed him to move—it was too good, but I needed more. Seconds later, he danced a finger, slick with my wetness, across my clit as his shaft slowly retreated, only to push deep inside again.

“Greyson,” I breathed. “I need—”

“I’ll give you everything you need, Cali. Everything you want,” Greyson whispered against my lips, his hips rising high before he pivoted them, surging deep inside me, the power of his thrusts pinning me to the mattress.

I reached back to grip the headboard as Greyson rose up onto his knees, cradled my hips in his hands, and slowly guided my body up and down his shaft.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered, licking my lips.

He picked up speed, every muscle in his body flexing as he drove in and out of me, his eyes closed, his lower lip trapped between his teeth, his face flushed with pleasure.

“I can’t wait to make you come again,” he groaned.

Once again, his fingers found the rigid nub of my clit, and he pressed his thumb against it, urging me toward my second orgasm as his shaft plundered my depths.

“I’m coming,” I gasped out, unable to stop it.

I spread my legs wide as my orgasm rose from where our bodies were joined and spread to every extremity.

“I’m not done yet,” Greyson growled.

He dropped down and swept his tongue up and down my still fluttering sex, his lips brushing against my clit, his fingers slowly advancing inside me and hitting a spot that sent me reeling again. My hips spasmed up off the bed, and my thighs clamped tightly around his head until the last of my orgasm faded away.

Greyson came up to lie beside me, gathering me into his arms and planting a kiss on the top of my head.

“That was amazing,” I said, splaying a hand across his sweaty chest.

I let my eyes drift shut, knowing that sleep wasn’t far off. We laid like that for a few minutes, and I breathed him in. Snuggling closer, I rest my head on his chest, feeling safe.

“Cali?” he asked, kissing my temple.

“Hmm?”

“I don’t think we have a choice,” he said. “We have to accept the three witches’ offer, no matter the price.”

**Episode 4510**

**Xavier**

Outside the Samara pack house, Blaine was staring at the prisoners with utter disdain. I groaned, because I knew that his distaste for our new visitors was about to come my way.

“What the hell are *they* doing here?” he demanded. He crossed his arms and shook his head.

“I’ll give you one guess,” I deadpanned. I wasn’t in the mood for Blaine’s bad attitude. I’d had my fill of assholes today. “Better yet—how about a warning instead? If you don’t want to *become* one of these prisoners, then you’d better shut up and make sure they’re secured.”

“What? But we don’t have a dungeon! Where the hell am I supposed to put them?” Blaine looked around wildly, as if a suitable spot might pop up out of nowhere.

“Do I have to do *all* the thinking around here?” I snapped. “Do you have a brain? Even half of one? I’m sure you’re going to tell me that you do, so use it!”

Blaine glared at me, but moved off to do as I’d asked, stopping to collect Knox and a few others before they rounded up the prisoners and disappeared inside the pack house.

*I’d never admit it out loud, but Blaine has a point. We really* don’t *have a secure place to keep these prisoners. If only Kira were here, she could’ve conjured up a magic dungeon.*

I felt a stab of grief. Kira was dead because she’d helped us escape the Bitterfangs, and now here I was, thinking about what she could have done for us if she hadn’t been killed. She deserved so much more than what she’d gotten. The Bitterfangs weren’t worth even a fraction of the trouble they’d caused—trouble we were all still dealing with.

*Maybe Lucian really was onto something with the whole “kill all the prisoners” thing. It’s not like we have any use for them, and they certainly aren’t good people. They’re the reason why Kira’s dead.*

When I stopped and thought about it, I had to wonder if it really would’ve been so bad if we’d let Lucian execute them. What were we keeping them around for, anyway? To turn them over to the council so that they could execute them anyway, or punish us for having them in the first place? The Bitterfangs had tried to fuck us all over, and as far as I was concerned, they could all die.

I finally made my way inside.

“And that’s why I didn’t ask Blaine to come to the palace with the others. I knew he’d be a huge pain in the ass,” I said to Ava.

Ava didn’t say anything. As soon as we stepped into the house, she left me and went off to talk to Marissa.

*Well, she’s obviously still pissed. It seems like every single time I do something for Cali, Ava resents me for it. Shocker. Is this how it’s going to be forever? I help Cali and Ava gives me the silent treatment?*

I wondered just what I was supposed to do. It had been risky to help Cali with Adéluce lurking around waiting for any excuse to hurt me and everyone around me , but I was never just going to stand by and watch when Cali was threatened like she had been tonight. No matter what Adéluce did to me or how mad Ava got, I was never going to abandon Cali like that.

*I love Cali, and her safety is my priority. I have to be there for her, even if it causes a rift between me and Ava. I just have to be prepared for how to deal with it.*

After checking in on Knox, Josephine, Zipper, and Blaine to ensure that they had everything in hand with the prisoners, I made my way upstairs.

I sighed, already preparing to smooth things over with Ava. I didn’t want things to be bad between us. It had been a long day, and I wasn’t in the mood to be on the outs with my Luna.

*Maybe we can both just sleep it off and not have some long, drawn-out conversation about it that we’ll end up having again in a few days anyway, when I do something nice for Cali again and Ava sees it.*

My fingers crossed, I slid into bed beside Ava. She immediately put her back to me.

*Guess it’s going to be one of* those *nights…*

I started to reach for her, but I stopped mid-reach and tucked my hand under my pillow. I hadn’t expected a warm reception, and I hadn’t gotten one, but I didn’t have the energy to fight with her right now. Hopefully she was as tired as I was and not in the mood to fight, either.

*Maybe in the morning, when we’re both well rested, we can hash it out. Until then…*

I closed my eyes, and all I could think about was Cali. I even twitched myself out of near sleep when I remembered how I’d helped her at the palace, earlier. It was uncanny how even the slightest physical contact with her sent my heart—and every other part of me—into overdrive.

I raised my head and stared at Ava, hoping that my sudden movement hadn’t woken her up. If she was even asleep. I couldn’t quite tell whether she was faking it, so I dropped my head back down onto my pillow and started to drift off to sleep again.

I groaned when I felt Ava’s warm lips on mine. I reached out and pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her waist. I was so happy that she wasn’t interested in arguing about Cali. This was what I wanted—what I *needed*, to help take my mind off things.

But when I opened my eyes, I saw that it wasn’t Ava I was kissing, but Cali.

Heat flooded through me as I immediately closed my eyes, pulling her closer and deepening the kiss. I knew that I needed to pull away… What if Ava saw us? Worse yet, what if Adéluce was waiting in the shadows, watching and biding her time, waiting for the right moment to strike?

But no matter the stakes, I just couldn’t pull away. Kissing Cali stirred up so many feelings inside me—all the overwhelming emotions that I had to fight to resist every time I laid eyes on her.

I couldn’t explain why my kiss had woken Ava up from her coma, but I could easily articulate my feelings for Cali. I’d never doubted them. Not even once.

*I can’t tell her anymore, but I love her. I never stopped. Being away from her has only made me love her more.*

It was like my constant longing for Cali and her touch had increased the already intense feelings I had for her.

“I meant what I said,” Cali whispered. “I never stopped loving you, and I never will. The way you came to my rescue tonight over and over again proved what I’ve always known—you never stopped loving me, either. Our love is too strong, too real, too powerful. It can withstand anything.”

I pressed my lips tightly against Cali’s, wanting to soak up the taste of her. When I pulled away, she was smiling.

“There’s no reason to keep denying what we both feel, Xavier. Let’s give in.”

I couldn’t hold back, and I didn’t want to. This was all I wanted, all I’d been fantasizing about from the moment Adéluce had wedged herself between us.

Our kiss continued to build, and Cali moaned my name, her breath a warm, sweet tickle against my lips.

“Xavier. Xavier, I love you. I love you so much.” Cali’s lips slid against mine as her hands slowly began to roam over my body.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I needed to touch her. I flipped Cali onto her back and lifted her shirt so that I could ravish her breasts through her bra with my mouth. Then I trailed my lips down her body, heading toward her sweet center. I couldn’t wait to taste her again. It had been too long. Way too fucking long.

“I’m going to make you feel so good, baby,” I told her, licking up her inner thigh.

“Prove it,” she gasped.

With a growl, I tugged her shorts down and slid a finger underneath the waistband of her panties. I started to pull down, loving the way she arched her hips toward me. My senses were filled with the smell of her arousal.

Suddenly, I felt someone stir beside me.

*What’s going on?*

I paused for only a moment before I kept going. I was too eager, too hungry to taste what was waiting for me between Cali’s thighs. But I stopped again only a second later. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that we weren’t alone.

Someone was watching us.

I was filled with dread when I realized that it had to be Ava, but when I looked, I was shocked to see Adéluce lying beside me, her disgusting mouth curved into a smile.

“Oh, don’t mind me, Xavier, just here for the show,” she said.

Adéluce’s cackle tore through the air, and I screamed myself awake, bolting upright in bed.

When I opened my eyes, Ava was staring at me.

“What the hell was that about?” she asked.

I paused, a list of lies sailing through my mind.

“A nightmare, that’s all. Just a bad dream,” I said quickly.

Ava didn’t look convinced. “Really? Because it didn’t sound like a nightmare. You were moaning and squirming around, like… like… Wait a minute. Did you just have a *sex dream* about Cali?”

**Episode 4511**

I woke up in Greyson’s warm embrace and smiled. This was how things were supposed to be between us—no fighting, no worries, no problems of any sort. Just Greyson and me, lazing around in bed before the sun came up.

*Wait…*

My eyes flickered to the alarm clock by my nightstand.

*What day is it?*

I reached for my phone with the arm that wasn’t trapped against Greyson. When I saw the screen, my stomach dropped.

*Holy shit—it’s my first official day of practice, and I’m gonna be late!*

Coach Ludwig was going to demolish me. He’d been so angry when I hadn’t shown up last time. For such a small man, he held so much rage that it was alarming. And impressive, actually.

*Stop thinking, Cali! GET READY!*

I slipped out of Greyson’s embrace. He had to be exhausted after everything that went down at the Vanguard palace, so I fought not to make any noise as I rushed around. What was I even supposed to wear to crew practice?

*Is there a coxswain outfit? Shorts? Sweats? A hat?*

I decided to put on leggings, a sports bra, and a sweater, and then I grabbed a duffel bag and dumped in everything and anything I could find. Perhaps six pairs of socks weren’t a necessity, but better safe than sorry.

*You never know!*

“Cali?” Greyson’s gruff voice startled me. I looked up to see him stirring, his light hair in disarray. “What are you doing up so early?” He glanced out the window. “The sun hasn’t risen yet.”

“I’m late for crew practice!” I said in a high-pitched voice.

Greyson frowned. “What are you *talking* about?” He looked down at himself. “Is this a dream?” He frowned harder. “This isn’t how my dreams usually go. You’re supposed to be naked.”

