







# Alpha Bully (Alpha Kings Island #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** He took my virginity, rejected me, and gave me a secret baby girl...

He was my brother's best friend and the future Alpha King. He taunted me all he wanted.

I was the pack's laughing stock after all; the weak, plus-size outcast.

Now I'm hunted, and he shows up...and tells me harshly he's taking me with him. No choice involved.

I knew he was my fated mate, but as the bad apple, I was too weak and forbidden to be with him.

He tricked me into sleeping with him, just to have his fun. I haven't been able to shift since.

Now our secret daughter is showing strong signs of magic, and our new owners hunt us.

That's when the Alpha King from my past emerges from the darkness.

I have no choice but to come with him, to protect my baby girl.

Memories of my past humiliation flood back, reinforced by living in his house.

His rough kiss on my lips awakens feelings I desperately buried deep inside.

His hardened hands on my hips make my broken body soften for him once again.

Will the Alpha King claim me and his baby girl for good?

The Alphas of Alpha King Island are brothers who rule their lands ruthlessly. Their mates are the only ones who find out that beneath the rough fur is a man who will burn down the world to protect the one he loves...

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Like anyone haunted by demons, I'm always visited in the darkness. The quiet beckons the memories closer, allowing the monsters in my mind to take root and wreak their destruction in my already shattered mind.

I can still remember what it felt like to be a child, full of innocence, and still be able to believe that those around me would care for me, be my friends, and love me. I'm not entirely sure when my innocence was replaced by the demons that haunt me today, but it was long before childhood was even over—solidified by my tormentors and bullies in high school and now enforced by my captors.

The old pipes groan and clang in the background as I stare into the fire. Although the pain feels like a weighted chain around my neck, the greatest of my demons has a very clear face and a name; though I hate to say it or think it, it seems to be lodged in my heart.

Callum.

If I had never known what happiness felt like with him, I wouldn't understand what it feels like to live without it now. It wasn't happiness, though, was it? Not really. It was just a fairy tale I made up in my head. And now, all I'm left with are monsters.

I smoothed out the lines on my dress. It was only a simple green summer dress, but it was my best one. I had darted around the cabin, avoiding my parents so they wouldn't see me wearing it—my mom told me to save it as my 'best.' But I didn't know what that even meant anymore, because it was clear this family wasn't going to have any 'best' days.

That wasn't true , actually . I was living my best days right then, and I never wanted them to end.

It all started when the alpha's oldest son, Callum, was injured on the first day of the tournament camp. Although we heal fast, it wasn't going to be fast enough due to the breaks in his leg, so our teacher arranged for him to do a special project, and the only person left to help...had been me.

My parents never engaged with the tournament. They didn't engage with the pack, full-stop, and I was sometimes surprised they even bothered sending me to high school. My brother Charlie left long ago and lived with some friends on the other side of town; I still saw him around, but he tended to look the other way if he saw me or our parents. I tried not to take it personally; I knew his quarrel was more with them.

The thought pulled me up short, but I did my best to shake off the sadness as I continued down the track toward Callum's house, grateful for how quiet the town was with most of the younger members still at camp. Nothing was going to ruin that day.

Those past few weeks with Callum were magical. He seemed reluctant to hang out with me at first; people usually were because of my family, but I knew we both felt an inkling of the bond. I knew it wasn't just my imagination or wishful thinking.

Callum was the most popular boy in high school—hell, in the whole pack. He was never one of my main tormentors at school; to be honest, he didn't talk to me enough to bully me, but he was always there on the sidelines watching. I don't think we'd said more than two words to each other since we were pups, and yet there we were. We were foisted together for this project, but now there was so much more between us. It had become clear we were mates. We'd been so happy together. He was so handsome and strong, and over the last few weeks, I'd discovered he was funny and playful, too.

The first time we kissed was more than I ever could have imagined.

We'd been studying, or at least pretending to study while listening to music. The house was otherwise quiet; the whole pack felt peaceful with so many away at the tournament. It's like we were in our own little bubble.

I caught him looking at me out of the corner of my eye, "What?" I asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"You really are beautiful, you know." He said, holding my gaze. "You shouldn't let anyone tell you any different."

I tried to shrug it off. I didn't want us to talk about anything serious; I liked our bubble, where we ignored the reality of our very different situations. "That's easy for you to say," I replied, hoping he'd change the subject.

Instead, he leaned in closer, and my heart almost stopped. "I know. But you're funny, clever, and so goddam beautiful, " he replied, nodding almost shyly. The honesty reflected in his eyes made my breathing stall and my pulse race.

The next thing I know, his lips crash onto mine, and I freeze, unsure what to do. As the kiss deepens, I sink into his embrace, and the weird thing is, it feels like coming home—like I'm meant to be in his arms and nowhere else.

It feels like happiness.

And when I gave myself to him a week later, it was like our wolves rejoiced. I had no hesitation. Then, for the first time, I couldn't wait for the tournament; it would be the first time I wasn't simply part of an outcast family existing on the periphery; I'd be with Callum. Maybe I could reconnect with Charlie. It felt like everything was possible for the first time in my life.

The track to Callum's house felt so familiar by then . I felt happiness radiating from my wolf as we approached. As we did, the scent of multiple wolves ahead slowed my speed. I glanced through the trees and saw Callum standing outside with his brothers and a few elders. I could immediately sense something is wrong. My wolf demanded that we go to Callum, so I broke from the trees. I could feel the bond pulling us toward him. I just wanted to make sure he was okay.

The moment he saw me and broke from the group to walk toward me, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake. His eyes were cold, his face unreadable. I'd already dealt with enough brutality from my own family and seen disgust reflected at me from the pack to know what that look meant. My wolf howled at me to do something, but instead, I just braced myself, praying that I was wrong and he'd take me in his arms.

"What do you want?" he snapped, loud enough that the other wolves looked over.

I didn't want to embarrass myself, so I smiled and replied, "The project, I'm just here about the project."

He scoffed. "I should have known your lot wouldn't have heard the news. My father is dead. Everyone is heading back from the tournament early, and there will be a new alpha. You can tell your parents if they're sober enough to hear it. Now leave."

His words cut like a knife, but I was sure it was because he was in pain; I could feel it through the bond. His father was a mean old man, something I thought we both understood. I reached for him, and he startled and jumped back. "What the hell are you doing? Don't touch me, you weirdo."

I stumbled slightly; glancing around, I saw a few wolves smirking, and my face began to burn. "I just thought...we're frien—"

"Oh my god," he groaned, "I knew letting you do that project with me was a bad idea.

You're as weird as your parents. Go back to that creepy cabin and stay away from me. I'm going to be alpha, and I've more important things to do than deal with you."

"But, we..." I started, tears beginning to form in my eyes.

Callum stepped closer and leaned in. "No one would believe I was sick enough to actually fuck you. So just fuck off, yeah?"

I heard one of his brothers say he couldn't believe Charlie was such a great wolf, coming from our weird family. Someone else muttered that it was damn strange I'd show up like this; they were almost embarrassed for me hanging around like the pack idiot.

I turned and tried to hold my head high, but I barely made it back onto the road before the tears began to fall, with heavy sobs that almost drowned out my wolf's pained howl. Something broke inside me as I walked that familiar pathway toward my dilapidated childhood home. As I heard the familiar sounds of my parents screaming at each other from inside, I kept going right past the house and into the forest.

I kept on walking as the evening set in and night fell. I walked and walked and walked until I could no longer feel my feet, and my dress had torn on more branches than I could count. The bond with Callum burned my soul, and my wolf's protests died to a whimper as we both acknowledged the truth.

That was happiness, being with Callum, and we would never have it again.

I honestly believed that was true until eight months later when I held my beautiful baby daughter, Harper.

But, although Harper has brought my soul back to life, we will never be safe if we



remain held captive in the forest like this. The demons in my head may belong to Callum, but the real ones outside this flimsy door are the ones I need to protect Harper from.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

My fingers burn as splinters tear the skin, but I don't stop; I swing the axe, splitting the wood. I throw the logs onto the stack and reach for another. I dare not stop because I don't know when Harper will wake from her nap, and the Collinses were clear about what would happen if I failed to complete my duties again today.

Subconsciously, I begin to rub my wrists where the shackles from last time were fastened so tightly, I swear I can still feel them. I was chained outside in the rain as punishment while Harper cried and cried for me inside, and Mr. Collins screamed at her to be quiet. He made it clear it won't be long before she is punished, too.

How could anyone threaten a small child?

I swing the axe more forcefully this time at just the thought of anyone touching Harper. There's a cracking sound as the axe head flies off the handle, vanishing into the thicket. I freeze, my heart racing.

Oh no, oh no, oh no , I think frantically.

I drop to my knees and start to dig through the dirt with my bare hands, desperately searching for the axe head. The Collines will...will what? My mind reels at the possibility of what they might do to Harper or me if I've messed up and ruined the only good axe.

Suddenly, my fingers brush against smooth iron among the fallen leaves and twigs. Relief washes over me like a tidal wave as I fix the axe head back on its handle.

Footsteps crunch on the driveway gravel behind me, and I whirl around to see Mr.

Collins striding toward me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Well, well, well," he says, his voice cold and laced with malice. "It seems you're not as useless as you seem."

I swallow hard, trying to keep the fear from my face. "I-I'm sorry, sir," I stammer. "It won't happen again."

"Finish up here and then sort that noisy kid out," he snaps. "The missus says she's been fussing, and it's annoying. You know we're only helping you out. We don't have to be so nice about it."

My heart drops; I hadn't heard Harper from out here over the wind and the sound of chopping wood. The knot in my stomach only grows as I consider what Mrs. Collins might do if Harper is annoying her. Not for the first time. I wish I had my wolf. I wish I were stronger so I could save us both. Harper is so small and fragile. The meager amount of food the Collins provide is barely enough to keep us alive, and it's killing me to see her so thin. She should be thriving and growing much faster.

He smirks nastily at me before turning and walking away toward the house without another word. I see Mrs. Collins come out, and they both walk away down the driveway. I watch them go with a mixture of relief and trepidation. I need to get these logs put away so I can check on my daughter. At least Harper is safe for now with them out, but what about tomorrow? And the day after that?

I stand up shakily and continue stacking wood, trying to push down the terror that threatens to swallow me whole. All I can think about is getting out of here with Harper before it's too late. Before they hurt her. But where would I even go?

The thoughts consume me as I quickly pile the logs into the store, making sure not to leave any mess and put the axe away properly. My fingers tremble slightly as I try to

rush the process. Finally, when it's done, I hurry to the house. My heart is pounding in my chest as I silently open the door and peek inside.

The cabin is empty. The living room is silent; no sign of any movement from upstairs, either. I creep toward our room carefully, trying not to make any noise as I push open the door in case she's fallen asleep again. She was awake through the night, so I knew she'd need to sleep today. When I peek my head around the corner, I see her cherubic face, red from crying but still smiling at me when she sees me. She holds out her arms for me to pick her up, and I do so gratefully, hugging her tightly against my chest as I breathe in her sweet baby scent.

Her little body feels warm against mine as I gently rock her back and forth while humming a lullaby under my breath to soothe her tears. "Shh...it's okay now," I whisper softly against her hair. "Mommy's here."

We sit on the floor together near the window where sunlight streams in, casting golden hues across our skin. Harper turns to me, her amber eyes flashing pure gold for a moment. As her emotions cascade, I rock her back and forth, and she begins to chatter happily. Eventually, she wriggles free from my arms and begins to totter around the room with her teddy. Her childish laughter warms my heart, and for the briefest moment, I try to imagine this is just another room in a home of our own. A safe home.

I stare at her in wonder. How can a child still be so happy in this environment? For a moment, I wish I had a fraction of her innocence left. She's still giggling when I notice the familiar sparking around her hands.

Struggling to my feet, I scramble toward her, "Harper, honey? Come here," I whisper, beckoning her to me soothingly.

She laughs and toddles toward me, but the sparks continue; if anything, they're

growing more explosive. The Collins never go far from the property, and I know the flashes of light will be visible outside the cabin. The first time Mrs. Collins witnessed Harper's developing powers, she threatened to get a witch to bind them. I can't let her see them again.

I've been trying to teach Harper how to control them, but she's still so young. Most shifters don't come into their powers until they're much older, and Harper appears to have inherited her father's family powers, too. I sigh as she falls into my arms, giggling and clearly amused by the pretty sparks. I knew about Callum's power; the whole pack did, but I'd never seen it in action. Caring for Harper's emerging powers when I don't even know the full extent of their potential is becoming more and more difficult.

"Come on," I say ushering her out of the room. "Let's go get you a snack, okay?"

Sparks still crackle around her as I guide her to the small kitchen. I remember the Collinses discarded some leftovers last night, and I'm just praying they're still there. They barely give us enough rations for one person, and now Harper is growing; she seems to be getting hungrier. As we step into the hall, Harper suddenly takes off, running her hand along the wall as sparks cascade from her fingertips.

"No, Harper, wait," I call, reaching for her as she slips through my fingers.

At that moment, I hear the front door open. "Ava? What's that noise?" Mr. Collins' voice booms, making me flinch.

I glance at Harper, willing the sparks to stop as I pull her toward me, cradling her closely. "It's just Harper playing. She'll be quiet now, I'm sorry," I answer softly, hoping they won't come any further into the house as I quickly dash and grab the wrapped leftovers from on top of the bin.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Collins appears in the doorway, her eyes wide with fear as she spots Harper in the hall and the sparks dancing on her fingertips. "Take her outside," she demands, gesturing for me to get out.

My heart is racing as I hurry out of the hall with Harper in my arms and pass Mrs. Collins, who stands scowling with her hands on her hips. We almost reach the yard when Harper's arms suddenly lift toward the house behind us, and a huge spark fires at the porch roof, creating a deafening explosion. The force of it knocks us both off our feet, sending us tumbling onto the dirt-covered ground.

Screams fill the air as I look up to see that the porch has been practically blown off. Mr. Collins, covered in dirt, has already grabbed the water canisters by the front door and is dousing some of the smoking wood. Mrs. Collins is standing stock-still, staring at their home in near disbelief. I look down, cradling Harper in my arms, and check her for bruises. She starts to whimper, and I urgently shush her, knowing that the sound of her cries will only make this worse.

"You." Mrs. Collins's attention snaps to me. "Put that monster down and help sort this out."

I stumble over the ground toward the side door, "I-I will put Harper in her pen and tidy all this up," I stammer. "I can fix this."

Mrs. Collins looks at me, her eyes cold and hard. "You'd better," she warns, her voice low and threatening. "We'll discuss your punishment tonight and what we're going to do about Harper."

I can feel the trembling in my knees as I walk inside and place Harper in the pen with her teddy and some of the building blocks I made. As soon as she's safely distracted, I rush back to the porch, joining Mr. Collins, who is already trying to remove what remains of the boards. He glares at me as he works, his face red with anger. I try not

to bristle under his gaze but fail miserably, as every glare only makes me more fearful.

The afternoon passes in a haze of sweat and splinters as I work on clearing away the debris and seeing what can be salvaged from the porch. It's only when it starts to get dark that they finally let me go. I'm grateful for the leftovers that I managed to put in my apron pocket earlier as I rush back toward our tiny room at the back of the house. As soon as I'm alone with Harper, I bounce her on my hip as we share the food.

"They're scared of you," I whisper, running my fingers through her hair. "You're powerful, and I know you will never have to live like this when you're grown."

As I speak, she looks at me with such innocence it makes my heart clench. I believe the words: she is powerful, and I know she will do great things. But right now, she's relying on me to keep her safe. After we eat, I creep out of the room to fetch a small jug of water. What I hear on the landing stops me in my tracks.

"We should just get rid of her," Mr. Collins whispers. "She's too much trouble."

"No, we still need a servant." Mrs. Collins insists. "We just don't need the child; I knew she was going to be more trouble than she's worth."

Mr. Collins mutters something indecipherable before stating, "Well, we didn't know she was expecting when we brought her in, did we? Little slut should be grateful we've made allowances."

"We can't keep the little thing here anymore. She's dangerous," Mrs. Collins retorts, her voice low and angry. "We'll let someone else deal with her. But we're keeping Ava; I can't do all this work on my own. You promised me a proper servant, and there's not many going around here."

“Fine,” Mr. Collins snaps. “You dump the child in the town, and we’ll keep Ava. Any trouble from her, though, any hysterics, and I’ll put her down myself. I won’t stand for any more trouble here.”

I stand frozen, my heart pounding in my chest as they discuss getting rid of my daughter. I know I can’t rely on my dormant wolf to protect us, but I won’t let anyone hurt my daughter. I will never be separated from her. I won’t let them. I always knew I’d need to get us away from here eventually, but I kept hoping my wolf would return and I’d be strong enough to protect Harper on my own. But now I know I’m out of time.

A plan formulates in my mind as I sneak back into our room and tuck Harper into our bed, giving her a drink and then kissing her forehead as though nothing is wrong. I know what I have to do now; I have to escape with Harper and find somewhere safe away from their cruelty. It will be dangerous, but it's the only chance we have. As Harper sleeps, I begin to prepare a small pack of essentials. I know I'll have to make my move in the early hours while they are still asleep and pray to every god that watches over us that we make it out of the dense forest alive. If I can make it to the coast, I know there are towns more welcoming to lone wolves since they receive visitors from the mainland; perhaps we can find somewhere to stay or someone willing to help us.

As exhaustion threatens to overtake me, I force my heavy eyelids to stay open, afraid of missing the perfect time to make our escape. My gaze remains fixed on Harper's peaceful face, still fast asleep. Her innocence overwhelms me, and my heart swells with fierce determination. I know I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe, no matter the danger.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Taking the well-worn path, I hike further into the remote part of the mountains that form part of the neutral territory between my pack and my brother's land. The most sensible thing our mean old father ever did was recognize that three alpha sons could never live in harmony and put a plan in place to divide the island into three packs.

As the eldest, I was able to choose first, and I chose wisely, snagging the coastline and abundant forests furthest away from the mainland and the trouble visitors bring. I have my ports and a large fleet at my disposal for anything we need, but I was happy to let my younger brother Tristen to deal with the constant influx of newcomers who are either welcomed as visitors or turned back on the dock.

However, as I crest the ridge that gives me the best view of the mountain ranges, I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy over the central lands that were left to Aiden, the youngest. It really is something out here. The trees here are tall and hardy, their trunks thick with age and their branches reaching up to touch the sky in all directions. Moss clings to the rocks in vibrant shades of green and purple, and wildflowers litter the ground beneath the towering ferns that sway gently in the breeze. It may have been the last area chosen, as Aiden is the youngest, but with his small port to the north, I sometimes wonder if his wolf might be the happiest in his mountain kingdom.

At least, he might have been, if it weren't for the fact rogue wolves tend to favor the mountains since they provide cover and easy access to all three packs. They're a thorn in all our sides. As brothers, we haven't always gotten along—too proud and stubborn, I guess. I hesitate to think we're anything like Ralph; the thought that any of us could be as bad as our cruel dictator of a father doesn't sit well.

However, sometimes I struggle to deny the resemblance in myself.

After all, I know I have a mean streak, too. And I've no doubt I'll end up as sad and lonely as Ralph because of it.

The crucial difference between my father and me, though, is that while I may have driven love away, I run my pack for the benefit of everyone and not just myself. I'm sure of that. The eastern pack is thriving under my leadership, and that is where I'm putting all of my focus. I pause at the head of the trail, only a few minutes from the meeting spot, and breathe deeply. Inhaling the fresh mountain air, I attempt to push down the unwelcome thoughts that rise whenever I'm alone with too much time to think.

The softness of her blonde hair haunts me, and her soulful dark eyes stare back at me through the years. My hands itch to feel her tiny frame again, my body dwarfing hers as I held her against me. My hands ball into fists as I curse my wolf for not just letting this go. It doesn't seem to matter how many women I fuck, Ava still haunts me.

Perhaps this is my punishment for being just like Ralph—an evil bastard.

The pack would never have accepted Ava, though. They would never have accepted Ava with me. She was weak and small, lacking any of the power shifters associated with a successful pack. Her family is made up of outcasts and criminals, considered beneath our society. It's true her brother Charlie has successfully integrated, but he was different from a young age, a uniquely strong wolf who aligned himself with the pack from the time he was a pup and broke free from his family the moment he could. Even then, it took the pack years before they fully accepted him.

Ava should have known I could never be with her. I hadn't even known she was missing until weeks had passed, busy dealing with the aftermath of Ralph's death. Her parents never requested a search party; they were probably just glad she wasn't under their feet anymore. Eventually, I heard rumors that she'd run off. Run off

where?

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the sound of voices ahead. I sigh as the familiar sound of my brothers' fighting grows louder—our father may have been many things, but he was not wrong about our inability to lead together. While we would never go to war and break the sibling bond completely, our leadership styles are too different. Tristen is hot-headed and quick to act, while Aiden is more deliberate and softer all around. I like to think I strike a balance between being deliberate in my actions and being slightly wiser in my approach due to the years of extra training under Ralph. For better or worse, he certainly prepared me well as the eldest for power. I assume he thought he had more time to school my brothers. It certainly isn't a job I want.

As I approach, their voices become more volatile, Tristen accusing Aiden of being too soft on the rogues while Aiden argues that we need to find a way to manage them better. The scent of anger fills the air as they argue, circling each other. The mountain wind whistles past my ears as I clear my throat, and both of them turn to look at me with matching expressions of irritation.

"What?" they growl out in unison.

"I didn't come here to listen to you two idiots fight," I snap. "If these meetings are going to lead to anything positive, we need to actually discuss the issue, not just squabble about it."

Tristen takes a step back, smirking. "All right, Dad. Let's get to it."

Aiden looks the angriest, but I can see he's trying to temper it. "Very fucking funny," he glares. "If he was Dad, he'd have told us to fight it out."

"Exactly," I snap back. "So can we just get on with it?"

They nod but barely look at each other, both directing their glares at me. At least I can unite them in something. I walk past them, heading over to dump the beers I brought next to the fire that one of them already started. Slowly, begrudgingly, they both wander over and grab a beer. I'll take a truce for tonight if it means I can get this over with.

To be fair to my brothers, we've had some pretty constructive meetings over the last few months like this, away from our packs and the constant interference of others' opinions. But I'm not sure they seem in the mood to be productive tonight. I know I'm not.

"So, how many more attacks?" Tristen spits out. "We had three over the last two weeks alone. Bastards."

Aiden nods. "About the same, along with a skirmish by the port. I think some of the rogues are trying to establish smuggling routes with the mainland."

"That's exactly what I've been noticing, too," I mutter. "They're getting bolder. We couldn't figure out how they were moving goods undetected until we found some evidence of magic. They're masking."

Tristen looks momentarily surprised, scratching his stubble. "They're evolving. Where are they getting magic from?"

Aiden face is filled with concern. "We need to stop this, now. Dad always said the rogues were just an annoyance, but this is getting out of hand. My people are losing shipments and valuable equipment."

The truth is, they were just an annoyance for a long time. Rogues

who either couldn't settle within the pack or were banished for various crimes lived

on the outskirts of the pack, populating the mountains and less prosperous areas of Ralph's island. They were generally considered annoying misfits but not particularly united or dangerous. That all changed when Ralph died, and the pack was divided. Some members didn't like the changes and chose to become rogues; attacks increased almost immediately, and now even our towns are being hit. I can almost hear Ralph's ghost laughing at us. He always said we were too soft for the job. I'll be damned if I prove him right.