I realized that with everything that had gone down the past few days and the chaos of the night before, I never told my mate about Lola’s deranged plan. Or my deranged decision to follow through with it. I grabbed a pair of rain boots to put on—*in case my feet get wet in the river? I DON’T KNOW!*—and quickly explained to Greyson what was happening. His expression grew more and more confused…

Until he burst out laughing.

“Hey!” I huffed defensively. “What’s so funny?”

“I…” He paused. “Thought this was a joke?”

I pointed at my face. “Do I *look* like I’m joking?”

“So…” Another pause. “You’re really a coxswain? For real?”

“For real!”

Greyson blinked at me. He pressed his lips together, so I suspected he wanted to laugh again, like the unsupportive monster that he was. But then he got that soft look on his face—the one that I would’ve called patronizing if it weren’t so attractive. Gently, he asked, “Love, are you okay?”

“*Am I okay?*” I scoffed, jumping from the bed to pack more stuff. “I’ve been through a war, I actually tasted my enemies’ blood, I saw my sweet Torin tear someone apart literally on top of me, Lucian wants to kill us all, but *still*. I’m okay.”

“I don’t think—”

“These random boys I just met are depending on me, Greyson, and I can’t let them down. This is my chance to at least try to be normal!”

He nodded slowly. “Okay… So that means—”

“That we’re alive, and we should seize the day. Experience new things before we die. Eat, pray—”

“Coxswain?”

“Exactly! Wait, can ‘coxswain’ be used as a verb?”

Greyson squinted at me. “Were you on crew in high school?”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He looked relieved. “Oh. So you *do* know how to—”

“Of course not,” I scoffed, zipping up my bag. It didn’t fit any more socks. “I don't even know what a coxswain is, really, but I’m determined to be the best coxswain I can!”

Greyson scrutinized my face. Finally, he nodded. “I get it. You know I believe in you no matter what.”

I warmed at his words. “Thank you, Greyson.” I paused. “Can you tell me what a coxswain actually does, though?”

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Once Greyson finished explaining, my head was spinning. I had no idea that a coxswain was responsible for so much. How could I have let Lola get me into this mess? I should’ve tried harder to unenroll! But there had to be tutorials online, right? All I needed to do was practice. I could totally become proficient in this thing in a matter of hours. *Not*.

*And if all that isn’t enough, I’m running late!*

Before Greyson could say another word, I threw myself into his arms, kissed his cheek, grabbed my duffel bag, and ran out the door. Over my shoulder, I called, “Thanks so much for the info and for letting me borrow your car!”

I hadn’t actually asked him if I could borrow the car, but that was a minor detail. I barreled down the stairs and—

Ran smack into Artemis.

“Cali! Why are you yelling?” Artemis looked both surprised and annoyed. “And what are you even doing up so early?”

“What am *I* doing up so early? What are *you* doing up so—” I cut myself off when I noticed Artemis’s backpack. This puffed-up feeling of anxiety inside me evaporated. All my focus was on my sister now. “Are you leaving for the Fae world?”

Artemis nodded. I winced. “What about Rishika?”

My sister glanced over her shoulder. “We’re taking a break.”

I felt my stomach drop. “Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

My eyes felt funny. “Okay… But were you going to leave at the crack of dawn without saying goodbye to me?”

“I was just coming upstairs to wake you and Greyson before I left. I wouldn’t just leave my little sister.”

Her reassurance made me feel better. But still. “Please be careful. The Fae world is dangerous.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “And this world isn’t? I’ve had to fight vampires, revenants, demons, werewolves, and witches ever since I stepped foot here.”

She had a point there.

“I’m *from* the Fae world, anyway. I know how to watch out for myself there.”

I gulped, fiddling with my hands. “So that’s it? You’re going right now?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “I’m still not sure where *you’re* going so early.”

I decided that since I was already terribly late and wasn’t going to escape Coach’s verbal lashing, I might as well offer Artemis a proper send-off. I explained to her about crew, hoping that she’d be impressed with my brand-new endeavors.

Unfortunately, she just seemed puzzled. “Rowing a boat is a sport?” She chuckled. “*You* are going to be in a boat competition?”

I frowned. “Yes, me. *Why* does everyone think this is funny?”

“It’s not that *you* are funny—although you are. It’s more that humans are funny, because—”

“I’ve fought a thousand monsters, Artemis. Surely I can deal with a small boat thing or canoe or whatever it’s called and steer it the way it’s supposed to—”

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” Artemis said simply, cutting me off with a tight hug. I let her, fighting back the sting in my eyes.

“I know you want to do this alone, but if you need me, please just send word, and I’ll be there,” I whispered, facing her.

She nodded.

“I hope you find Kadmos,” I said. “I hope you find everything you’re looking for.”

“Thank you, Cali.”

I sniffled. “I’ll miss you, you know.”

Artemis smiled a little. “I’ll miss you too, little sister.”

Artemis and I hugged one last time on the front porch. A moment later, I watched my sister, armed to the teeth, head off into the woods. My tears were falling freely now. I couldn’t stop them.

*She’ll be fine*, I told myself*.*

I needed to believe that.

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My brain was split in two directions as I drove to campus. First things first, I had to talk to Rishika when I returned home and make sure she was okay after Artemis left. I couldn’t imagine how hard this was for her. I knew I’d be devastated if Greyson decided to go away for an extended period of time.

The second thing was that I was going to be so very late.

I tried not to exceed the speed limit and failed, but I finally got to my destination. If only Big Mac were still with the Redwoods—she could’ve just blipped me out of the house without any of this drama.

“Hey!” someone barked, honking at me as I pulled into the parking lot. “Watch where you’re going!”

I realized I’d almost collided with a white Audi.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

I waved an apology and pulled into a spot, just as the Audi driver called, “Where the fuck did you learn how to drive?” His windows were tinted. All I could see was his bulging bicep and the anchor tattoo there. I had no time for this guy’s bullshit, so I shut him out, ran from the car, and raced toward the gym.

*I’m late! I’m late, I’m late, I’m late, I—*

Left my duffel bag in the car.

*FUCK.*

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Because I was the Queen of Reason, I returned to get my duffel bag and the infinite amount of socks I had in there. When I finally got to the gym, nobody was there.

Apart from Coach Ludwig, who glared at me and pointed at his watch.

“You’re late again, Hart!”

My stomach dropped. “I’m so sorry. I—”

“No excuses!” he barked. “The disrespect! The audacity! Who do you think you are?”

“Honestly, not sure. I feel like I’m going through an existential crisis that I’m not equipped to deal with, but—”

“Enough of that mumbo jumbo, Hart!” Coach hissed with the dark flourish of a—very small—supervillain. “There will be dire consequences for your tardiness. Starting *right now*!”

**Episode 4512**

**Xavier**

I sat up on the bed. “Ava?”

She huffed from the bathroom.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked.

I heard the sound of a blob of toothpaste landing on the sink. She bit out, “I said I’m *fine*.”

Ava was not fine.

The night before, despite my best efforts to convince her that I couldn’t remember who my dream was about, Ava hadn’t believed me. She had turned her back to me and inched away the moment I tried to touch her.

I had not slept all night. Gone were the days when fucking things up with Ava was a given for me. I felt shitty for upsetting her now.

“So you’re feeling okay? No headache or anything?”

She grunted in response.

This wasn’t fair. None of it. I wished I could be totally honest with Ava and tell her that the sexy dream I had about Cali had morphed into an Adéluce nightmare. But any mention of the vampire-witch wasn’t allowed, so I was stuck yet again.

I had no idea why Adéluce had appeared in my dream in the first place. Was dreaming about Cali forbidden? Would she punish me for it? Was her appearance a warning about what would happen next? Was she going to harm Cali?

I had no answer to any of those questions, and I wanted to punch something to take out some of my frustration.

Ava wasn’t helping either.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about what happened last night?” I asked when she walked out of the bathroom. She shook her head at me, not even giving me a real response. My wolf whined at her dismissal, and I watched her move around the room. She grabbed a dress and pulled it over her head before heading downstairs without another word.

Full-on silent treatment, then.

I followed her downstairs like a pathetic dog. I hated it, but I couldn’t help myself. Before I could think it through, I asked, “Are you hungry? I could make some eggs for us. Scrambled, how you like them.”

“Not hungry,” she said flatly, grabbing the carton of orange juice from the fridge.

I wanted to grab and shake her. Was she really going to keep acting like this over a fucking dream? If I were able to pry her mind open, what kinds of dreams would I find hidden there?

I watched her pour herself some orange juice and drink it, her throat bobbing with each swallow, her ponytail swaying. My fingers itched to reach over and tug on that ponytail to pull her close, kiss her hard, and tell her to cut the bullshit. But I stopped myself.

I needed to blow off some steam before I blew up.

“I’m going running,” I told her.

She didn’t even acknowledge me.

Jaw clenched, I walked out of the kitchen. I hoped that if I gave her space, she’d cool off. We couldn’t go on like this. *I* couldn’t go on like this. I needed to be goddamn focused here. The Samaras had real problems to deal with. There hadn’t been any trouble with the prisoners during the night, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t *going* to be in the near future.

“Hey,” Knox said when I stepped on the front porch. “What’s going on?”

“Going for a run,” I grumbled, starting to undress.

“Ah,” Knox said. “Mind if I join?”

I groaned internally. I preferred running solo, but I imagined Knox would probably start sulking if I told him to fuck off right now. For all his faults, he’d been trying to be a good pack member, and I knew that I had to show him I appreciated that.

So fucking annoying.

“Sure,” I said with a grunt.

His whole face lit up. “Awesome!”

I hated everything.

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Knox rambled the entire time we ran. He filled me in on the prisoners with excruciating detail. I didn’t even have to ask any questions. In the end, he had one for me, though.

*What are you and the others going to do about the council?* he mind linked as we ran by the river.

*I’ll talk to the other Alphas when we get back*, I said. Before he could go on rambling, I added, *I need a moment to think now, so no more talking.*

Surprisingly, Knox did shut up.

It only lasted for a few peaceful minutes.

*By the way, what’s up with Ava?* Knox asked. *She had a stick up her ass this morning.*

There was no way in hell I was going to explain anything to Knox.

*No idea*, I lied. *Maybe she didn’t sleep well.*

Knox’s wolf huffed. *Maybe. But I was worried you two were fighting again, which would suck. She should be grateful to you for waking her up from the coma. Your Alpha-Luna connection did the trick.*

Knox was… actually taking my side here? Interesting. Not a bad thing, actually. But his words only reminded me that he only knew half the truth. He had believed me when I’d cited the Alpha-Luna bond as the reason why Ava had been brought back.

In reality, it had been “true love’s kiss.” As crazy as that still sounded.

*She’ll be fine*, I mind linked Knox. *Don’t worry about it.*

Knox nodded. We fell into a quiet rhythm as we ran after that. But instead of relaxing, now all I could think about was that damn kiss. How could what Ava and I had be true love? Wouldn’t I know if I were in love with Ava? Sure, I wanted her. I cared about her, and a few times I’d wondered if that care could be more, but love? No.