I sigh before focusing on my brothers. "It doesn't matter where they're getting magic from, only that we stop it and enforce controls within our packs and in the neutral areas. For the good of all our members," I say firmly. "Double the patrols and ensure all magical protocols are taken. We also need to use any contacts we have to establish why the rogues are escalating and who is making the decisions."

"What about your beta, Charlie?" Aiden asks. "He's a good wolf, but he comes from rogue stock. Didn't they all go? Maybe he's still in touch and could ask some questions."

I grind my jaw, irritated by the question. "I believe the mother is dead. I don't know about the others, and neither does Charlie," I snap. "Focus on your own contacts, and we'll follow up."

Tristen and Aiden exchange a mocking glance, one they surely know is just pissing me off even more. Neither says anything, though. Tristen hands out more beers, and they begin to bicker about the best methods for blocking the masking magic that the rogues are using. They're giving me a headache, and I'm tempted to just leave them to it. I take a long drink from my bottle and try to tune out their noise for a minute, but all that does is let my mind wander to thoughts of Charlie's family. More specifically, his sister, Ava.

The familiar question raises its head—is she a rogue now, or just gone forever?

With the increased rogue activity, I find myself constantly searching for signs of her. I quiz people on descriptions after attacks and visit specifically so my wolf can try to sense her. It's ridiculous. What would I even say? Nothing has changed.

Except...everything else in my world.

My role as alpha is all-consuming, and I try to allow it to distract me, but she still exists in the corners of my mind. Deep down, I know she's still out there; I can sense it. It's almost as if she could round the corner on a trail at any moment and appear before me. I'm constantly on edge, anticipating her presence. And yet, she never appears. And I've never outright searched for her, because that would risk exposing the truth—that I had a relationship with an outcast.

My judgment would be questioned—something I cannot allow.

Those weeks we spent together with the rest of the pack occupied by the tournament are embedded in my mind. I felt like someone really understood me for the first time. Really saw me. And then I destroyed it.

I wonder what she would make of the man I've become, or if she would even recognize me. I know I have to force myself to rejoin the conversation, even though my heart isn't in it. I have a pack to protect and a job to do. The rest will have to wait.

“Are you even listening?” I'm vaguely aware of Tristen's voice.

“Sorry, what?” I feign interest, “I was just thinking about my patrol rotations.”

He gives me a sideways look but doesn't press it. “I said, we need to act decisively, and soon. We can no longer afford to sit around and let them take potshots at us. We need to reclaim our borders.”

Aiden grunts in almost reluctant agreement. “I actually agree with Tristen for once. We need a show of force.”

“A show of force, huh?” I mutter. I’m not so sure it’s that simple, but maybe they’re right. Maybe it’s time to change our approach and put them down once and for all. “Fine. We’ll each hold a pack meeting tomorrow evening and inform our people of the plan to seek out and eradicate the rogue threat once and for all. We’ll start with the border towns and work inwards, reestablishing control over our lands.”

My brothers nod, but I don’t feel like standing around and talking anymore, so I don’t give them a chance to say anything. “I’m outta here. Let’s get in touch after the meetings.”

I leave them talking. It’s late now, and I want to be back in town before morning. They seem more on the same page than when I arrived, but as I disappear down the trail, I hear the familiar sound of them bickering. Hopefully, they’ll go their separate ways before it ends in another fight. There was a time I’d have joined in, but now I can’t even find it in myself to do that.

Back on the dark trail to my pack, I subconsciously look for signs of her, a never-ending haunting I brought on myself and will suffer for the rest of my days.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Our escape from the cottage went smoothly. I was never locked inside. It wasn't necessary, because the Collinses knew I had nowhere to go; being pregnant and then having Harper, I wouldn't even risk it. Mr. Collins had made it very clear he'd find us wherever I ran; they knew I didn't even have my wolf's protection.

I hold Ava's tiny body against me, willing her to stay quiet. At only fourteen months, she seems to have already learned when it's dangerous to be too loud, something that breaks my heart when I think of how much she has endured already.

My resolve only grows the further we travel into the forest. I'm trying to stay off the main trails, walking in the direction of the coastline. All the ports are used to seeing visitors with all the regular trade going to and from the island, so we'll be able to blend in better, and I can work out my next steps. The priority is finding somewhere warm for Harper to rest. The money I stole from the Collinses' box in the kitchen weighs heavily in my bag. I know stealing it will only make them angrier, but I had no choice.

I try to focus on the trail ahead and not the burning in my arms from carrying Harper and our small bag for hours. The sun will be rising soon, and we'll lose the cover of darkness. I can only hope we're far enough away from the Collins house to give us enough of a head start.

Ava becomes more alert as we near the edge of the forest, her little head turning this way and that, taking in the sights and sounds around us. She's never been this deep into the forest before and is clearly fascinated but also restless. The smell of pine and earth fills our lungs as we step out into a small clearing. I set Harper down gently, grateful for a moment's rest and the chance for Harper to stretch her legs before she



starts grumbling too much.

She immediately stumbles towards a small stream, reaching for the cool water. I watch as she splashes her hands, laughing joyfully. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. She looks up at me, her eyes bright and curious, and I can see my reflection in them—a mix of fear and determination. "Mama, Mama, Mama," she chants, rubbing her hands together with delight.

I smile softly, leaning against a nearby tree. The bark is rough against my back but provides much-needed support. "Don't get too wet," I laugh. "I'll fill up our bottles."

I grab our empty bottles and crouch down next to her by the small stream, refilling them as Harper collects leaves, holding them up in the early morning golden light as though they are treasure.

The sound of rustling leaves behind us startles me, and I tense instinctively before realizing it's just a family of deer making their way through the underbrush. Their muted spotted coats blend perfectly with the colors of autumn leaves and soft morning light. Ava seems mesmerized by them, too. She reaches out her little hand toward them but doesn't take another step forward.

Relaxing again slightly, I release the breath I hadn't even realized I was holding and pull out some bread from our bag, breaking off pieces for us to snack on. I know we can't stay here long, but I can already feel my tired arms coming back to life. I just need a few more minutes.

Harper takes a bite of the bread, looking at me questioningly. "We're going on an adventure," I say, gently smoothing her blonde curls from her face. "To a place where the sun always shines, we can see the sea, and we'll be happy together."

I feel the tears prickling my eyes, desperately wanting the words I'm telling her to be

true. She seems to consider this before nodding seriously and scooping up another handful of leaves, not a care in the world. I'll do anything to protect her innocence.

The wind picks up slightly, carrying with it a warning chill that sends shivers down my spine. I stand up quickly, grabbing Harper's hand. "It's time to go," I say.

She seems unfazed as I adjust the bag and lift her into my arms. She's not a tiny baby anymore, but a cheeky toddler who wriggles in my arms even though I will her to be still. I wish I was stronger, and I curse my wolf for abandoning me after Callum's rejection. My wolf was never the strongest or fastest, but since she retreated into my soul, my strength has only faded more. The pregnancy and birth were hard on my body, and I needed her, but she never returned. Sometimes, I can almost feel her at the very edge of my subconscious, and I try to bring her forth, desperate for her return, but she slips away.

I could not carry easily Harper even if I had my wolf, but I would be stronger and know that I could defend her. The truth is, I feel like a failure. I cannot even protect my own daughter; I've allowed the Collinses to scare and threaten her. I vowed to be a better parent than my own ever were and love her more than any of the pack ever loved me, to give her a better life and show her what happiness really means.

And yet, here we are, alone and vulnerable in the forest, just hoping the Collinses won't catch up with us, knowing I'm unable to defend us if that happens.

This is our only chance of escape—my only chance to keep Harper safe. I cannot fail her again.

The forest is coming alive now as daylight filters through the canopy of trees, illuminating the path before us. I feel slightly nauseous as I consider that our absence will have been noted by now. It's my job to start the fires in the morning, prepare their breakfast, start the washing, and split new logs. I'm expected to be up and

awake long before them, and they will definitely be awake by now. The house will be cold, and they will have come looking for me.

A shiver of dread runs through me as I remember the few times I was late starting my duties, especially when Harper was only a tiny baby, the yelling as Mr. Collins would drag me from the room, slapping me around the head and throwing me outside, where I'd have to listen to Harper's cries as I rushed through my chores. I know it should make me angry. It should fire me up. But instead, I simply feel embarrassed. Embarrassed that I ever believed they were actually going to help me when they found me in the forest the night I walked away from Callum, the pack, and my family. They'd pretended to be concerned and offered me somewhere to stay. I was a fool for believing anyone would just want to help me.

I shake my head to clear away those thoughts. There is no time for self-pity or wishful thinking. All that matters now is getting as far away from them as possible. And maybe then, I can find a safe place for us to stay. Somewhere Harper will never have to feel scared or alone again—a real home.

I push myself to move faster, my breathing becoming more strained as the ground gets steeper and we reach the top of the hill. I look down at Harper, her cheeks a rosy pink from the cold, but at least she's sleeping soundly in my arms again. She's a brave little girl, but I wish she didn't have to be so strong so soon. My heart aches for her as we continue on, my thin boots crunching against frosty twigs and leaves. Suddenly, the wind picks up, carrying with it a howl that sends shivers down my spine.

"Please, not the wolves. Not already," I whisper to myself, my voice trembling. "It's just the wind."

But as we continue walking, the sound grows louder and more distinct. Panic begins to surge inside me as I realize we're not alone on the trail. Wolves—and they're

getting closer by the second. Is it the Collinses, or some other wolves out running? I try to kid myself that it could be anyone out for a run, but I recognize the aggression in their howls. They're hunting.

My legs tremble underneath me as I force them to keep moving despite the burning in my arms from carrying Harper and our bag. I can feel my strength draining away with every step. Without my wolf, adrenaline is not an endless resource.

We finally reach an opening in the trees, where there's a small creek frozen over with the frost that still lingers in the air. I know we need to stop and rest here because I can't keep going, but we don't have time if those wolves are coming for us. Their howls are drawing closer, echoing off the trees like a warning. My heart is pounding in my ears as we stay close to the tree line, reaching some large boulders that I duck behind. I can't see anyone, but I can feel them out there. I think they're on one of the other trails, but that is no comfort, as it's easier to cut across in wolf form. The forest is no obstacle.

They let out a chilling growl that sends Harper stirring in my arms, whimpering softly as she wakes from her nap. I quickly hush her, not wanting her to sense my fear, but that seems unavoidable, and she begins to whimper. There's no hiding from the fact that the Collinses have found me. In wolf form, they must have covered my escape route in no time to have already caught up with us. They're coming for us; they're coming to claim what they think is rightfully theirs—Harper and me.

I force myself to look at her, trying to give her some reassurance even though I have none. "It's okay, sweetie," I whisper, my voice shaking as I try to sound calm for her sake. "We'll be safe here." But even as I say those words, I know they're a lie. We're not safe anywhere with them on the trail.

We can't outrun them. I don't even think I can fight them off without my wolf. But I won't let them take me or Harper without a fight. What if they drag me back and just

leave Harper out here alone? The thought makes my blood run cold, and I clutch Harper tighter against me, trying to block out the cold seeping through our thin clothing as the trees rustle and snap behind us.

I see Mr. Collins's wolf step into the clearing; his wife and a couple of wolves I don't recognize linger behind him as he shifts back to human form. "Come out, Ava. We know you're there." He smirks. "Don't make this worse for yourself. After all, you're a thief now, too."

I carefully put Harper down and place my bag in front of her. I open it and give her the rest of the bread to try and occupy her while I call on my wolf one last time. I can feel Mr. Collins pacing in the clearing, and my heart pounds with fear and adrenaline as I look at Harper's beautiful face and try to will myself to shift. To fight.