At least that was what I thought, since I didn’t know what the hell I felt.

If I had indeed fallen in love with Ava all over again, though, it would mean that Adéluce had gotten what she wanted. But why would she even want that in the first place? Why would she want me to be in love with two people? None of the shit Adéluce did or asked for made any damn sense. Unless her only objective was to torture me.

She’d fucking succeeded.

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Knox and I completed a few loops around the Samara territory before heading back to the pack house. At least he’d been silent during the rest of the run. We weren’t BFFs now or anything, but it had been fine.

“Xavier!” Gabe’s familiar voice echoed through the trees.

I looked ahead to see him and Mikah loading up their car. He waved at me.

*Where are they going?* Knox asked me.

*About to find out*, I replied.

*I’ll give you guys some privacy*, Knox said, trotting to the back of the pack house.

Knox was full of pleasant surprises lately. I’d be shocked if I didn’t have other shit to deal with right now. I shifted back to human when I got to the front yard, eyeing both Gabe and Mikah with a frown. “Where the hell are you two going?”

Gabe chuckled. “Sheesh, clingy much?”

I huffed. “Seriously, what’s happening?”

“Dude, we did what you wanted,” Gabe said. “We tailed Ava, but we found no further evidence of a vampire stalking her or anyone. So Mikah and I decided—”

“We’re leaving,” Mikah told me, slamming the trunk shut. “It’s been interesting, to say the least. Goodbye.”

Gabe huffed. “Hey! That’s my buddy you’re talking to! Be nice!”

“I’m *nice*,” Mikah said defensively.

Gabe pouted. “Nice-*r*.”

Sighing, Mikah turned to me again. “Gabe’s gotten a mercenary gig that he can’t afford to turn down. He needs to keep up with his connections. I do, too. I get that you two are obsessed with each other, but it’s time for a break.”

Gabe scoffed that he wasn’t obsessed with me, and only *I* was obsessed with *him*. I ignored his bullshit and processed the situation. From their conversation and Mikah’s determination, I could see that this was a losing fight. I couldn’t tell them I needed their help, anyway. Adéluce had made sure of that.

The bitterness I felt was staggering.

“Thank you,” I said, cutting through Gabe’s rant about how friendship was important. Both he and Mikah turned to me. I said again, “Thank you for all your help. I really appreciate it.” I eyed Gabe. “Just make sure to stay alive.” I turned to Mikah. “Keep him alive, okay?”

Mikah nodded seriously. Gabe snorted, rolling his eyes as he pulled me into a hug.

I watched them drive off, and everything we’d been through rolled inside my head. Gabe had been there all along—through me becoming the Samara Alpha, through the Bitterfang war, and now with finding a solution for Ava. I vowed to always have his back as well and ignored the weird ache inside my chest.

For some reason, it felt like loss.

I was going to miss that outrageous asshole.

I shook off the feeling, heading back inside. Ava’s scent hit me, and my wolf whined. I was ready to track her down and try to talk to her again when my phone vibrated on the kitchen counter.

“I have an update,” Mace said when I picked up, cutting to the chase.

“What?” I asked.

“Someone from the council is going to come today.”

**Episode 4513**

“There will be dire consequences for your tardiness. Starting *right now*!”

My stomach flipped while Ludwig glared at me.

*Consequences? What kinds of consequences? Is it too late to unenroll? HOW THE HELL DO I UNENROLL?*

This had been a huge mistake. Major. I had no idea what it was like to be on a sports team. I’d never been on one in high school for many reasons, including the fact that I was the most unathletic person I knew.

*That’s in the past, Cali*, I reminded myself. *You didn’t know you had powers back then. You hadn’t fought a million monsters and won.*

Despite all that, Ludwig’s strict glare made me gulp. Seluna who? I could tell this man was going to make my life a living hell.

“Ten!” he barked, pointing out at the sports field in the distance.

I frowned in confusion. “Ten what?”

“Laps, Hart,” Ludwig snarled. “Give me ten laps, and then get your butt inside!”

I blinked at the field. It was massive. I doubted I’d manage to do three laps around it.

“You want…” I sputtered the words out, flailing as I gestured between the field and myself. “Me? There? *Ten?*”

Ludwig narrowed his eyes at me. “Ten laps, Hart! Don’t make me give you twenty!”

I choked on my spit and immediately backed off. No use trying to negotiate with a madman. I could tell that Ludwig operated with no rhyme or reason. He just wanted to see the world burn—or at least students who were late.

I rushed to change out of my rain boots and into a pair of running shoes. At least I’d brought those in the duffel bag, along with my million socks. I decided to change socks as well, just for good measure and since I had them, when I heard Ludwig grumbling.

I looked up to see him talking with someone else: another student who said, “I’m sorry for being late, Coach. Some of the coffee spilled because some jerk cut me off in the parking lot.”

I gasped.

*That sounds familiar!*

The anchor tattoo on the guy’s arm was familiar as well. It was the Audi asshole.

Great.

I finished tying my shoes, straightening to my feet. Maybe if I was fast, I could avoid him.

Anchor Tattoo didn’t give me the chance. “It was *her*,” he declared, pointing at me as if I was in a police suspect lineup. “*She* made me spill your coffee, Coach!”

I was speechless.

*That fucking rat!*

“Of course it was Hart,” Ludwig said with an eye roll. “I assume you two haven’t met yet. Caliana Hart, this is Codsworth, one of the alternates. Codsworth, Hart is the new coxswain.”

Codsworth scoffed as a response, turning his back on me to walk away. Before I could ask Ludwig why Codsworth didn’t get any laps for being late, Coach sipped on the coffee Codsworth had brought him with a satisfied *Aaahhh*.

He walked off, calling over his shoulder, “Ten laps, Hart! I’ll be counting!”

Fuck my life.

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When I started my laps, I went as slowly as I could, barely fast enough to fall into the “running” category. I spotted Codsworth up ahead with the other crew members as they strolled out of the gym. He shot me a victorious smirk.

*What the fuck is that dickhead’s problem? He’s such a kiss-ass!*

I would never stoop so low as to bring my coach coffee. I was going to prove my worth on the playing field—or the river—and become *the* best coxswain CCU had ever seen. I was going to come out on the other side victorious and prideful…

As soon as I figured out how to go about doing the things that Greyson told me a coxswain does.

*Right! Piece of cake!*

I had barely finished one lap and was already out of breath.

“Hart!” Gael shouted from across the field, pumping his fist before waving at me. “You’re doing amazing, sweetie!”

The rest of the guys started laughing. A cruel, twisted joke, while I was going to die out here. Before my paranoia about being bullied could kick in, though, Gael waved again, and I realized that his teasing had been good-natured. Schmiddy, Johnny, and Bear joined in, grinning. At least they seemed to be on my side, and that made me feel good enough to ignore the fact that Codsworth glared daggers at me.

*What is his problem? It’s not like I actually hit his car! And besides, who’s to say it was my fault? If anything, he almost hit me—in Greyson’s car! He’s lucky I didn’t text Greyson about it.*

The rest of my run was fueled by visions of Greyson using his calm scary voice to make Codsworth cry.

Nevertheless, by the time I was on my tenth lap, not even my thirst for vengeance could sustain me. I was gasping for air. My legs burned, my lungs ached, and my socks were drenched in sweat. It was ridiculous that I was in such a state after running simple laps. All that combat training I’d done, all the magic shields and swords and the blood of my enemies on my hands, and I couldn’t *run*?

Unacceptable. Unimaginable. Abominable.

*This is just the beginning*, I told myself. *I will build up my stamina and take physical training more seriously. I vow to fix this!*

In the meantime, I was bending over, hands on my knees, fighting to catch my breath and not to vomit in front of everyone.

*Why am I doing any of this, exactly?*

Other people bought a sports car or shaved their hair off when they wanted a change in their lives. This was my version of an early quarter-life crisis, I supposed.

“Hart!” Gael jogged over to me with the grace of a big cat.

*Ugh*, I thought. *Show-off!*

“You good?” he asked, clapping me on the back. “Ready to hit the river?”

I finally managed to straighten myself. Then I said, “Sure.”

There was a tiny scream inside my head that said, *Liiiiieeeessss!*

“Cool.” Gael grinned. He was way too cheerful for an authority figure, being the captain of the team and all. I want to ask where his optimism came from, but before I could, Gael said something that stopped me dead in my tracks.

“This is gonna be so fun. Everybody is itching to start training for the first regatta.”

Sorry. Regatta?! When was that going to be? I was terrified to know *when* the regatta would be, actually. I had a lot of studying to do if I was going to be a coxswain.

“Enough talking, folks!” Ludwig shouted, blowing his whistle. “Everybody line up!”

Gael raised a hand at Coach before eyeing me again. “Those laps did a number on you, huh?”

“I’m *fine*,” I said, rubbing my chest. Was I having a heart attack? Was I going to die out here? If yes, at least I would die doing something that I had no idea about.

*This is all Lola’s fault.*

Gael told me one or two more encouraging things that I missed while stewing over my best friend. He then ran off to the lineup, and I finally limped my way over as well. Somehow, I found myself next to Codsworth. He shot me a look, and I could just *feel* the disdain oozing off of him.

“… I will also be emailing you a copy of this week’s schedule, of course. In the meantime, I’ll run through it, in case you have any questions, and…” Ludwig was rambling in the background while Codsworth still shot me looks full of derision.

I was unable to keep my mouth shut.

“What is your *problem* with me?” I hissed at him. “I didn’t even hit your car, and you ratted me out. You’re glaring at me right now just for breathing!”

His jaw clenched. “Not. Glaring.”

“You. *Are*.”

“I just think it’s funny how you think you’re ever going to make it on this team,” he scoffed quietly. “Because you’re fucking not.”

“What are you even going on about? You know nothing about me, and you’re already dissing me?”

He rolled his eyes, looking over at Coach. Ignoring me. Aggravation bubbled up inside me. I wished I could blast some sense into him, but I stopped myself. It wouldn’t look good on my first day of training.

*As the days go by, though . . .*

I needed to remind myself that my teammates were friends, not targets. While that was going on in my head, I realized that people all around were splitting up into smaller groups for the training. I stood there, unsure of what to do, when I spotted Patel and Johnny. They were huddled together, talking quietly before turning to me. They both gave me a nod—kind of a weird, cryptic nod, but I would take it.

“Hey,” I said after walking over. “Can I be in your… group thing? For practice, I guess?”

I didn’t know if it showed, but I had no idea what I was doing.

Patel looked grave, suddenly. He nudged Johnny. “Go on, dude.”

“What?” I asked, looking between them. “What’s wrong?”

Johnny took a deep, dramatic breath.

I chuckled awkwardly. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

Johnny peered into my eyes so deeply I felt like he was trying to penetrate my soul. “We’re hosting a party tonight for your initiation, Hart. You gotta be there, or *else*.”

**Episode 4514**

**Greyson**

“You look happy this morning,” Ravi noted as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

The truth was I hadn’t stopped grinning while thinking about Cali’s latest adventure. I had no idea how she and Lola had cooked up this entire crew team thing, but I 100% preferred it to them running off into the forest and getting into trouble. Though, trouble mostly found us these days. Ravi agreed with me when I explained to him what was going on.

“That’s the last thing I expected you to tell me, but hey. I guess that’s Cali,” he said with a chuckle.

I nodded, taking a sip of my coffee. “I’m glad she’s doing this, letting loose. It’s an opportunity to feel normal.”

Ravi raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know if being on a sports team would be the ‘normal’ thing for Cali. But who knows? Maybe she’ll surprise us.”

“She’s full of surprises,” I said with a snort. “I have no idea what she’s gonna spring on me next.”

Ravi smirked. “Sounds to me like you’re into it.”

“When it’s not a life-or-death matter, yeah,” I admitted with a shrug.

Ravi squinted, scratching his chin. “I guess I’m having a bit of a hard time picturing her sitting in a boat, yelling at a bunch of guys to keep them on course. Do you think she’s bossy enough for that?”

I laughed. “She can be bossy, all right.”

Ravi raised his eyebrows, opening his mouth to speak again, when Rishika came into the kitchen. She usually chatted up a storm in the mornings, but now she had this weird, sad look on her face. In a quiet voice, she said, “Good morning.”

Well, fuck. Who died?

“Morning,” Ravi said awkwardly, standing up. He looked at Rishika like he would get an allergic reaction to her feelings if he stood too close to her, and then he skedaddled out of the kitchen. Which was fine by me, because now I’d have more room to speak with her.

“Hey, sit with me,” I said, gesturing at a chair. “What’s going on with you?”

With a heavy sigh, Rishika took a seat. “Artemis left for the Fae world this morning,” she said. “And we sort of broke up.”

Fucking hell.

“I’m sorry,” I said, squeezing Rishika’s shoulder. “I knew she wanted to go, but I didn’t expect it to happen so soon or for it to impact you two that way.”

“I know, but I think it was ultimately for the best,” she said with a heavy sigh. “Doesn’t make it easy, though.”

“No,” I said, frowning.

Rishika pressed her lips together, shaking her head as she fiddled with her hands in her lap. “But she has no idea when she’ll return, and I don’t want either of us to hold each other back.”

Rishika’s shoulders were hunched. I’d never seen her curl up into herself like this.

“She’ll come back,” I said. “It might just take a bit of time.”

Rishika sighed. “I know she needs to resolve the situation with Kadmos. But I was hoping we could do it together. I’d hoped she’d want me to go with her, but there are some things that a person feels like they need to take on alone.

“Yeah,” I said. “And it’s hard to convince them otherwise.”

Rishika turned to me. Her eyes glistened, but no tears had fallen. I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse. “I guess we know that better than some. You spent a long time as a Rogue, too.”

I nodded. “That kind of mentality always sticks. I used to try to take matters into my own hands even after becoming the Redwood Alpha. It’s taken practice to talk myself out of it. Cali made me realize it and taught me how to accept her help.”

Rishika sighed again. Looking away, she whispered, “I get it. I guess… I miss her already. I want this bad part to be over with already.”

“You can take off some time from your pack duties, if you’d like.”

Rishika snorted bitterly. “That would only make things worse. At least I have things to keep my brain occupied.”

“True. I guess taking care of things around here distracts you from spending every waking moment pining over your girlfriend.”

Rishika scoffed at my words. “I do not *pine*.” I raised an eyebrow. She rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. Maybe I do. A *little*.”

“A little,” I agreed, hiding a smile. “Still, though, let me know if you change your mind about taking time off.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” she muttered.

Patting her back, I said, “Of course. Anytime.”

She took a deep breath, nodding. “Do you need me to do anything right now?”

I asked Rishika to check on the prisoners, which she was going to do after fueling up on coffee. While she poured herself a mug, my phone vibrated in my pocket. Xavier’s name flashed on the screen. He better not have called to give me shit about the sire bond again. I needed to draw the line here.

“I gotta get this,” I told Rishika. She nodded, and I stepped outside. Not that I minded Rishika listening, but she had her own shit to worry about right now. She didn’t have to dwell on my problems with Elle and/or the constant problem that was Xavier.

Answering the phone, I said, “What do you want?”

“And people call *me* antisocial,” Xavier scoffed.

“If this isn’t important—”

“It is,” Xavier said. “We have a problem. Or, to be more accurate, *you* have a problem.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“The council is coming today.”

Fucking hell.

“Told you it was an emergency,” Xavier said. Did I detect some pleasure in that little shit’s tone? What the hell was his problem? Did he *want* me to get in trouble here? I had hoped to keep the council away until we all agreed on what to tell them about the prisoners, but that was no longer possible.

At this point, I had to figure out what the fuck to do with Ethaniel ASAP. If he ran his mouth about Elle and me to Cesaries, it could cause a clusterfuck of epic proportions. It would be Ethaniel’s word against mine, but the council had already been sniffing around about Elle, so this was the last thing we needed right now.

“I’m not thrilled about this either, but at least they’ll take the prisoners off our hands,” Xavier said, cutting through my thoughts.

“What about Lucian?” I asked.

“What about him?”

I rubbed the side of my neck. My pulse pounded there. “Mace said that Lucian might tell the council about the sire bond out of spite.”

“That’s a good point,” Xavier said. “The princeling did seem angry enough to throw you and Elle under the bus.”

“You’re not helping right now.”

“Who said I was trying to?” the asshole said, clearly baiting me.

I wasn’t gonna fight with him right now. “Do you know when the council is coming?”

“No. We need to start preparing. Like, right now.”

“We should have Lucian sequestered, so he won’t be able to cause any more trouble,” I said. “Aysel can talk to the council, make up some excuse about her brother going away.”

“You sure we can trust her?” Xavier asked.

“She did ask for my help to stop the executions,” I said. “She thinks that Lucian being detained right now is what’s best for him, so our agendas align.”

“Lucian’s taken care of, then,” Xavier said, “so you’d better turn your attention to Ethaniel. If anyone’s going to spill, it’s him.”

“I already know that, *Xavier*.”

“Then do something about it, *Greyson*.”

“*Fine*.”

“*Fine*.”

Xavier hung up. I shook my head, rolling my eyes when I realized that he and I hadn’t actually resolved our earlier fight about the sire bond. Did it *really* need any kind of resolution, though? Conflict was part of Xavier’s and my way of communicating. If anything, trying to iron things out with him would’ve been weird.

At least we agreed that Ethaniel was a greater threat than Lucian. I had to figure out a way to fix this that didn’t involve bashing in the Northwind Alpha’s head. For a second time.

I headed inside the house and downstairs to the basement. Those thoughts twisted inside my head, nagging at me. The council could literally show up at any minute. I didn’t have the time to finesse any kind of long-term plan. I had to think fast and in a practical way.

“Greyson, hey,” Zainab said. She stood guard at the bottom of the stairs, before the series of rooms in the basement. I hated the idea of us locking up people down here, but it wasn’t like I could just allow the Bitterfangs to roam around the house.

“Everything okay?” Zainab asked.

“I need to speak to Ethaniel,” I said.

Zainab gestured ahead, at one of the bigger rooms. When I opened the door, Ethaniel looked up, a defiant look in his eyes. “What the fuck do you want?” he hissed, tugging on his restraints.

It was all or nothing here.

“I have a proposition for you,” I told the Northwind Alpha.

**Episode 4515**

I was driving home, my head swimming with thoughts. Practice had been… interesting. We didn’t get in the water today, thankfully, so I had some time to figure out how I was going to pull *that* off. We just did stuff in the gym. Apparently, cardio was important—*who knew?*—but all my recent training with Artemis helped it be not terrible.

The party that Johnny and Patel had told me about had me on edge, though. They’d insisted that I needed to be there because this would be my initiation. What did that even *mean*, though?

I’d heard many horror stories about hazing, and I refused to let that be my journey. I wanted to look Patel and Johnny in the eye and tell them, *I’m all maxed out on trauma at the moment, boys. Check in with me again next month!* But Patel had reassured me that the team was against hazing, and Coach would kick anyone who would try to put me in danger off the team.

“So me doing something dangerous *was* on the table originally?” I had asked Patel. He’d given me an appeasing smile that was supposed to be comforting, I assumed. But it definitely hadn’t worked on me.

“Come on, Cali, chill,” Johnny had told me. “It’s gonna be fun! Bring your friends.”

That was the only silver lining in the entire situation. I doubted they would ask me to invite my friends if they planned to haze me in some way. They definitely wouldn’t dare do anything after meeting Greyson. I’d always thought Greyson was the calm one between my mates, the one who didn’t show his anger. But in this case, I would welcome him setting some boundaries with those boys if they acted out.

*Right. Why am I doing this again?*

It was a challenge, and I had accepted it. I would not back down.

*Never!*

Nodding to myself, full of determination, I pulled into the pack house’s driveway and parked. Before getting out of the car to head inside, I grabbed my duffel bag and the printed-out schedule Coach had handed out to us. The practice today had ultimately gone fine and thankfully hadn’t involved the water yet. I still had some time to figure that out. He’d emailed it to us as well—the man wasn’t fucking around. I could still hear his voice in my head.

“Tardiness will not be tolerated, Hart,” he’d said with a stern look. “*Never*.”

Codsworth had given me a cocky smirk after Ludwig’s reprimand, all satisfied with himself. That guy was such a jerk!

*At least my cardio is doing well thanks to training with Artemis. Bet he didn’t expect that, did he?* I thought, walking toward the front porch. *I wonder if I have enough control over my magic to zap that smug look off his face next time.*

The thought was interrupted by the notion of my mom listening in to what I was thinking right now. She’d be ashamed if she knew. This wasn’t how she’d raised me—I was not a spiteful person. I didn’t want to be one, and I didn’t plan to become one now by going to extremes just because a dumb boy was bothering me. I had no idea what Codsworth’s problem with me was, but I didn’t care. I was going to ignore him and his stupid smug face forever.

*Besides, I’m determined to prove him wrong! I’m more than capable of being part of the team!*

That seemed like little more than a wild dream as I started climbing up the front porch steps, though. My legs were cramping up, stiff from the laps, and I groaned in pain. I got inside slowly, huffing and puffing and vowing to run more often.

“Cali! Are you okay?” Torin gasped when he saw me. Before I knew it, he had me seated on the couch and was offering me a glass of water.

“Thank you,” I told him, taking a huge gulp.

Torin’s eyes narrowed as he took me in. “What happened to you?”

I winced. “Running is what happened. *Lots* of running.”

Torin placed a hand on his chest. “Oh my gods! That’s horrible!”

“I *know*.”

“Do you want me to heal you?”