I feel my wolf in the recesses of my mind. I can almost sense her intention and willingness to return, but something is stopping her. If she won't return now when it matters more than ever, then when will she? I look down at my hands and see claws appearing and then retracting, but I can't complete the shift. Frustration makes me feel sick as I weigh my options: beg them not to hurt us? They're scared of Harper. I don't think they'll let me keep her.

I reach into my bag and take the silver-tipped knife I've kept hidden since finding it in the barn a few weeks ago. I sharpened it to a fine point, and it is capable of doing some damage, but perhaps not enough. It might be my only chance, though, if they threaten to hurt Harper. Tears sting my eyes as I step to the side of the boulder and reveal myself just as Harper begins to cry, reaching for me.

"I won't miss that damn noise," Mr. Collins snarls, making me flinch.

I hold my head high, "Well, I won't go anywhere without my daughter. I will fight you with everything I have to keep her safe," I tell him, my voice determined but

shaky.

He simply laughs and looks back at his wife and the other two wolves. “She really thinks she has a choice.”

Harper is wailing now, and I falter slightly, the bond between us demanding I pick her up, but I daren’t take my eyes off the man in front of me. Suddenly, something catches my eye at the side of the clearing. Is there another wolf? Are we surrounded? I feel dizzy with panic and look toward Mr. Collins, who has also turned to look deeper into the forest. For a moment, I think I catch a familiar scent on the breeze, but the crackle of thunder that follows sends me reeling before I can think clearly. Mr. Collins’ eyes widen a fraction right before the figure of a man barrels into him, followed by a flash of lightning that sends him flying backward. He staggers to his feet as a giant silver wolf launches at him out of nowhere.

A wolf I would recognize anywhere: Callum.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

I have to admit, probably my favorite part of these regular alpha meetings is the long walk back to my pack. I don't care that it takes almost until sunrise. I know I could do it quicker in wolf form, but it's not about speed. It's about having time in the forest to think, away from the constant chatter from the pack, multiple opinions, and the nagging threat from the rogues.

It's the only time I get some peace these days. The only peace I've had since Ralph dropped dead out of the blue; he'd been suffering from some mystery illness, but the stupid fool didn't tell anyone. I'm not sure anyone mourned his actual passing beyond some of the old guard who appreciated his brand of tyranny. Certainly not me. But his sudden passing did throw the entire Island into chaos. And then I compounded that by going against my wolf and throwing Ava away.

I did what I had to do, and I wish she would just stop haunting my every damn step. Let me enjoy a moment of peace. It's as though she's dogging my every thought tonight.

I growl in frustration before stopping suddenly with the dawning realization that the entire trail is infused with Ava's scent. She literally is all around me. I want to shrug it off as though it's simply my imagination, but I know it isn't. She's been here . Recently. Her scent is so strong. And so is her fear.

I take a moment and allow my wolf to consider the different scents in the forest. These trails are well used, but several scents stand out as recent—other wolves. A hunt is on. Is Ava part of it, or the target? Is it really her?

I can sense the wolves' direction, so I shift, taking off down the trail, barely even

pausing at the crossroads and clearings as I focus relentlessly on my pursuit. I'm a blur of motion, my paws barely touching the ground as I race through the forest.

I round a corner on the well-worn path and approach a clearing, the moonlight glinting off the silver water of a small creek that runs along the edge. I duck to the side, slowing and creeping through the undergrowth until I find a better view.

And there she is. The ghost that has haunted me ever since I rejected her. Now, I see her, standing her ground against a man flanked by wolves who linger behind. My heart skips a beat when I hear a baby or small child crying from somewhere behind Ava. Who is she hiding, and are there others?

I spring to action, barreling into the man, sending him flying before summoning my lightning magic, which hums in my veins as I spin around to face the wolves. I need to distract them before the man who was threatening Ava recovers. I send a bolt of lightning straight at the closest wolf, but I don't stop there. My lightning arcs through the air and takes out the other two before dissipating in a shower of sparks. The other wolves struggle to their feet and retreat to the furthest edge of the clearing, unsure of what to do. I turn my attention back to the man, who is back on his feet and advancing on Ava.

"You really shouldn't have done that," he warns, his voice dark and threatening. "You think you're something special, getting in the middle of what doesn't concern you? She's ours." He raises his hand as if to grab her, and I see red.

My magic surges once more, as I send a bolt directly his way, first a warning shot to the ground that causes him to stumble. When that doesn't work, a shot to his shoulder sends him flying backward again.

"You're going to have to go through me first." Turning to the cowering wolves, I growl, "Take him and leave, or fight, and I will put you all down right now."



They're not part of my pack, nor anyone I recognize, so I assume they are rogues or visitors. Either way, they've clearly realized who I am, as one approaches ears down and submissive as they guide the injured man away. I can feel Ava's presence behind me, but I don't turn until I'm satisfied that the other wolves have gone.

The forest falls silent around us; even the child who was crying now seems calm. I finally turn to look at her, and I'm shocked by what I see. Ava stands before me, cradling a small blonde child, her own fair hair—much longer than before—flowing around her. Her figure seems smaller and more fragile, yet curvier in some ways. Her clothes are disheveled and dirty. Seeing her like this pisses my wolf off. Why couldn't she have made something of herself and gotten away from here?

"You can't stay here, they'll be back," I snap. "Seem to think you belong to them." I eye the child in her arms.

She lifts her chin slightly in response. "Well, we do not. Just wrong place, wrong time."

She shifts slightly, and I can tell the child is too heavy for her to hold for much longer. I find myself staring at them for a moment before releasing a sigh. "What about her?" I ask, gesturing at the child.

She pulls the child closer, rubbing her back. "She is mine, " she confirms. I can't see the child very well, but she looks very young and small. Something within me burns at the knowledge that she's had a child with someone else since leaving. "We're heading to the coast, so we'll get going."

I can't help but scoff at that. "Is her father there? Those wolves will just circle back around for you if you stay on this trail. Is he meeting you?"

She looks startled for a moment, and I know I'm snapping at her, but I can't help it. I

stare at the child, trying to get my head around the fact she's been playing house with some new man while her disappearance has haunted me. She looks around the forest nervously, obviously trying to assess the risks for herself before responding.

"There's no one, it's just us," she finally admits, and I know I'm a bastard, but it soothes my wolf somehow. "Thank you for your help, but we'll be fine."

I watch as she pulls a heavy-looking backpack onto her shoulder while trying to balance the child. The cute blonde toddler turns to look at me inquisitively, and the intense blue of her eyes briefly takes me aback as she stares back at me with something akin to wonder in her eyes, like she's never seen anyone like me before. She almost seems to be assessing me; it's as though she can see straight through me. It's disconcerting, to say the least. There's something unusual about the child.

I shake my head. "I won't leave a child, or you, out here to be picked off by those wolves," I say, watching the uncertainty flash across her face. "I'm alpha, and this is my land. You'll come with me while we sort this out."

I don't miss the way she subtly rolls her eyes and begins to protest. It should piss me off, but it almost makes me smile. I'm mostly relieved she hasn't completely lost her spirit; the rest of her demeanor seems to imply it. Except the way she faced up to those wolves—clearly a mother's determination. That's something I can respect. So why can't she see the only way to protect her child is to come with me?

"No way," she replies defiantly. "I'm never going back there. I'm never going anywhere with you."

She moves to walk past me, and my wolf bristles at her attitude. Why does she have to be so damned difficult when I'm just trying to help her? I reach out and grab her arm, pulling her back roughly. She stumbles, trying to maintain her balance with her daughter in her arms.

“Don’t you dare,” she hisses, glaring at me angrily. “You’ve hurt me enough already.”

But her words fall flat as she looks down at the place where I’m holding her, a nervous tremor running through her body. The scent of fear is so strong it almost makes me hesitate, but I’m not going to let her walk into danger. “I can protect you both,” I insist, even as I feel my own fangs slowly lengthen in response to her distress. “Agree, for her sake if not your own.”

She shakes her head violently, eyes filling with tears. She’s about to say something, but I cut her off. “Goddammit, Ava,” I snarl, “this is not up for discussion. It’s been a long night, and I don’t fancy another fight with those wolves. Do you?”

Her eyes go wide, filled with tears now, but instead of fighting me on it again, she looks at the girl and simply nods. Without another word, we leave the clearing and begin walking down the trail that leads towards the town. At the crossroad, Ava looks toward the trail that leads to the port and pauses. I can tell she’s considering her original plan, but she says nothing and follows me. The trail she was on passes near our town, and it’s clear she was hoping to travel undetected through the night. The question is, why?

I notice the child watching us both warily over Ava’s shoulder, her little brow furrowed in confusion. Her weight is clearly bothering Ava, and I notice her readjusting her a few times. Ava was never the strongest wolf, but she appears to be even weaker now. I sigh, irritated at the thought that her wolf continues to be a disappointment. “Let me take her,” I say, stopping. “It’ll be quicker.”

She hesitates, but I can see her arms physically shaking, and I reach for the girl before she can argue. I almost expect the toddler to complain, but instead, she squeals in delight as I lift her higher. “What’s her name?” I ask Ava.

Eyeing me warily, obviously reticent, she pauses for a moment before replying. “Harper. Just be careful with her. She’s not used to other people.”

I nod but don’t say anything as we continue walking faster now. I must admit, the kid doesn’t seem nervous as she chatters and waves her arms around. I don’t have much experience with pups, but I find myself enjoying the way she seems to be excited about everything in the forest.

I smile as Harper bats away a butterfly that has taken a particular liking to her. I turn to see Ava watching us; there is an unreadable expression on her face. This is clearly the last thing either of us expected to happen today. I steal another glance, my wolf responding to her proximity. I can’t deny her beauty. That was never the problem. Her soft blonde hair, pale skin, and rosy pink lips call to me, but I also can’t miss her small, weak stature, and I doubt her wolf has improved at all. A question nags at the corner of my mind, and I find myself stopping and turning to her.

“Why didn’t you shift?” I ask. “You could never defend yourself or Harper against a man. Were you even going to try to fight?”

Red appears on her cheeks, and her head dips. “Of course I was. I would fight to the death for Harper,” she says quietly. Truthfully. “But my wolf is gone. I mean, not totally, but I can’t shift. Not right now, anyway.”

For fuck’s sake, I think to myself. A wolf that can’t even shift.

“Well, it’s a good thing I turned up if you can’t save yourself,” I mutter, and carry on walking, my stomach churning at the thought of what would have happened if I hadn’t stumbled upon them. Harper giggles at something unseen, and it pulls at my heart.

I’m not sure why I care so much about them, but I do. And it’s confusing as hell.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

I want to tell him to fuck off, but the truth is, he's right. If he hadn't found us, the Collinses would have either dragged me away and left Harper to die in the forest or been forced to kill me in the fight to save her. There was no good outcome in that scenario.

And now I'm watching the man who destroyed me carrying my daughter through the forest, laughing along with her...

Carrying our daughter.

The thought makes me panic inside. I want to grab Harper and run. We were so damn close to the port. So close to the life I'd promised her, a fresh start where we'd be happy together and safe.

Returning to the pack's main town is the furthest thing I can imagine from a fresh start. I watch Harper closely, carefully. She's happily chatting away about anything and everything she sees. Most importantly, she's calm. It's usually when she's overexcited that her magic gets out of hand, and I'm just praying it stays that way until I figure out my next move.

It's not that Callum's family are the only shifters with magic, but they are certainly the strongest, and I've never seen anyone else on the island with the gift of lightning—until Harper. At first, I thought she had fire, but now I can feel the electricity build around her before the sparks begin, and I know without a doubt she has her father's gift. She just can't control it, so fire is usually the result, anyway.

I just don't want Callum or anyone else in this godforsaken town to see it. I prefer

that he assumes she has a father somewhere. I can't risk the pack wanting to keep her; I know how much they value the gift. Oh my goodness, my parents...I don't even want them to know about Harper.

Callum is a few steps ahead on the path, so I increase my speed to catch up and clear my throat to get his attention.

"C-Callum?" I call out, and he slows, visibly frustrated. "I, um, I don't want to see my parents. We're not staying, and I don't need them bothering me."

He comes to a complete stop, and I see something unreadable flash across his face before he schools his expression again. "Ava," he begins, almost carefully. "I'm sorry to say your mom passed on. I don't know the details. Your dad...he's gone, the house is just empty."

Of all the things I was expecting him to say, this wasn't it. For a moment, I feel like the wind has been completely knocked out of me, and I simply stare at him. Something like pity is reflected back at me, and I want to tell him to get lost and that I don't need his pity. But I don't. Instead, I look at Harper and feel the weight of a thousand questions hit me at once: Why didn't she love me? Why didn't she protect me? Why didn't she care?

Harper smiles at me with pure innocence and love. And I know I will never let her be hurt the way I was.

"Ava?" Callum prompts, pulling me from my thoughts. "I am sorry—"

"That's okay, we weren't close, really," I say quietly. "That's why I didn't want to see them."

Harper wriggles in his arms, obviously annoyed at stopping, as she was clearly

enjoying the journey. The town isn't far now, and I don't want her to get worked up, so I start walking, but he stops me, blocking the path. "I'll look into it for you. Charlie will know more."

I bristle at my brother's name. "No, I don't want to see him, either." Callum looks visibly confused and opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand to stop him. "He won't want to see me, either. After all, did he go looking for me?"

I can see the answer written all over his face: No. I already knew that, but it still stings to have it confirmed. The silence hangs between us for a moment; he appears lost for words before he finally notices how much Harper is wriggling and refocuses his attention on her. He nods at me, turning to keep walking. As he turns, I notice the tiniest sparks dancing on her fingertips and hold my breath, waiting to see if he notices. When he doesn't, I thank the goddess, a reprieve that is temporary as we turn the final bend and see the town come into view.

I hate this town.

It occurs to me that I never asked Callum why he was out in the forest by himself so early. Not that it matters, but our approach to town coincides with the whole place coming alive for the day. I feel eyes on me from the moment we reach the outermost house, and it only gets worse the closer we get to the center. Thankfully, we haven't run into any of his betas, so no one dares ask Callum why he's walking with me, but that doesn't stop them from openly staring with hostile glares that make me want to run far away.

Harper seems to pick up on the change in atmosphere, twisting and turning in Callum's arms, reaching for me. "Mama, Mama, Mama."

Her calls bring even more attention, and I hear whispers coming from a group of women outside the bakery: She has a child, who would have thought? Imagine

coming back here with a child in tow. Always strange, that one.

“I think someone wants you now,” Callum says, handing Harper to me and giving her a surprisingly affectionate smile, seemingly oblivious to the commotion our presence is causing.

I take Harper back, relieved that my aching muscles feel stronger again as I hold her with ease. She sinks against me, and I savor our bond for a moment, allowing the peace she gives me to soothe my frayed nerves. Ignoring the whispers, we follow Callum toward his house. It feels like a million years since I was last here, and I have to ignore the waves of grief and fear that rise up as the property comes into view.

The alpha’s home was naturally always the most impressive in town, but it appears Callum has made some serious upgrades. The historic cabin exterior has been refurbished and is now complemented by giant steel and glass windows that blend the old seamlessly with the new. Callum’s childhood home always had a slightly ominous vibe, being Ralph’s abode, but now it feels fresher and brighter. Although almost anything would look more welcoming than where Harper and I have been living.

I follow Callum up the familiar steps and wait as he opens the door. It appears the outside transformation was only the beginning; the interior has been completely remodeled. Entering the hallway, I’m stunned. Without a word, we follow Callum into what appears to be a modern chef’s kitchen. I stand dumbfounded, staring at the high-end appliances, gleaming counters, and custom cabinetry, trying to remember what the layout of the house used to look like. I glance around, seeing that beyond the kitchen is an open-concept living space with a massive fireplace and floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the forest surrounding us. It’s breathtaking, but I can’t relax into it.

“This is beautiful,” I whisper, hoping to break our awkward silence.



Callum nods absently, distracted by something only he can see. “I wanted something more...welcoming, I guess.” He clears his throat, looks at Harper, and asks, “Are you hungry?”

Harper claps her hands and beams. It breaks my heart to think how brave she has been and how, with only a small amount of bread earlier, she must be starving. She rarely complains, and it’s not because she’s just being good; it’s because all she’s known is hardship. The thought makes my stomach turn, but it also strengthens my resolve that things are going to get better for us now. I’ll figure out our next steps.

I watch as Callum moves around his kitchen, making some food for us. I feel awkward just standing there, and I try not to stare, but I find myself unable to tear my eyes away. Gone is the handsome boy I stupidly fell for, and in his place is a man—an alpha. His presence is almost too much for me, an overload for my senses. My now-dormant wolf begins to stir, something that is both confusing and terrifying. Our tentative bond was irreversibly destroyed when he rejected me; the last thing I need is for my wolf to start harboring false hope now.

I try to keep my emotions in check while Harper enjoys her snack and chatters with Callum. I must admit, he’s better with her than I would have imagined.

“Cute kid,” he says, tearing me from my thoughts. “Her dad a shifter?”

Although his voice is level, there’s a strange undercurrent to his tone, and I find myself turning red under the scrutiny in his expression. I nod, grabbing the empty plates and taking them to the sink. “Mmm, I don’t really like talking about it.”

With my back to him at the sink, I hold my breath, praying that he’ll drop the subject. For a moment, I think he’s going to push me on it, but thankfully, Harper’s babbling seems to break the spell, and although I hear him let out a frustrated sigh, he doesn’t say anything more. At least, not for now.

I wash the dishes, just grateful for something to do, and then Callum offers to show us to the spare room. We climb a wide wooden staircase that leads to a hallway with several doors on either side. My jaw drops as he opens one of them to reveal a large suite complete with what looks like a walk-in closet, an ensuite bathroom, and king-size bed that looks out over the treetops outside.

"It's yours for now," Callum says softly as he sets Harper down on the plush carpeting in front of the window seat. "Do you mind sharing?"

I have to force my mouth not to hang open, shaking my head. "N-no, we always share," I reply, smiling as Harper skips to the bed and throws herself on it. Tears prick my eyes as I see how happy she is to be somewhere so comfortable. "Thank you, this is too much. We'll be out of your way in no time."

Something unreadable flashes across his face before he replies, "Let's just see if it's safe first. You're welcome to stay as long as you need." He pauses at the door. "Dinner's at seven, get some rest. I'm sure it's been a long time since you got any sleep."

My instinct is to tell him we're fine, maybe offer to do some cleaning or something. Anything to make myself useful. But I glance back at Harper on the bed, already yawning, and the pull to be close to her is overwhelming. I'm about to answer when the doorbell rings; suddenly, I feel nervous, hyper-aware that I'm right back where I don't want to be.

Better than being at the mercy of the Collinses, though.

Callum seems to sense my tension as he nods reassuringly. "That will be my betas. We were obviously spotted coming into town. I messaged them anyway. Those wolves looked like rogues, and were too close to town for my liking." Pausing, he adds, "We can talk about that later. What do you want me to say to Charlie?"

“Nothing,” I reply quickly. “I don’t think we have anything to say to each other.”

Callum stares at me for a moment before relenting. “Fine. I don’t think that will hold long, though.”

“I won’t be here long,” I retort as he closes the door.

Once alone with Harper, I almost wish I hadn’t been short with him, but the thought of seeing Charlie makes my heart break.

There was a time when I loved my big brother more than anything in the world, and I thought he loved me. And then he turned his back on me, shunning me. I can understand why he wanted to get away from our parents, but I can’t forgive him for abandoning me.

I walk over to Harper, who is already snuggled down on the bed, fully clothed. Looking through to the bathroom, I consider how amazing it will be to give her a proper bath, but it can wait. I lie down next to her and pull her close to me. As she falls asleep, I tell her our familiar bedtime story about our perfect house, a life full of friends and happiness. Lying on the soft blanket in a warm, safe bedroom, for a moment, I could almost fool myself into thinking that it was true.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

I stand on the raised deck, watching Ava and Harper below in the garden. Although it's unfenced and borders the vast forest behind, they never stray beyond the lawned area, always remaining within easy reach of the house.

They've been here nearly a week now, and Ava is still tiptoeing around the house. Being in the garden feels like a massive step. She's scared, alright. I just can't tell if it's fear of the wolves she was fleeing or worry about seeing pack members that's got her spooked.

I've tried talking to her, and I see glimpses of the girl I once knew, but it's buried under layers of fear and secrets. Having coffee in the kitchen yesterday when Harper was having a nap, it was almost like that summer. Our perfect summer. She was laughing at my attempts to fix the malfunctioning coffee pot that keeps leaking; somehow, I only made it worse. For a brief moment, my wolf felt the kind of peace I'd almost forgotten existed like I was finally able to just be myself again.

But then I tried asking some questions about Harper and where they've been living. Ava clammed up so fast that it was almost as if I could see the walls being physically raised before my eyes, and the moment was lost.

Watching Ava now, it's so easy to remember that summer and how at ease I felt with her. How easy it is to want that feeling again. But what really has my attention right now, is Harper. She's a cute kid, for sure. But it's more than that. I haven't thought too much about wanting pups; I figure there's plenty of time for that. I don't even have a mate, after all. I haven't even spent much time with very young pups, usually struggling to find anything to say to the ones in the pack who look up at me with wonder when I tower over them. But something about Harper feels different. From

the moment I saw her in the forest, my wolf feels compelled to care for her—perhaps it's just an extension of how I feel toward Ava.

I find myself irrationally hating that Harper has a father somewhere out there, someone who had Ava—had what was mine.

I concentrate on what Harper is showing Ava, a bunch of flowers and leaves. But that's not what interests me. It's the way sparks surround the tiny bouquet. At first, I wonder if it's a trick of the light, but as I watch, it happens again. Ava crouches down, whispering something to her, and I see her holding Harper's hands.

Coming from one of the few families that possess magic along with our wolves, I recognize fellow magic when I see it. Harper's father must have had the gift, as I know Ava doesn't. I watch Ava desperately trying to calm Harper's magic. She doesn't know I'm watching, but I can see her glancing nervously around. Perhaps that's why they don't stray too far from the house. It makes me wonder again who Harper's father is.

Ava is vague about her age, and the child is very thin, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that she looks so young that she must have been conceived after she left the pack. After I rejected her, she must have run straight into someone else's arms. The thought pisses me off more than it should. I've been with other women since she left, more than I'd like to admit, but the hypocrisy doesn't make me feel any differently.

I debate going down there and trying to talk to Ava about it again; she usually shuts down anything to do with Harper's lineage. She must realize that won't work forever. To be fair, though, I think her plan is still to leave as soon as possible. She might even have gone already if it weren't for all the increased rogue activity on our borders. Word is, they're looking for someone. A child. Ava went white as a sheet when I told her, and although she swears blind, there's no reason anyone would want

Harper, now that I've seen those sparks, I'm not so sure.

Although she still mentions leaving, I can see the trepidation in her eyes. I must be more of a bastard than I ever imagined, because my wolf wants her here, and if the only way to keep her is fear, then I'll take it. But she can't hide out here forever, locked away in the cabin. It won't stop the whispers building around town.

An alert on my home system indicates Byron's here to give me his update and pulls me from my thoughts. I buzz my beta through, tearing myself away from Ava and Harper. Byron stomps silently into the kitchen and heads straight for the pot of fresh coffee waiting on the island. I smirk, heading over to refill my own. He's a hell of a friend and beta, but he's useless in the mornings after patrol until he's had his coffee.