I was tempted. Very tempted. But then I shook my head, braving through the aches and pain. “I think I should heal the old-fashioned way. If I’m going to make it on the crew team, I want to do it without relying on magic.”

“Very honorable of you.” Torin nodded solemnly. “My offer still stands if you change your mind. How did practice go? Have you mastered being a coxswain?”

I was ready to answer when I realized I’d never mentioned any of this to Torin before. “How did you know about that?”

He grinned. “Lola told me all about it when I called her earlier. It sounds *very* exciting. How many boys are on the team?”

“Five. No, seven. No… nine?” I frowned. “I should probably learn how many people are supposed to go in the rowboat.”

“Good idea,” Torin agreed. “Are any of them cute?”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. What was Torin doing asking if other boys were cute when he had a boyfriend already? *Hmm?*

“What about Kevin?” I asked.

Torin chuckled. “Kevin’s cute, too, of course. I was just curious.”

“You can find out for yourself soon,” I said, and then I invited Torin and Kevin to the crew party.

Torin’s eyes widened with excitement. “You mean it? A real college party? For *me*?”

“Well, they’re throwing it in *my* honor”—or to kill me, who knew?—“but you’re my brilliant friend, so you’re my guest of honor.”

Swaying with excitement, Torin threw his arms around me in a hug. I hid my wince when his hand bumped my hip—*goddammit, exercise!*—and hugged him back.

“Okay, I gotta go call Kevin now so we can plan matching outfits!” Torin informed me before dashing upstairs. His enthusiasm was worth the dire danger I was probably going to be in during the event. Okay, scratch that last part—I was exaggerating. I’d fought a million monsters, so going to a college party had to be a piece of cake by comparison.

Finishing my glass of water, I got to my feet and stretched a bit. I needed a shower pronto, but I decided to talk to Greyson first. Ignoring the dull ache all throughout my body, I headed toward the study to find him. I couldn’t wait to invite him to the party. I was pretty sure he’d agree to come with, if only to assess the situation, and his presence could only do good things for my vibe.

*Showing off my hot boyfriend to the crew? Don’t mind if I do.*

I was contemplating telling Greyson about Codsworth’s bullshit, plotting a potentially evil plan of intimidation that would probably shock my mother, when Zainab came up from the basement. She looked pensive.

“Hey,” I said. “Everything okay? Have you seen Greyson?”

She gestured behind her. “He’s down there talking to one of the prisoners, but he didn’t say why.”

I nodded. “I’ll go check on him. How are you doing?”

Zainab shrugged. “I guess it’s kind of weird to keep them locked up. We’ve never had so many people down there. But at least this should be over sooner rather than later.”

I hoped so, too.

“Who is Greyson talking to?” I asked Zainab.

“Ethaniel,” she said.

The memory of Greyson beating Ethaniel to near-death erupted in my head.

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When I got down to the basement, everything was quiet. I got a better sense as to why Zainab had looked unsettled. The prisoners were in chains, many sitting on the floor in their rooms. I could see them all through the glass panels in the doors. I was glad we’d been able to stop Lucian from executing them, but I didn’t know if they were grateful about it. If their glares were anything to go by, it didn’t seem like they were, anyway.

*Don’t think about this too much, Cali*, I told myself.

I walked down the hallway, toward where Zainab had told me Ethaniel’s cell was. My heart was pounding as I reminded myself that there was no way Greyson had come down here to hurt Ethaniel. He was probably sussing out the situation, considering the fact that Ethaniel had an idea about Greyson’s and Elle’s connection.

*This should be fine. This should be—*

I almost jumped at the sound of chains rattling. Ignoring my sore muscles, I hurried over to Ethaniel’s holding room. I could see Greyson through the glass panel. Just his back and figure, broad and tall, towering over his prisoner. My heart was pounding. Without pausing, I opened the door, and—

Nothing.

Ethaniel was sitting on a chair, his wrists bound. He looked unharmed. He gave me a look full of menace and derision, but Greyson hadn’t hurt him.

Greyson hadn’t spilled more blood for Elle.

*Of course, he wouldn’t have hurt him*, I thought. *I shouldn’t be so paranoid. Greyson doesn’t hurt people for the hell of it. He’s reasonable and just, and he always tries his best. He—*

He had a sire bond with Elle, and it had made him act in an unprecedented way.

My chest ached at the thought all over again.

“Greyson?” I asked, looking between the two men. “What’s going on?”

Greyson’s expression was calm. Unlocking Ethaniel’s cuffs, he said, “I’m letting the Northwind Alpha go.”

**Episode 4516**

“Why would you let Ethaniel go?” I asked, aghast.

Greyson told him, “I’ll be right back.”

The sneer on Ethaniel’s face didn’t move. “Don’t take too long.”

Greyson led me out of the room and closed the door behind me. I gestured around. “Can they hear us out here?”

Greyson shook his head. “The rooms are soundproof. Big Mac’s magic.”

I took a deep breath, glancing over Greyson’s shoulder, at Ethaniel’s door. Quietly, I asked, “What’s happening, Greyson?”

In a low voice, he said, “I am offering to let Ethaniel go, if and only if he agrees not to talk to anyone about his suspicions considering the sire bond.”

“But Ethaniel threatened to expose you,” I said. “Isn’t letting him go free worse? Who’s to say Ethaniel won’t immediately go to the council and tell them everything?”

“That’s what we’ve been discussing,” Greyson said. “We reached an understanding.”

“An understanding?” I scoffed. “Does Ethaniel even know the meaning of that word? He already attacked you at the barbecue! He’s dangerous, Greyson.”

“I can deal with him,” Greyson said gruffly.

I shook my head, raking my hands through my hair. “Why does this have to happen right now? Why didn’t you talk to me about this before?”

*Because the council is on its way*, Greyson mind linked. *They’re coming today.*

I gasped.

*I have to get Ethaniel to agree to keep quiet, Cali*, Greyson added. *Freeing him in exchange for his silence is the only option I can think of that doesn’t involve breaking his neck.*

Greyson’s words were even in my head, steady, but their weight hit me hard. I glanced at Ethaniel through the glass panel. He sat there, rubbing his wrists where the handcuffs used to be. His face had healed from the terrible beating Greyson had unleashed on him.

He was lucky he was alive. He was lucky I had stopped Greyson.

I didn’t think Ethaniel realized it, but I had saved his life.

*And now, here we are. At his mercy.*

“I just don’t think we can trust him,” I whispered.

*I don’t think we have a choice*, Greyson replied in my head.

The “other than killing him” was implied but not spoken. I gulped, nodding. I still had a horrible feeling about this, but it wasn’t like I had a better idea here.

Greyson gestured for me to follow him back inside Ethaniel’s holding room.

“Trouble in paradise?” Ethaniel asked mockingly, eyeing me before he turned to Greyson.

My mate ignored his comment and moved on. He said, “I need to know that you will keep your word, Ethaniel. Can you do this?”

Ethaniel leaned back in his chair, glaring up at Greyson. “I have a few questions.”

“Go on.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, watching them both as they spoke. They reminded me of two predators circling each other. And yet, one of them had overpowered the other in the past.

*Does Ethaniel remember that? Does he care?*

I had never, not once in my life, believed that I could look at Greyson and wonder if there was a chance that he would kill someone in front of me. The thought made me shiver.

“What about the rest of my pack?” Ethaniel was asking. “The prisoners held here and elsewhere. I know the alliance has spread out the crowd.”

“I’m not going to release anyone else,” Greyson said. “Whatever happens to the rest of the Northwinds is for the council to decide. This offer is for you only.”

Ethaniel’s eyes narrowed. “So in exchange for me keeping my mouth shut about you and that wolf of yours, you set me free.”

Calling Elle Greyson’s wolf made a familiar acidic feeling twist inside my gut.

*I need to shut down the jealousy. Right. Now.*

“What about justice for Evan?” Ethaniel went on. “Your wolf robbed me of justice.”

Shaking off my other feelings, I replied before Greyson could. “Justice was served. Helix is dead. Isn’t that ultimately what you wanted?”

“No,” he snapped. “As the Alpha, my pack expects me to demand respect and settle scores. It doesn't look good when I can’t deliver.”

I wanted to bang my head against the wall.

“Are you serious right now?” I asked, peering at Ethaniel. “You fought a war trying to get what you wanted. News flash: You lost. You don’t get to even the score again, it’s finished. People *died*. You tried to kill Elle, you tried to kill me, Greyson almost killed you, and he would’ve if I hadn’t stopped him, but you’re still sitting there talking about respect and honor? Do you realize how ridiculous this all sounds?”

Ethaniel opened his mouth to speak but closed it. He looked taken aback, shocked at my outburst. But Greyson nodded at me, and I went on.

“The bottom line in this entire fucked-up mess is that both Evan and Helix are dead. Punishing Elle and Greyson isn’t going to change that. Greyson killing you right now wouldn’t change that either. You should take the deal and put all this behind you.”

Ethaniel glared up at me. I could tell he was sizing me up, his fury rising, but I didn’t give a shit. Greyson spoke up again. “Cali is right. I couldn’t have said any of that better. I want an answer from you right now.”

Ethaniel huffed, rising to his feet. “I’ll think about it.”

“No,” Greyson said, walking over to stand before Ethaniel. “You give me your answer now, or the deal is off the table. Your freedom for silence. If you say no, I put these back on”—he held up the handcuffs—“and you may still face execution.”

For a moment, the two Alphas glowered at each other.

I held my breath… and exhaled when Ethaniel said, “Fine. I’ll take the deal.”

I knew that this was what I’d pushed for, what Greyson wanted, but I still didn’t think it was a good idea.

*What if he’s lying, Greyson?* I mind linked.

My mate eyed Ethaniel. Then he took another step closer, invading the other Alpha’s space in a way that everybody knew you weren’t supposed to do if you didn’t want a fight.

Greyson was ready for a fight. Ethaniel could tell.

“If you go back on your word,” Greyson said, “if you say anything to anyone about me and Elle, I will hunt you down. And if anything happens to me and I’m unable to follow through on this, my pack will. I will make it their mission. Do we have an understanding?”

Ethaniel gritted his teeth together. “Are you fucking threatening me, Greyson?”

Greyson reached for Ethaniel’s jaw, gripping it. I winced, waiting for the other Alpha to shove Greyson off, but that didn’t happen. Ethaniel only stood there, fists clenched, his glare fixed on Greyson’s while my mate spoke.

“I see you’ve healed, Ethaniel,” Greyson said in a low voice that made me hold my breath all over again. He moved Ethaniel’s face around in an appraising way, in a way that no longer reminded me of predators circling each other.

This was predator and prey.

“Next time, you won’t be so lucky,” Greyson said in that same quiet voice. “I will tear you apart, and my generous Luna won’t be there to save you.” He gripped Ethaniel’s jaw tighter, repeating, “*Do we have an understanding*?”

My hands were in fists, nails digging into my palms, heart thundering.