"Long night?" I chuckle as he drains his mug.

"Eventful," he replies, putting his mug down and cracking his shoulder. "Two skirmishes on the southern border. One of the scouting teams got something interesting though, overhead some chat that's probably about your girl."

I roll my eyes. "She's hardly my girl."

"You're the one playing house with an outcast and her random kid," he replies caustically.

My wolf has me on my feet in seconds. The mug in my hand flies toward my beta, and he ducks, raising his hands in mock defeat as I stop myself short of grabbing him by the throat. "Woah, steady." He stands back, waiting for me to calm down. I stuff down the rage, knowing I can't let my wolf get out of control. "I'm just messing with you, Cal. It's your business."

"It's called doing the right thing. She's just a kid," I say, glancing out the window at

Harper running around.

“And Ava?” Byron presses more gently this time.

I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding, and with it, some of the tension. “Well, she never exactly got a chance in this pack. Maybe she deserves a break, too. But she’s nothing to do with me. I’m just doing the right thing. Now, what’s this info?”

“Some rogues with a cabin on the northern ridge appear to have been keeping a slave. Some noise about her causing a load of damage and taking off. Seems to have been a kid involved.” He adds, “There seems to be a lot more interest in finding the kid than the woman, though, which is odd. Lots of rogues out, looking which is even stranger. They seem organized on it.”

The rogues have been working together more recently, but they certainly aren’t organized. What could have made them decide to work together on this? And why do they care so much?

“Let’s wait for the other patrols to get in and see if anyone has any further updates on it. I’m supposed to be reporting to my brothers on how we’re decreasing rogue activity, and so far, it’s only escalating.” I grimace at the thought of not appearing strong on this.

“Well, you’re not going to like this bit either, then,” Byron says more cautiously. “You’ve got your own reasons for keeping ‘em here, but out there, they’re putting two and two together on the uptick in attacks. Ava’s family has always brought trouble; folks aren’t happy with her holed up here. Charlie’s asking a lot of questions, too.”

My wolf bristles at the thought of anyone questioning my leadership. I stuff down the

feeling—anything not to react like Ralph would have. “Charlie probably should have worried more when his sister was being held as a slave,” I mutter, knowing damn well I’m as much, if not more, to blame. “I’ll be at the meeting later to answer any questions. But tell anyone this: whatever the rogues do or don’t do isn’t on the heads of a woman and child.”

Byron seems to take my meaning and nods solemnly. “Understood, alpha.” He says, putting his mug in the sink and heading for the door. I don’t see him out. Instead, I return to watching Ava and Harper for a moment. Ava’s fair hair practically sparkles in the morning sun, taking my breath away. Harper is running circles around her in the meadow grass, and I feel my wolf’s hold extending to both of them now. I sigh in frustration; from what Byron said about the pack’s reaction to her being here, nothing has changed.

Besides, she hates me. Byron’s wrong about one thing: we’re not playing house. She avoids me, and I work all day to avoid the fact that she’s avoiding me. She has no wolf to speak of and is far too meek to change the pack’s opinion of her. The only time I see her fire is where Harper is concerned, but even that is wrapped in layers of fear. The pack would destroy her - again. The only one who doesn’t seem to care is Harper. She was shy at first, clearly worn out. But now, she’s constantly seeking me out, peering around doorways to spy on me, shrieking joyfully, and running off. It’s hard not to smile at her innocence and sense of adventure.

I notice Ava gathering Harper’s things and motioning her to head back to the house. Weighing whether to stay and talk to her about what Byron revealed, I decide to wait until after the pack meeting and go into my study, shutting the door. I never think of myself as cowardly, but I’m starting to feel as though there are some questions that I’m not going to like the answers to.

Running the pack, even without the rogues causing problems, is a full-time job. The numerous business investments that ensure our wealth stretch from the island to the



mainland, and many were divided along with the packs. I'm still dealing with the fallout. The afternoon passes quickly, my eyes straining to read the spreadsheets after hours of concentration. Perhaps this is why Ralph was always in a bad mood, I muse, stretching and checking the time.

I hear Ava and Harper in the living area as I head out. Ava is reading something to her, and it's only as I slip out, deliberately saying nothing, that I pause on the porch. I'm almost tempted to go back inside and be with them. I shake my head. That is not my family, not my kid, and not my woman. The line between wanting to be a good alpha and help someone and the fact I rejected her is clouding my vision on this. I just feel bad because I fucked her before the rejection—I should never have even gone there knowing how the pack would react. Sure, I still feel a pull to her, but it's not like she's Luna material.

I need to get my head on straight.

The hall is overflowing as I arrive. Pack meetings are always well attended, but this is exceptionally busy. A few wolves nod in greeting as I head into the building, but it's not long before I spot Charlie weaving his way toward me.

"How is she, Cal?" he asks, the same as he has done all week.

"She's good. Kid seems fine too," I reply. "I don't have much news for you. Maybe you need to try talking to her yourself."

He runs his hand through his hair, looking conflicted. "You said she wouldn't see me. I don't want any drama."

I chuckle darkly. "Looks like we might get that anyway."

I don't give him a chance to answer, needing to get this meeting underway and very

aware that talking to Charlie about all this only makes me feel more like a bastard than I already do. His guilt is written all over his face, but he's also reluctant to step up and deal with his sister. He's spent his entire life from adolescence distancing himself from that family, and he's in no rush to be dragged back in, by the looks of things.

Byron is calling the meeting to order as I step onto the stage, a sea of faces shrouded in respect and curiosity staring back at me. We begin with a breakdown of rogue activity, and I provide an update from my brothers, all saying much of the same. Tristen seems to have stepped up the most, destroying a few camps and exiling some rogues to the mainland, something we're beginning next week with the first set of prisoners set to leave—and good riddance.

The questions gradually turn to Ava: Why is she here? Is the child hers? Is it the same child being hunted by the rogues? What has Ava done wrong now?

The questions mount, along with my building frustration and rage. I glance over at Charlie, standing with his mate; from the set of his jaw, I can sense he's close to exploding, too. The conflict is written all over his face.

“Enough.” I slam my fist onto the table, and the room falls silent. “Enough. Have you heard yourselves? A child was being attacked—a child technically of this pack, whatever the family. We don't know enough yet, but we do know where our loyalties lie against the rogues. So, focus on the issue at hand.”

“Why is she staying with you? At the alpha's house, no less. She has her family's old cabin in—” someone pipes up from the crowd.

“She would be taken easily from there,” I snap. Murmurs continue around the hall. Admitting that she couldn't protect herself or her child only reinforces the narrative about her, but it's true. “I will have no one questioning my decision on this.

Understood?”

I hear a few “ yes, alpha”s from around the room, and that will have to do for now.

“Tough crowd,” Byron mutters as the pack disperses.

“They’re restless about the rogues. Ava is an easy target,” I admit.

Byron pauses for a moment before replying, “You know, it might work better if she was out and about. That’s a cute kid. Let people see that, and they’ll ease up.”

“Did they ever ease up on Ava?” I ask dryly.

“Oh, I don’t know, I guess you must have at one point,” Byron replies, already walking away. I stare at his retreating back in surprise; I didn’t think anyone knew what had happened between us. For the first time, I wonder if it’s as secret as I thought.

Returning to the house, I find it almost shrouded in darkness except for a small lamp in the kitchen. Ava stands at the sink washing the dishes, some leftovers covered on the counter. She half-turns as I enter, drying her hands. “We ate. Harper was so tired,” she says with a small smile. “But I kept this warm for you.”

The soft lighting makes her look even more beautiful; her small, curvy frame makes my hands itch with the urge to grab her and pull her close. She looks like she’d weigh nothing at all. Weak. My wolf growls in frustration, and when I look back at her, I see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“You know,” I say, stalking toward her. “A lot of the pack meeting was about you. I think it would be better if you and Harper were seen out in town. Stop hiding away.”

She takes a deep breath and glances around. “We can leave if it’s easier. I don’t want to cause any problems.”

“Goddammit. That’s not what I said,” I snap. “You just need to act...normal. The pack functions better when everyone fits in, you know that.”

Tears well in her eyes, and it only pisses me off. Why can’t she just be normal and get the pack to accept her? Charlie managed it. “I won’t expose Harper to their hate. She deserves so much better.”

I run my hand through my hair, exasperated and annoyed. “It’s not hate,” I say, stepping closer to her. To my surprise, she doesn’t shrink away.

“What would you call it, then?” she says, eyeing me defiantly. She’s pissing me off. The meeting pissed me off. Everything is pissing me off.

My eyes flicker to her mouth, and I know the exact moment she realizes as her breath hitches. She finally diverts her eyes, but I find that’s the last thing I want. Leaning down, I capture her lips in one crushing movement. My hand tangles in her hair, and she melts into me with a soft moan. I can taste the fear on her lips, but it only makes me more determined to take her.

She gasps as I deepen the kiss, her hands coming up to my chest in surprise. She leans into me more, and I feel her body starting to melt against mine. My other hand slides down to her small waist, pulling her closer, feeling the soft curve of her ass beneath my fingers.

Suddenly, she pushes me away with surprising force, and I stumble backward. “We can’t do this,” she gasps out between breaths. “If you don’t want us here, we’ll leave. But you’re never having me like this.”

With that, she turns and runs from the room. I don't go after her because what would I say? This is exactly how I want her.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Harper is clearly thrilled with the new clothes Callum left outside our door this morning, but they only make me nervous. It means he isn't giving up on his insistence that we go out into town and try to integrate. I tried telling him we're still not staying; there's no point. But he's right about one thing—we can't go anywhere with the rogues still potentially looking for us. I won't risk Harper's safety.

I help Harper pull on a cute fleece jacket and watch as she beams with pride. At the Collinses', she only had four items of clothing, and I'd had to beg for those. They were stained and the wrong sizes. I want to hate Callum so much, but that's increasingly hard to do when I look at my daughter and see the healthy color in her cheeks from good food, her laughter from having somewhere safe to play, and now these lovely clothes.

Even her magical outbursts have been less frequent, which makes me wonder if she was doing it so much out of fear. Another way that I have failed her. Tears begin to well in my eyes, and she seems to notice straight away, rushing over to me and wiping them away with innocent determination. I smile reassuringly at her and get her to twirl for me again.

It is hard to hate Callum when he's done so much for Harper, yet I burn with rage for what he has done to me. He destroyed me. He rejected me, and I lost my wolf. And then, he kissed me and made me feel everything that I had tried so hard to forget.

Harper dances around, impatient to get going. I've told her we're going to go to the shops and she's excited, if a little confused. She's never been to any shops before. We talked about it and made it a game, explaining how they work, and now she's even more excited. She's eager to see the world, and I know I shouldn't hold her back. But

I also know how cruel this particular world can be.

I check my reflection in the mirror. Again, I'm grateful that Callum picked up a few things for me, too, so I don't look a complete mess. My hair hasn't been cut in over three years, but it's in fairly good condition now that I'm able to wash it properly, and it falls in waves down my back. Harper seems to have taken my coloring, and it makes me smile at how similar we look. I just wish she hadn't inherited her father's magic. I fear it's only going to put her at risk.

I heard Callum leave after breakfast, and I'm glad I don't have to face him again right now. In some ways, I'd rather face the whole pack than see his face and think about the way his lips felt against mine last night again. Breakfast was hard enough, but I managed to occupy myself with Harper and try to ignore the way his eyes seemed to bore into my soul, or at least my body.

The kiss did more than ignite my body; it briefly brought my wolf to the surface, too. She clawed and whined for him even hours later. And that pisses me off more than anything—where was she when I needed her strength? Where was she when Harper needed her? That she would return just for him after all we have been through is an insult. I feel like I don't even want my wolf anymore, and I've never heard a shifter say anything like that.