Ethaniel gripped Greyson’s wrist, pushing it away from his face before he stepped away from Greyson. Retreating while Greyson didn’t move a muscle. Everything about this was jarring, because this wasn’t Greyson. Not *my* Greyson.

I understood the reason he was doing this right now, how he needed to threaten the Northwind Alpha. I understood, and I knew that Greyson wasn’t Silas, but I—

I just wished that I didn’t have to witness any of this.

“I’ll take the deal,” Ethaniel said gruffly. “But I expect you to look out for the Northwinds who remain prisoners. I want them to be treated fairly. We may have aligned with the Bitterfangs, but we didn’t start the pack war.”

“All the prisoners will be treated fairly,” I said. “That has been our intention all along.”

Ethaniel paused, turning to me. His earlier mocking expression had vanished. He stared at me with this odd look on his face—as if he’d just seen me through new eyes. As if he had only now realized the truth that Greyson had shared with him earlier.

I was the reason Ethaniel was alive.

“Thank you,” he told me.

For a moment, I allowed myself to believe that he meant it.

“I’m taking the deal,” he told Greyson, then. “But you should know that I don’t like it, and if things change—”

“Nothing will change except your heart rate if you ever go back on your word,” Greyson cut him off. “And if you’re delusional enough to want to play games with me, let me remind you that you are still my prisoner. I could find an inconspicuous way to kill you right now and tell the council that it was an accident.”

The hair at the back of my neck stood.

*Greyson wouldn’t… He won’t… Of course not!*

Ethaniel snapped, “The council will know that you killed me—”

“The council did nothing when the Bitterfangs started a war or when Lucian invited a demon into his home. They pick and choose what to give a fuck about, and at this point, I am willing to take my chances. Are *you*?”

Greyson was bluffing. I knew that, but his behavior still made me shiver.

He was convincing enough that Ethaniel backed off.

“*Fine*,” Ethaniel spat, lowering his head.

Greyson led Ethaniel out of his holding cell a moment later, and I followed.

My heart was still pounding.

*Greyson*, I mind linked, *how are you going to explain this to the pack?*

**Episode 4517**

**Xavier**

I paced around the living room, waiting for the Samaras to gather for a quick pack meeting. I needed to update everybody on the council bullshit before moving forward with my main problem right now. As always, that was Ava.

That woman was the fucking bane of my existence.

I had put off smoothing things over with her to talk to Mace and then Greyson, and now I wondered if that had just made everything worse. Was she gonna blame me for not coming to her sooner? Knowing Ava, the answer was probably yes. I could tell that I had my work cut out for me when she arrived with Marissa and didn’t spare me a single look.

I fucking hated this.

“What did you want to talk to us about?” Marissa asked.

I looked away from Ava, clearing my throat. “Let’s wait till everyone’s here.”

A moment later, I looked among the Samaras and spoke up. “The council is on their way to discuss the prisoners,” I said. “I don’t know if they’re coming to us directly or if they’re going to stop at the other alliance packs first. But I want to make sure that when they come, they’ll be able to tell that all prisoners have been treated fairly. We don’t want to have the council up our asses about anything.”

Murmurs of agreement spread among the crowd. Knox gave me a nod. He was the first to know how fucked-up and annoying the council could be.

“… isn’t fair,” a voice muttered. My head snapped in that direction to find Blaine glaring at his feet.

“You got something to share with the group, Blaine?” I asked sharply.

He huffed. “The prisoners are all people who tried to kill us just a few hours ago. We shouldn’t need to answer to the council about anything. They’re full of shit, and that—”

“That’s why we need to make sure that Cesaries and his buddies are gonna be in and out of this house as quickly as possible,” I said, interrupting him. “We don’t want to hold these people captive. End of story. And as tempting as it may be to take your anger and frustration out on the prisoners for what they did, you’d better not even think about it.”

Blaine looked away from me, his gaze downcast.

Message received.

“Anyone else got any questions?” I asked, looking around.

Nobody did.

After the meeting ended, Ava headed outside. I hurried to follow her. I felt a little pathetic, like a puppy running after her, but this whole thing bugged me. This girl had almost died because of me, because of fucking Adéluce, multiple times. We *shouldn’t* be like this. We could be okay.

I wanted us to be okay.

Blocking her way before she could climb down the stairs, I asked, “Where are you going?”

She scoffed, “I need some fresh air. Is that a crime?”

“I just wanted to say—”

“I don’t need a repeat of your earlier lecture, Xavier. I get it. Don’t kick or spit on the prisoners.”

I scowled. “That’s not why I’m here. We need to talk.”

Ava’s eyes flashed with anger. “About what?”

I groaned, rubbing my face. “Fucking hell, is this how you wanna do this?”

“I don’t see what there is to talk about, Xavier,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “You had a sex dream about someone other than me. That’s all. Whatever.”

“*Whatever?*” I scoffed. “I can practically see the steam coming out of your fucking ears, Ava!”

Her glare was icy cold. “What would *your* reaction be if I had a sex dream about Greyson?”

I scowled. “That would never happen.”

“Why?” she snapped.

“For real? We both know you’re not into blonds.”

She huffed. “You’re fucking ridiculous,” she said, poking my chest. “Why can’t you just be real with me?”

I glowered. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“All I’m saying is what if I did have a dream about someone else? What would you do then?”

“It would rub me the wrong way, okay?” I huffed. “But still, I wouldn’t be as mad as you are. You have to be reasonable here. *How* can you blame me for a fucking *dream*? It’s like—”

“Keep your voice down,” Ava said between gritted teeth, glancing to the side. “We have an audience.”

I turned to see Donovan and Perrie watching us with rapt interest through the window.

Werewolves were such gossips, I swear to god.

“You’re coming with me,” I said, grabbing her by the arm.

To my surprise and relief, she let me pull her around the side of the house. When I faced her, she didn’t push me away. She was still glaring like she wanted to see me roasted alive, though.

“You think this is a reason for us to fight?” I asked. “Are you really going to act like this over a stupid dream?”

That did it. She shoved me away. “You should know by now that this isn’t about the dream. It’s about the woman who was in the fucking dream, Xavier!”

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Ava stared at me, breathing hard, her expression torn between hurt and anger. It made me feel like shit. *Should* I feel like shit, though? If we were in a normal relationship, I would. But I wasn’t sure what I had with Ava. Not really. Part of whatever was going on between us was old feelings, some of it new, but most of it festered because of Adéluce.

At least that was what I told myself.

Because if I allowed myself to believe that whatever I had with Ava had turned out to be true love, the kind I’d only ever thought I’d have with Cali, I didn’t know what the fuck I’d do.

But no matter what, I knew that right now, I had to fix this. I couldn’t let things fall apart between Ava and me. I didn’t know how Adéluce would react to that. She could take out her rage on my mates at any second. And even if I didn’t want to put a label on my feelings about Ava, I did know what I had felt when Adéluce hurt her.

Rage. Despair. Pain. Fear.

I saw some of that in Ava’s face right now, too.

“You need to stop worrying about this,” I said, moving closer to her. I hated the way my voice cracked. “Whatever dream I had or who was in it doesn’t fucking matter. The only thing that matters is what’s real.”

“What the fuck does ‘real’ even mean, Xavier?” Ava laughed bitterly, raising her hand to shove me again*.* I didn’t let her.

Lightning fast, I gripped her wrist before her palm could land on my chest and pulled her into a kiss. She gasped into it and moaned when I pushed her backward, up against the wall. She was all teeth immediately, her response fueled by anger instead of pleasure, but still. I knew I had her now. I had her where I wanted her.

“Real,” I panted against her mouth after tugging on her hair to break the kiss. “This thing between us feels real, Ava. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you don’t want me.”

Her breaths grew even harsher. Her gaze flashed with fury and lust.

“Fuck. *You*,” she spat, her hand smacking my shoulder before she raked her nails across my neck. She broke skin, drew blood. It hurt like a son of a bitch, bad enough that I groaned, but she devoured the sound when she kissed me. She started it, this time.

It was a biting kiss that made me want to bend her over this wall, tear her dress off, and fuck her like an animal. And it felt good. It felt so good to be with her like this. It was the best power trip to whisper in her ear, “Tell me you don’t want me. Tell me this doesn’t make your pretty little pussy wet.” It felt amazing to hear her moan after I whispered, “You know I own you.”

Was this love, though?

I had her pinned against the wall, and we kissed like there was no tomorrow. We were panting, shaking together, my hard-on rubbing up against her stomach, her whimpers getting louder, but still—

*Is this love?*

Suddenly, she pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, panting.

“What…” She rested her palms on my chest to keep me at a distance and fought to catch her breath. To speak. “What are we doing, Xavier?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I lowered my head to kiss her again.

She covered my mouth with her hand. Out of the blue, she seemed… sad? What the *hell*?

“I’m your Luna, and we’re mates,” she muttered. Her eyes were shiny at the corners. “But can I even call you my boyfriend when you’re dreaming about someone else? I need to know what we are, Xavier.”

Her question brought everything to a standstill.

Because I didn’t know the answer.

“You can call me whatever you want,” I said after taking her hand in mine. I kissed the middle of her palm, and she sucked in a breath.

“This isn’t fair,” she whispered. “I need to know what *you* see us as.”

The term “boyfriend” was juvenile, but if it was what Ava wanted to hear and what would make her stop looking so fucking sad, then so be it.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m your boyfriend.”

She had forced the words out of me, but when I said them, I didn’t hate the sound. I didn’t want to know what that meant either.

“If that’s the case, you have to tell me…” Ava paused, holding my gaze. “Do you love me, Xavier?”

**Episode 4518**

**Greyson**

Cali had a point there. The pack would have questions along the lines of: why was I letting Ethaniel go? Who else was I going to release? What happened next?Nevertheless, I’d been so focused on getting Ethaniel as far away from the council as possible that I hadn’t considered anything else. My number one priority had been to shield Elle from all this, but now I realized that I needed to process the ramifications of my deal with Ethaniel.

I needed to focus here and tie up any obvious loose ends.

For one, I wasn’t going to talk to the Redwoods about the connection between Elle and me any more than I had to. The Redwoods knew that I had turned Elle, but not about the sire bond and the chaos it was causing in my life right now. They definitely didn’t need to know about the council’s suspicions and their intention to punish anyone who turned a wolf into a werewolf. I had to keep things under wraps, under control, and move forward with as little fuss as possible.

Easier said than done, but I needed to try.

*I’ll tell the pack what they need to know to understand my decision*, I mind linked Cali. *I’ll say that Ethaniel knows about Elle, and to protect her, I made a deal with him.*

Cali glanced at Ethaniel. *What about the sire bond?*

*I’m not going to discuss that with the entirety of the pack, Cali*, I replied. *This isn’t the time for it, anyway.*

She bit her lip nervously. *But what if the pack gets upset that you’re letting Ethaniel go? He fought with the Bitterfangs.*

*If anyone disagrees with me, I’ll talk to them after the fact and explain why I had no other choice*, I mind linked. *I’m the Alpha. They should trust me on this.*

*You’ll probably need to talk to Elle as well*, Cali said. *Separately.*

I nodded. *You’re right. But in the meantime, we can’t waste any more time. The council could be here any minute.*

“This is taking a while. Are you two done chit-chatting inside your heads?” Ethaniel asked, interrupting.

I turned to glare at him. “Before I let you go, I need to explain your release to my pack. I will escort you out afterward.”

Ethaniel looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

At least for now, he’d learned not to fuck with me.

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A few minutes later, I had the Redwoods gathered in the living room. I explained to them that the council was on its way, Ethaniel had threatened to tell them about me turning Elle, and I had cut a deal to keep him silent.

The entire time I spoke, Elle’s expression was blank. She did not say a word.

I avoided looking at her and focused on the others.

“I want to make something very clear,” I went on. “If the council shows up today and has questions, I’m the one answering them. If they try to speak to any of you, you tell them that they should direct whatever they want to say to me. That’s all.”

“So you want to do damage control, and we should keep our mouths shut,” Ravi said, eyebrows raised.

“More or less,” I said.

There were murmurs of agreement all around.

“Do you have any questions?” I asked, glancing at the clock over the fireplace. “The council could be here any moment now, so we need to make it quick.”

“I think I speak for the pack when I say that we trust your judgment, Greyson,” Rishika said. “We’ll do whatever you ask.”

Their confidence in me had me standing tall. I thanked the pack and asked Rishika to let me know when the council showed up. Cali rested a hand on my arm, squeezing.

*You did good*, she mind linked. *Your honesty is always appreciated.*

The way she looked at me, all that trust in her gaze, made me feel ten times better. I had this outrageous, stubborn belief that as long as I had Cali by my side, I’d be able to fix every problem fate threw my way. I hoped that would turn out to be true.

“Thank you, love,” I murmured, cupping Cali’s cheek. She leaned into my touch, resting her hands on my shoulders.

“I get that this whole thing is really tough for you,” she muttered. “I want you to know that I’m proud of you for trying to figure things out in a way that’s non-violent. Even if I don’t like the idea of making a deal with Ethaniel.”

Cali’s apprehension made sense, but it still hung heavy on me. I was ready to ask her to come downstairs with me so we could release Ethaniel together when I heard my mother’s voice.

“Greyson?” Sabine walked up to us, her expression serious. “I need to talk to you for a moment.” She glanced at Cali. “Alone.”

My mother was rarely so stoic. Alarms went off in my head. Turning to Cali, I said, “Let Ethaniel know that I’ll be down shortly. Don’t go see him alone, though, okay? Bring Rishika or Ravi with you.”

I’d expected Cali to tell me that she could deal with Ethaniel on her own, that she didn’t need bodyguards, but that didn’t happen. “Okay,” she said, and I was surprised but relieved.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered, kissing the side of her head.

Sabine led me down the hallway to my study, and I followed. When she shut the door behind us, I knew that this had to be serious.

“What’s going on?” I fought not to sound antsy but failed. “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“This isn’t about me, Greyson.”

“What do you mean? Did Big Mac—”

“I understand why you made this deal with Ethaniel,” she interrupted. “I know about the sire bond.”

She knew that I had turned Elle— everybody did—but saying the words “sire bond” carried a million implications. Violent, uncontrollable ones that needed to be detained. Where was she going with this?

“How do you know?” I asked carefully.

“I’d love to say it was motherly intuition, but the truth is that MacKenzie told me. Not that I couldn’t exactly figure it out for myself either.”

I shook my head, sighing. “Of course she did.”

“Don’t blame Big Mac,” Sabine said. “Don’t you share secrets with Cali?”

“I do. I’m not blaming Big Mac,” I said, eyeing my mother. “I’m still waiting for you to talk to the witch, actually.”

Sabine frowned. “I think I explained to you last night that we need some time. It hasn’t even been a day, Greyson.”

“Right. You’re right.” I ran my hands through my hair, rubbing my face. “I guess I just want you to end this argument with her. I don’t even know what it’s about.”

Sabine exhaled sharply. “MacKenzie is grieving. And she’s not good at discussing her feelings anyway, so—”

“But *you* are good at discussing your feelings. I have to wonder why you haven’t reached out to her, or why she hasn’t come crawling back yet. She’s crazy about you.”

Sabine pressed her lips together. Her gaze was dark. Pained.

Fucking hell, was she going to cry now? Did my dumb questions go too far?

“Sometimes love isn’t enough,” she said in a quiet voice.

Her words made my chest ache. Because love *had* to be enough. Love was always enough for Cali and me. No matter what happened—no sire bond, no *due destini*, nothing could tear us apart. I wouldn’t let it.

“I know you care deeply for Big Mac,” I said, “and she cares for you. You’ve been through hell together, and you deserve your happy ending. A nice wedding. I feel like both of you know that. Don’t you miss her?”

Sabine paused, quickly rubbing the corner of her eye. “Do *you* miss her, Greyson?”

That question was… a lot. Did I *miss* Big Mac? She used to spend half her waking hours yelling at me or rolling her eyes at me or telling me that werewolves were a nuisance. She was irritable and often cold. But she was loyal, and I did think she cared about me. About us all.

I did miss her.

“This isn’t about how I’m feeling,” I muttered. “I just want to make sure you’re giving Big Mac space because you feel it’s the right thing to do, not because you’re losing hope.”

Sabine’s eyes glistened. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, shaking her head. In the end, she said, “I called you in here to talk about you and Elle. Not me and MacKenzie. This is important, Greyson. I understand the deal you made with Ethaniel, but I don’t like it.”

“Cali doesn’t either,” I admitted. “But the only other alternative is killing him, and she hates that even more.”

Sabine nodded. “Believing that Ethaniel will keep his end of the bargain is almost naïve, I feel, but perhaps fear will keep him in line. Either way, I trust you to make your own decisions.”

“What did you need to talk to me about, then?”

“Letting Ethaniel go isn’t a real long-term solution to this problem, Greyson.” She took a deep breath. “Have you considered what will happen if the council finds out about you turning Elle anyway?”

**Episode 4519**

**Xavier**

“Do you love me, Xavier?”

I had no idea how to answer Ava’s question. Hell, the same question had been on my mind ever since I blurted out “I love you” to her when I’d thought she was dying. I told myself that I hadn’t meant it then, but how could I be sure? If it were true, if I really was in love with Ava, wouldn’t Adéluce have made some declaration of triumph? She’d asked me to fall for Ava, after all.

But what about the kiss?

If Ava had really been revived because of a true love’s kiss—*my* damned true love—then what would that mean? Had I fallen in love with her between the time that I had blurted out those words and the moment I kissed her? Did I truly love two women at the same time? How the fuck was any of this supposed to work anyway? And why did people call it *fall* in love—did someone just slip into it without a parachute?

None of this made any fucking sense, and I hated thinking about it. I hated thinking too much about anything, in general, period, but that seemed to be my main occupation lately. Pretty fucked up, if you asked me.

“Xavier?” Ava whispered. Her expression was tense. Her eyes were pleading, and seeing someone who was usually so prideful wilt like this broke something inside me. “I need an answer.”

I thought about giving her what she wanted. Telling Ava that I loved her even if I wasn’t sure about my feelings. But would that be fair to her? Would telling her the truth about the kiss make her feel better? Or would it frustrate her further, knowing that she *still* hadn’t gotten a declaration of love out of me?

Could this be what Adéluce had been waiting for to reappear?

If I told Ava that I loved her and spoke to her about the kiss, I wouldn’t be able to take it back. My acceptance would mean my defeat, and there was nothing that Adéluce enjoyed more than seeing me defeated. Of course, I could only speculate here. This was just a theory about Adéluce’s plan, one of many. But it was all I fucking had.

Once again, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

If I told Ava I loved her, it could set off an Adéluce-induced domino effect.

If I told her that I didn’t, then she would be hurt, and I would be back at square one.

But right now, with her in my arms, staring up at me like that, all vulnerable and broken in a way that she rarely was, I knew I couldn’t stall any longer.

“Do I love you?” I whispered. “How about I show you?” I leaned down to kiss her, ready to start things up again to distract her.

But she pushed me back. “I don’t—”

Suddenly, a scream came from inside the house.

“Andrew escaped!” Donovan shouted, rushing outside, practically tripping over himself.

Ava gasped, pushing me away to rush back inside the house.

That sure had distracted her.

Yes, it would’ve been better if Andrew hadn’t escaped, but his timing had been impeccable. At least it gave me an excuse to put the love question off for now. I hurried behind her, and we found all the pack members gathered on the front porch, talking loudly. We were seconds away from descending into chaos, so I stepped in.

“Hey!” I yelled. “One person at a time!”

Everybody shut up. I turned to Donovan. “What the fuck happened?”

He gulped. “It was my turn to check on the prisoners, and everything was fine. Except when I got to Andrew’s room, the door was open, and he was gone.”

I could feel all the blood rush up into my head. Boiling. “The council could be just around the corner, and we lost a prisoner? Do you have any idea how bad this makes us look? How the actual fuck did it happen? How did he simply walk out? Am I running a fucking bed and breakfast here?”

Everybody was dead silent, blinking at me. Perrie raised her hand. “I don’t think—”

“It was a rhetorical question,” Ava told Perrie, and the girl lowered her hand.

I was about to lose my shit.

“Who was in charge of the prisoners before you?” I asked Donovan.

Blaine stepped forward. His face was impassive. “I was. But I’m sure I latched the door.”

I glared at him. “I’ll deal with you later.” I looked around the pack. “I want everyone who isn’t assigned to guard the prisoners to follow me into the woods. This is a manhunt.”

Everybody agreed.

We needed Andrew back before the council showed up and accused us of failing at the most basic of tasks.

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Moments later, we’d all shifted and I was leading the Samaras through the woods with Ava by my side. She’d been efficient and quick as always, organizing everybody. Andrew’s scent was easy to pick up, which made this entire situation even more fucking ridiculous.

Did this giant asswipe really think he’d be able to escape for good? I had no idea how the fuck he’d gotten out—though my money was on Blaine doing something shady—but *seriously*? This was an epic waste of everybody’s time.

*Looks like he went north*, Ava mind linked. *That’s close to Redwood territory.*

*He’s a fucking idiot if he thinks we won’t catch him*, I replied.

*Xavier?* Knox’s voice cut through. A moment later, he came to run alongside me.

*What do you want?* I asked. My wolf was always scowling anyway, so I assumed that got the point across.

*I know everyone is wondering about Blaine’s involvement in this*, Knox said nervously. *But I want you to give him a shot to explain.*

*Why the fuck should I?* I scoffed.

Knox huffed. *I know that Blaine’s been a pain in the ass, giving you a hard time right and left. You have all the reason in the world not to trust him, but I know him. We’ve been friends for years.*

*You have great taste in friends*, I mocked.