Grabbing Harper's hand, I head downstairs. I can feel my trepidation rising as we leave the house and set the alarm as Callum showed me. I haven't been out since we arrived in town, it feels all wrong walking down the porch steps. So many memories of the last time I stood here before fleeing the pack linger. It's like the trees are mocking me as the leaves rustle. I'm determined not to let my feelings affect Harper, so I plaster a smile on my face and swing her arms gently as we walk. She's giddy with excitement as we turn onto the main square, and I point out all the different shops.

The hardware store that hasn't changed at all since I was a little girl, the general store with the biggest range of stock on the island by far, and the bakery that old Mrs. Richardson used to own; she always gave Charlie and me free buns when she saw us loitering. We could never go in, as we had never had any money.

The Collinses' stolen money burns in my pocket, but I look down at Harper and make a decision. I could never buy anything from the bakery, but I'm going to make sure she experiences it. Besides, I was a slave to the Collinses; they never gave me anything but pain and suffering for the work I did. The measly few hundred dollars I stole is pocket change compared to what they actually owe me for the work I did. It still doesn't feel entirely right, but as Harper eyes the window display, I know I'm doing the right thing for her.

Taking her hand, I guide her into the shop and over to the counter. Thankfully, the bakery is quiet, and I don't recognize the woman behind the counter. She gives me a slightly strange smile that makes me suspect she knows who I am but doesn't say anything. I keep my focus on Harper and try to suppress my nerves. Harper appears oblivious to my inner turmoil as she scans the array of sweet treats before triumphantly pointing at a cream bun almost the size of her head.

"Tis one, please, Mama," she says, and when I nod, she begins to jump up and down in excitement.

"Someone's very excited." The woman behind the counter smiles. "Anything for you?"

"Just a latte, please," I reply, smiling back. Behind me, I hear the little bell ringing above the door as more customers pour into the bakery.

Harper bounds over to one of the small tables by the window, and as I turn to check her whereabouts, I notice several familiar faces. Two shewolves I went to high school



with and a couple of older women. All of them have their eyes trained on Harper and me.

“Oh, my goddess. I can’t believe she’s actually showing her face,” one whispers loud enough for everyone to hear.

“It’s the child I feel sorry for. She looks so sweet, but imagine being tied to that as a mother. No father. She has no chance,” another says, and that one stings more than anything.

The woman behind the counter hands me my latte and the bun on a plate. “Can I get it to go, please?” I ask apologetically, and she offers me a small smile of understanding before taking the bun and putting it in a bag. I take it gratefully and rush over to where Harper is sitting in the window.

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s go eat these in the park.” Harper is still at that age where she thinks everything is a good idea and happily gets up, eager to have her bun wherever we sit.

Turning toward the door, I see Anna and Samantha from school, obviously waiting to say something to me. I knew it was a possibility that I’d see someone I know, and Callum told me the pack was asking questions, so I thought I’d prepared myself. But as I watch their expressions dance between disgust and pity, I can’t help the nausea that begins to surface.

“Ava?” Anna says her tone light, her expression anything but. “And who is this?”

Harper waves at Anna, and her innocence makes my heart clench. “This is my daughter, Harper. We’re just on our way out.”

“Mmm.” Anna doesn’t move. Instead, she leans down to Harper. “On your way to

meet your daddy?”

Harper just looks at me. We’ve never talked about her having a daddy, so she doesn’t look particularly confused; she just smiles uncertainly. I hold my head high as I look directly at Anna. “We’re just going to the park, do you mind?” I ask, indicating that they should move.

“You were right, no dad. How sad,” Samantha mutters. “How does that work, Ava? Who have you been living with, exactly?”

I can feel my face burning as everyone in the bakery’s eyes are focused on me. “That is none of your business. Now, let my daughter enjoy her treat in peace, please.”

I hate the slightly pleading tone that has entered my voice as I say please, but I just want to get Harper out of here. The woman behind the counter calls for the next customer, and I’d like to think she’s doing her best to break the tension, but Anna and Samantha don’t take the hint.

“Try not to be strange about it, Ava,” Anna says smoothly. “We’re just concerned and checking on you. No one knows where you’ve been or who you’ve been with. There are all sorts of rogues out there.”

I straighten my spine and glare at her. “They have nothing to do with me or my daughter. Now move.”

Samantha chuckles as the bell rings behind them, and a few more people enter, further blocking our path. “Someone’s feeling brave because the alpha’s taken pity on them. Very odd, if you ask me—”

“Brave to be questioning the alpha so openly, if you ask me,” a familiar voice says from behind Anna. She spins around, and I see Sara standing by the door.

Sara was one of my few friends from high school, and I wasn't entirely surprised to hear from Callum that she's now mates with Charlie; I always suspected they had a soft spot for each other. I used to assume that's why she was so nice to me. She must have thought, wrongly, that he cared.

Anna has the decency to look marginally humbled, glancing around and realizing she was indeed openly questioning the alpha. No one would care what she was saying about me, but Callum is a different matter.

I smile gratefully at Sara as I see my way out. "Hi, Sara. Harper and I were just on our way out." No one stops me as I step forward, and Sara holds the door for me.

"I'll walk with you," she says, following us out of the bakery and crossing the road toward the park. We walk silently for a moment before she speaks up. "How are you, Ava? I wanted to stop by, but Charlie said we should wait until Callum said."

I'm surprised they'd even thought about it. "Callum said you were with Charlie. I, um, wasn't surprised," I say.

She laughs. "Was I always that obvious?"

"Only to me," I reply quietly. Glancing behind me, I check that no one has followed. "Thank you for your help back there. I don't think they'll follow now. You don't have to stay."

Sara looks awkward for a moment. "That's not why I came with you. I wanted to see you." Then, looking past me, she adds, "And meet—Harper, is it?"

Harper has stopped and looks at me almost expectantly. "Yes, of course. This is Harper." I reach for Harper's hand, and she comes running back over. "Harper, this is Sara. We went to school together."

She looks shy for a moment and ducks behind me slightly, whispering, “She your friend?”

Sara bends down and peers around at Harper. “Yes, I’m Mom’s friend. Shall we stop and have your treat now?”

Part of me wants to tell Sara it’s not necessary and she should just leave. We were friends early in high school, but as the bullying got worse, she wasn’t always there for me. I think it must have been hard for her to risk her position in the pack, too. But she always tried to make sure I had a friendly face to turn to, just like she’s doing now. Realizing that I want Harper to see something positive today, I nod and smile, making Harper sit down before I tear off some of the bun. She devours it instantly, making Sara and I laugh. She doesn’t ask where I’ve been or about Harper’s father. We simply sit and chat; she tells me all the local gossip. I find myself wanting to ask about Charlie, but I just can’t bring myself to find the words. Just the thought of him makes me feel so sad.

As Harper finishes the last of the bun, we stand to say goodbye, and I feel lighter than I have in a while. “Thank you, Sara, I really appreciate what you did back there.”

She bats her hand as if to dismiss it. “I did nothing. I wanted to see you, and they were just in my way.” She laughs. “Can I come see you at the house? And Harper? She’s just so lovely.”

I beam with pride because I know she is. Harper is the shining light in my dark world, and she’s only shining brighter here, however hard that might be for me. I feel wary, reluctant to let anyone in, but Sara looks so hopeful that I find myself nodding. “Sure, yes. As long as it’s ok with Callum.”

She grins and steps forward, wrapping me in a hug. I freeze for a moment, shocked by the contact. Apart from Callum’s kiss, no one apart from Harper has touched me

with any kindness in years. The well of emotion causes tears to prick at my eyes, and I have to blink them away before she notices.

As we say goodbye and head back toward Callum's house, I turn back and wave once more to Sara. Part of me doesn't want to open myself up to the old memories by reconnecting with anyone else here, and Sara feels too close to Charlie for comfort, but I can't deny she's always been kind to me. Seeing how much Harper responded to her was lovely too, and she deserves the best I can give her. We still need to move on if we're going to have the better life I've promised her, but for now, perhaps showing Harper that people can be nice is the best thing for her. For both of us.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

While I would rather the pack not suffer continuous problems due to the rogues, I am enjoying the increased patrols. Part of being alpha that I didn't expect was how much time I'd sit behind a desk making financial decisions, solving problems, and dealing with pack disagreements. The chance to be out and let my wolf run free isn't something I'm going to pass up. Even the fights are worth it, as I relish the opportunity to flex my alpha powers.

Ralph ruled this island with an iron fist, along with his family. And I guess that included the rogues, too. They were always the scavengers living on the edges of our society, feeding off the scraps. Ignored at best, persecuted at worst, I guess. I never thought too much about them until Ralph's death, and the attacks started in earnest.

They must have sensed their chance in the ensuing transition period—a land grab of sorts. That's certainly been the result, anyway, as several landowners have abandoned properties nearer the borders, tired of the attacks and having to defend themselves constantly. Smaller cabins are being inhabited by rogues claiming they have a right to abandoned property. They're becoming emboldened, and so far, our attempts to crush them are having only limited success. We need to go further.

That doesn't mean I can't enjoy the fight right now, though.

The last of these rogue wolves has been rounded up, and Byron leads the group, taking them down the mountain to be held until expulsion. I wipe the blood from my hands on my leg, enjoying the buzz of adrenaline in my muscles that lasts long after the fight has ended. This particular group of rogues had been targeting a small outer settlement on the northern ridge, great families that had been there for years. Unfortunately, some of the younger wolves are away at college on the mainland,

leaving the older folks more vulnerable to theft. Getting rid of these vermin tonight feels good. As alpha, all I want is for my pack to thrive and feel safe; getting these rogue attackers under control is essential to keeping that a reality.

I fall into line with my betas walking down the trail toward town; the mood is upbeat, except perhaps for the miserable and beaten group of rogues at the front. I turn to see Charlie fall into step with me, and I tense slightly, knowing full well what he's going to say.

"Ava said any more about where she's been?" he mutters, almost reluctantly, but I know the situation is eating at him. "Whose the kid is?"

I eye him deliberately, finding I don't like him referring to Harper as just the kid . "She has a name, you know, your niece. Harper. Sweet thing."

Charlie runs his hand through his hair. "Yeah, Sara ran into them and said the same. I just don't know how to handle all this. You know I wasn't close to Ava."

I can feel my rage burning close beneath the surface, but I also know he's asking his alpha for advice, so I try to temper my own feelings as I reply evenly, "That's not true though, is it? You two were super close as kids; you just made the decision to choose the pack over your parents; no one ever said anything about you ditching Ava." I feel him bristle at my words but continue. "No reason you can't make amends now."

"So this is all my fault, huh?" he snaps.

I want to tell him yes. Actually, it is all your fault. She ran that day because she had no one—after I rejected her, she had no one. "Do you remember what you said when folk started asking where Ava was?" I reply coldly. "You said she'd decided to leave and didn't want to be followed. Was that true?"

I already know it's not true. Ava told me she didn't speak to Charlie. It pissed me off that he lied then, it's going to royally piss me off if he lies to my face now, but I'm giving him a chance.

To his credit, he doesn't miss a beat. "I, uh, lied," he says, looking down at the trail. "I know it was stupid, but I honestly figured she'd just had enough, and I didn't want the whole pack talking about her or my folks."

"So you just abandoned her?" I snarl. "And look what happened to her."

"Look." Charlie says, stopping me in my tracks, "I don't know what caused her to run off; it had nothing to do with me, so someone else did something. I should have done something, but everything was going so well, and folks seemed happy that she was gone. I didn't want to rock the boat. My own position wasn't as secure then. I'm a selfish fuck."