*Xavier, I’m serious*, Knox said. His voice had dropped. *I know Blaine. I refuse to believe he let Andrew escape on purpose. What would he achieve by that?*

*I don’t know*, I snapped, *he’s never been thrilled about being a Samara. Why not try to taint our reputation?*

*He’s not like that*, Knox said. *He fought in the same war that we did. You saw that he did a good job defending the Samara name. I am one hundred percent positive that Andrew’s escape was an accident. A mistake.*

A mistake. How the hell was I supposed to believe that?

*Does Blaine deserve some kind of reprimand for being careless? Yeah, sure*, Knox rushed to add. *But don’t assume he’s guilty of intentionally helping a prisoner escape. That’s fucked up. That’s treason, Xavier, and Blaine wouldn’t go down that road.*

I wanted to tell Knox that Blaine had done much worse things when he and Knox had taken over the Samara pack. But I reminded myself that Knox had really been trying lately, and I had to give him that, at least.

So, even if I still had my doubts about Blaine, I mind linked Knox, *Thanks for your honesty.*

Knox nodded and his wolf fell back into pace with the others. Ava was the only one by my side now. Her wolf shot me a sideways glance. *You didn’t bite Knox’s head off for speaking up*, she observed.

*He’d better not get used to it*, I scoffed.

*We both know he’s growing into a good pack member, Xavier*, Ava told me. *Don’t deny it.*

*You’re right*, I conceded. *He’s been doing a lot for the Samaras. I never thought I’d say this, but he’s an asset.*

*I never thought I’d hear you say it either*, Ava mind linked. *But I’m glad this is happening.*

In the midst of a crisis, Ava hadn’t brought up our earlier “love” conversation. But she didn’t look that mad at me anymore. Probably because I hadn’t bitten Knox’s head off for speaking. I’d take it.

*What do you think we should do with Andrew once we find him?* I mind linked, changing the subject. *A good beating wouldn’t be out of the question.*

Ava’s wolf nodded. *I’ll help hold him down.*

If I were human right now, I would’ve smiled.

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Andrew’s scent grew stronger quickly. He had to be nearby, and we were closing in.

*He can’t be that far*, Ava mind linked. *If we go up the river—*

*Sorry to interrupt*, Marissa said, running alongside us, *but we have a problem.*

I internally groaned. *What?*

*I don’t want to point fingers, but I saw Knox talking to you*, Marissa said. *I assume it was in support of Blaine, right? They’re thick as thieves.*

*What about it?* Ava asked Marissa.

*There’s something both of you should know*, Marissa said. *I picked up Blaine’s scent on Andrew’s door.*

*How’s this news?* I scoffed*. Blaine was on guard duty. His scent is probably all over*.

*You don’t understand*, Marissa mind linked. *I checked all the doors. His scent was only on Andrew’s.*

**Episode 4520**

Instead of going downstairs to speak to Ethaniel, I decided to wait for Greyson to finish his conversation with Mrs. Smith. I was too amped up and stressed out to visit Ethaniel, even with Rishika and Ravi as my escorts.

The Northwind Alpha wasn’t known for his polite demeanor anyway, and I wouldn’t put it past him to act like a dick. I wouldn’t put it past myself either to blast him because I felt threatened, so I decided that avoiding him all together would be the best way to go.

*I wish Lola were here*, I thought. *I miss her.*

I really did. There was nothing like discussing your problems with your BFF. I wanted to call her, but I didn’t think that unloading all my stress on her would be fair. She was grieving for Jacqueline, and she was supposed to be relaxing right now. Not obsessing over Greyson and his decision to let Ethaniel go.

I was glad that Greyson had chosen to be as honest with the pack as he could safely be, but the deal he’d struck with Ethaniel was shaky at best. There were too many unknowns here. It looked like Ethaniel had been intimidated by Greyson’s threats, but that was right now. How the hell did we know that he wouldn’t get all cocky and brave again when he walked out of here and ran away free?

*If Ethaniel tells the council the truth, and the elders figure out that Greyson turned Elle…*

Best-case scenario, they’d take Greyson away. Whether that would be to imprison or interrogate him or whatever—I didn’t know. But what would I do in that case? What would happen to the pack? I wasn’t their real Luna. I wasn’t a werewolf. I couldn’t lead them, so who would take Greyson’s place?

Rishika was more than capable—she’d proven it time and time again—but I didn’t know how this hierarchy thing worked with werewolves. Didn’t someone need to have Alpha blood to step into the position? Xavier would’ve been the ideal candidate, but he had turned his back on me and the Redwoods. Even if he’d always told me that what he wanted was to be the Redwood Alpha… Now he was the Samara Alpha.

*This is a whole mess*, I mused, my thoughts going a mile a minute. *Who knows what Ethaniel’s going to do once he leaves the pack house? What if he’s gathered more information on the Redwoods somehow? On Greyson? He doesn’t seem like the forgiving type—how do we know that he’s not holding a grudge against Greyson?*

My spiraling was interrupted by the sound of the study door opening. Greyson slipped out, his expression dark. My anxiety increased a notch, and I rushed over to him.

“Well?” I asked. “What happened with your mom?”

Greyson shook his head, rubbing his face. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What?” I blinked in shock. “But you always want to talk about everything!”

Greyson dropped his hands from his face, squeezing his eyes shut before looking at his feet. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to shut you out or have a repeat of last night. I’m just—” He bit the inside of his cheek, leaning back against the wall. He looked exhausted, suddenly. “I’m just so fucking tired and frustrated, Cali. Everyone’s telling me this is what I gotta do with Ethaniel. But at the same time, they’re questioning my decision.”

I cringed. “By everyone… do you mean your mother? And me?”

Greyson looked at his hands. He folded then. His voice lowered. “Yeah. The two people who matter to me the most.”

Greyson’s shoulders were hunched, and I hated seeing him like this. I wanted to reach out to him, caress his cheek and tell him that everything would be okay. That I wished we could escape all this and go far away, just the two of us to Portland, like he’d promised.

But reality always called.

“Your mom and I are the two people who love you the most,” I emphasized, squeezing his shoulder. “It’s not that we don’t believe in you. You know I do, and I’m pretty sure your mother does as well.”

Taking my hand that rested on his shoulder in his grasp, Greyson nodded. “I just don’t know what else to do that doesn’t involve poisoning Ethaniel and getting rid of him as a threat altogether.”

My heart pounded at Greyson’s words. I knew that he was right. This was war. These were war tactics, and I’d seen it with my own eyes that sometimes, existing as a supernatural meant the survival of the fittest.

“Please don’t confuse my and your mom’s worry for a lack of trust in your leadership,” I said. “We want to keep you safe in case Ethaniel goes back on his word.”

“Do you have another solution for me?” Greyson asked. He looked earnest yet still frustrated. “Because if there’s anything else I can do, Cali, I’m open to any suggestions.”

I pressed my lips together, taking in a deep breath. “I feel like you’ve done the best you could with the hand you were dealt. But now we need to prepare for what happens if Ethaniel doesn’t honor the deal and things don’t go as planned.”

Greyson’s troubled expression cracked. The smile that formed on his downturned mouth was precious to me. It changed up his whole face, made him look more like himself. My Greyson. He brushed his thumb over my knuckles, and his voice was soft. “You sound just like my mother.”

I pulled him into a hug, burrowing my face in his neck. “I’ve been called far worse.”

He kissed my temple, cupping my cheek to face me. “I know we shouldn’t be sitting here talking when we don’t know when the council is arriving. But this is the best I’ve felt all day.”

“I know,” I whispered, shaking my head. “What should we do now?”

“I wish I had a great answer to that, but I’m improvising as I go,” Greyson said.

“Technically, we do have one more option,” I said. “And if it works, it would save us all the trouble of dealing with the Northwind Alpha.”

Greyson raised a brow.

“We could call the three witches and ask them to break the sire bond,” I said. I hated bringing it up when I knew how dangerous it was, but the witches did offer. And it wasn’t like either Greyson or myself had been able to come up with better options.

“What about the price?” Greyson asked, surprised.

“We can always back out if the price is too high,” I said. “But this whole situation with Ethaniel makes me realize that we’re cornered. And we don’t know what’s going to happen next when it comes to the sire bond. I’ve seen what it can do to you, Greyson.” I gulped. “What it can do to both you and Elle. She attacked her mate, for god’s sake. For *you*.”

Greyson fell quiet.

“We need to give the witches at least one chance to fix this,” I said. “The sire bond would be gone, and the council would have nothing to accuse you of. Even if Ethaniel went back on his word, what proof would he have? The best thing we can do is get rid of it.”

He nodded. “You’re right. It makes sense.”

I knew that, but my insistence wasn’t rooted in logic only. There was a selfish reason I wanted the sire bond broken. My jealousy was still there. What was happening wasn’t Elle’s fault any more than the *due destini* was my fault, but still. I hated the way I felt about this girl that I called my friend and the man I loved. I couldn’t help the way my emotions worked.

When I placed my hand over Greyson’s heart, I wanted it to beat only for me.

*He’s mine only. He’s always been. He needs to be.*

“Let’s call them right now,” I told him.

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Greyson called the witches, putting them on speaker.

At the third ring, a pleasant feminine voice said, “Well, what do you know? It’s Greyson Evers!”

“So,” Chloe barreled on, “have you made up your mind?”

“Ask about the price,” I whispered, nudging him.

Chloe chuckled. “Of course Cali’s there, too. Hi, Cali!”

I glared at the phone. “Hi,” I said. I wasn’t as polite as I would’ve liked to be, but the sky was falling right now.

“You said you’d call me back about the spell, but you never did,” Greyson told her.

Chloe laughed. “That’s because we didn’t think you’d like our answer.”

I groaned quietly, fighting the urge to pull my hair out. “Chloe, *please*, just tell us. Can you do the spell? And if yes, how much is it going to cost?”

“Of course we can do it,” Chloe said confidently. “But like I told you, the potential side-effects of the spell might be very high, and we haven’t even gotten to the question of payment.”

“What kinds of side-effects?” I asked, bracing myself.

“They’re more like potential consequences. The cost of pulling off a spell like that, I would say,” Chloe added.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Greyson asked tightly.

“There are three possible outcomes here,” Chloe said. “The ideal outcome would be that we cut Greyson’s sire bond with the turned werewolf, and you and Greyson live your happy lives.”

My heart was beating fast. That sounded amazing. Incredible. Perfect.

But Chloe wasn’t done talking.

“Then, there is also the possibility that the sire bond could turn into a mate bond,” Chloe went on. Her words landed like an anvil on my head.

*Elle and Greyson? Becoming mates? MATES?*

“What’s the third outcome?” I asked. My hands were shaking.

As if she weren’t delivering a fatal blow, Chloe calmly said, “The mate bond between you and Greyson might be severed forever.”