I can hear my own blood rushing in my ears, knowing I'm the reason she ran. I want to punch Charlie in the face, but I know it's because I'm the bastard that set all this in motion; he doesn't even know I was fucking his sister. I'm angry at him because I'm angry at myself. But I'm not about to tell him that.

"Sort it out, Charlie. Make things right with Ava," I say firmly. "The last thing this pack needs is division. It's time that they see you making things right; they'll follow suit, and we'll have more time to focus on keeping everyone safe."

He stares for a moment and then nods. "Might help if she was a little more forthcoming with where she's been. With the rogues? That's really what's bothering people," he suggests. "She might be able to help. Sure she hasn't said anything?"

I glare in response. "I'm sure I would have told my betas had she provided any useful information on that front."



Realizing he might have overstepped, he bows his head, and I can feel his wolf's submission. The truth is, I know he's right. Everything I'm pissed off at him about is just a reflection of my own shortcomings in this situation. And that just pisses me off even more.

We walk on in silence, though I'm reassured Charlie will at least try to make amends with Ava, if she'll let him. I think it would help if the pack saw that her own brother was more welcoming of her return. None of that helps my deeper sense of frustration, though—how we've been avoiding each other since I kissed her. Nothing has changed regarding her status in the pack. It's actually worse than ever. Even her wolf has abandoned her. Kissing her, wanting her, is more pointless than it was then.

Sometimes, I think I should just offer her and Harper safe passage to the mainland, maybe give her some money, and tell her not to look back. But even the thought of doing that makes my gut twist, and my wolf gets angsty. I know what that means. I know my wolf senses the mate bond. Which is actually the most ridiculous part of all this, as my wolf should know better than any that the pack won't accept her.

Charlie doesn't attempt to talk to me again as we reach the town, and I issue orders about the prisoners before heading back to the house. I was so fired up from the fight, and now I just feel weary, worn out by my own thoughts and regrets. Not to mention, my wolf is riding me hard about every wrong step I've made where Ava is concerned.

When I enter, the house is quiet—too quiet. I think for a moment that my senses are on high alert until I hear the gentle sound of a lullaby from somewhere upstairs. Following the sound, I find myself outside Ava's room, listening at the door. The scent of the vanilla bath salts fills the air, and I see that she's tucking Harper into bed for the night. She's singing quietly to Harper, an old pack lullaby I remember from when I was a pup.

My heart swells at the sight of her kneeling next to Harper in the enormous bed, her

long blonde hair cascading over one shoulder as she gently strokes Harper's cheek. She's wearing a soft pink nightgown that clings to her body just right. It's simple but shows off every curve, and my hands itch to touch her. Ava's voice is raspy but soothing, and I can hear the love behind every word.

I shouldn't be here, but something inside me won't let me walk away. I can't help but feel like this is my world now—Ava and Harper are part of it. Maybe it's selfish or stupid, but for a moment after talking to Charlie, after I'd walked in silence stewing on every aspect of this mess, I thought about telling her everything. How much I care for her and want her and Harper to stay with me. How much my wolf demands it.

But then reality sets back in when I remember what would happen if I did that. The pack would never stand for it; they'd never accept her. What about Harper's father? Will he return and lay claim on both of them? The thought fills me with rage and bitter jealousy. As much as I can pretend it isn't so, standing here and watching this family scene play out in front of me, I can't hide from the truth—it's not my family. And beyond these walls, I have a pack who won't let me play pretend. But that doesn't stop me from craving everything I can't have.

I should leave, but my feet are rooted to the spot. I watch her finish singing and then lean in to kiss Harper's forehead, tucking her in one last time. The click of the lamp as Ava turns to walk away leaves me in near darkness, only a faint sliver of moonlight filtering through the window. I can barely make out Ava's form as she stands and walks toward the door, but before she notices me, I grab her wrist, pulling her forcefully into my arms.

Her breath hitches as she gasps in surprise, her body stiffening against mine. "Callum," she whispers, her voice shaky with fear or anger—I can't even tell which, and right now, I don't care.

"I'm sorry," I whisper back, my mouth brushing against her earlobe as I pull her

closer still. "I can't stay away."

Her heart is really racing fast now, and I feel it pounding against my chest through our clothing. Desire flares between us like wildfire caught in the wind. She tries to pull away slightly, but she doesn't fight me when I don't relent. Maybe because she feels it too, or maybe because she knows there's no escaping me this time.

I lead her toward my room, careful not to turn on any lights so that we remain shrouded by darkness. I kick the door shut behind us and push her against the wall, crashing my lips onto hers. It's a rough kiss, demanding and hungry, not like when we were kids. There's no gentleness or exploration here, just need. She responds by tangling her hands in my hair as she clings to me desperately. We're both panting heavily when we finally break apart for air.

"I want you," I murmur against her earlobe before trailing kisses down her neck toward her more sensitive areas. "God, I want you so much."

Her breath is ragged as she nods against my shoulder. "Callum...we shouldn't be doing this." But there's no conviction in her voice. There's only desperate need echoing between us.

We stumble toward the bed. The sound of fabric ripping fills the air as I shred Ava's flimsy nightgown, and our skin finally touches. It's electric, sending shockwaves through my body that make me shudder. Her nipples are hard against my chest, and I groan in anticipation as I bend down slightly and take one into my mouth. She arches her back, gasping and pushing herself further into the sensation.

"Fuck," I mumble against her breast, my other hand moving down to where she's already damp with arousal. My fingers part her folds and find her clit, rubbing firm circles around the sensitive nub before dipping inside her wetness. She cries out softly at the pleasure coursing through her body and grinds down onto my hand in

response.

I can't wait any longer. Standing up straight and pulling off the rest of my clothes, I gently push her back onto the bed. She's panting heavily as I hover over her naked form, kissing along her jawbone and down her neck, nudging her thighs open further. My cock throbs painfully against my stomach as I position myself between her legs and slide inside her in one swift motion.

Her walls clench tightly around me as she gasps out loud and grips my shoulders almost painfully. She's tight, almost too tight, and I have to close my eyes to steady myself before I start to move. I want to go gently for her. I should go gently, but I can't. The need for release is too great. I start thrusting into her with long, hard strokes, each one hitting harder than the last.

I know we're both trying to be quiet, but we're close to losing control. Everywhere I touch sends my magic sparking—her nails dig into my back as she pulls me closer, and my hand finds its way to her breast, massaging it roughly while I grab her hip with my other hand so I can drive into her even harder.

Our breathing is heavy as we speed toward our climaxes—finally, overwhelmed by pleasure, Ava's body tenses up underneath mine, and she cries out as she comes undone first, her walls gripping me tightly as I continue to pound into her relentlessly through her orgasm until I lose control and explode inside of her, groaning out loud as my hot cum fills her.

We collapse together, and I pull her against my side. She seems to sink into me for a moment, but as our breathing returns to normal, I feel her tensing. Releasing her slightly, my eyes having adjusted to the darkness, I look into hers but see only uncertainty and doubt.

“Ava,” I begin, not really knowing what to say. “I-”

She pushes back slightly. “D-don’t,” she whispers, “don’t say anything. I just need to get back to Harper. If she wakes up and I’m not there...”

“We should talk about this,” I say, but she shakes her head and pulls away from me.

“No, that’s the last thing we should do,” she replies before standing, grabbing the blanket from the end of the bed, and rushing out the door.

I lie on my back, surrounded by her scent, my cock already hard again. My wolf almost demands I drag her back here, but I hear her bedroom door click shut and groan with the frustration I feel in every part of me.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Standing under the hot water, I close my eyes and allow the steam to envelop me for a moment, shutting my eyes against the world and trying to block out the way my body appears to remember Callum's every lingering touch on my body from last night. The memory of last night is so vivid it feels almost real again. Echoes of years ago fill my senses, and the longing for him that never went away feels reignited. I can almost feel him inside me now, hot and hard, thrusting—

My eyes fly open as I hear movement from the bedroom: Harper.

"Mama?" I hear her sleepy voice through the sound of the cascading water. I quickly rinse, switch the shower off, and grab my towel.

"I'm coming, sweetheart," I call out, wrapping my hair in a smaller towel. Stepping out of the ensuite, I find her sitting up in bed with her new favorite teddy bear. "I was just washing my hair. Did you sleep ok?"

Harper nods enthusiastically, and the way her mussed blonde curls bob crazily around her with the action makes me smile. She's thriving at the moment, growing so fast, and finally starting to grow taller and look more her age. The fear that last night's events might make things more difficult for her makes my heart clench.

No, this situation isn't permanent. But I want any next steps to be easy on Harper. I need to decide when it's safe to move on, not be pushed out. I'll never forget the ease with which Callum turned on me. How could I ever trust he won't just do that again? Sleeping with me obviously means nothing to him—he didn't hesitate to reject me before publicly shunning me.

I had been shunned all my life, but destroying the bond between us destroyed so much more. I will never survive in this pack without my wolf; I couldn't even survive with her. I feel her sometimes, stalking the outer edges of my consciousness. I felt her last night, so close. Callum's wolf almost chased mine, trying to bring her back to the fore, but if anything, that seemed to scare her away more.

I sigh, scooping Harper into my arms, her childish giggles soothing my soul. She's so small and fragile, a picture of the innocence I desperately want for her. I can't let anything hurt her the way this pack has hurt me.

"Let's go downstairs and get some breakfast, ok?" I ask as I help her dress and run a comb through my hair before carrying her toward the stairs.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee fills the air as we enter the kitchen, and I see Callum standing at the stove. He turns to face me, and my heart skips a beat—he looks so good in nothing but a simple t-shirt, apron, and jeans. His muscles ripple under the tight fabric with every movement, and his eyes are smoldering when he looks at me. The way his gaze sweeps over me makes my body tingle with awareness after what happened last night.

"Good morning," he says curtly, not fully meeting my eyes. It feels like a knife to the chest.

I nod uncertainly in return, setting Harper down at the table before pouring myself a cup of coffee. The rich flavor coats my tongue, sending warmth through me that has little to do with the caffeine. I take a sip and watch Callum expertly flip a pancake before plating it and walking over to Harper.

"Here you go, little one," he says, gently putting the plate down in front of her and cutting the pancake into tiny bits. Something about the tender scene just hits me; he's so sweet with Harper that it physically hurts to watch them together.

He clears his throat and leans against the counter, crossing his arms. "Sara's coming over today," he says abruptly. "I've already said yes."

I feel my heart start to race, a mix of nervousness and anticipation surging through me. It went well when I saw her the other day, but I can't trust anyone here. Sara is Charlie's mate; it all just feels too accosting. Is she just fishing for information? What does she really think of me? I swallow hard, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Okay," I manage after a moment. "That's...good. I think."

Harper sits eating her pancakes with glee, drowning out some of the tension in the room as she giggles and claps her hands together. But it doesn't last long before Callum speaks up. "I'm going for a run, and then there's pack work to attend to," he announces, grabbing his keys from the hook by the door.

He waves at Harper, who squeals with delight before turning to me. For a moment, I think he's going to say something about last night, but instead, he simply pauses, briefly looking as lost as I feel before the moment is broken, and he leaves without another word.

Sara arrives mid-morning, and I feel like I've been psyching myself up for it for hours by the time I open the door. Her easy smile puts me more at ease as we walk through the house, with Harper leading the way to the back deck, where I have coffee waiting.

As we sit down, the sun warms my skin through the pale fabric of my dress, and I try not to think about how much I wish this moment felt more normal.

"So," Sara says hesitantly as she takes a sip of her coffee. "How are you settling back in?" Her green eyes are full of curiosity mixed with caution, and for a moment, I wish we could just relax and really be friends.



I shrug, feigning nonchalance. "It's been an adjustment," I admit, trying not to let my nerves show. "But Harper's doing well." I smile at my daughter, who is playing with some books on the steps.

Silence stretches between us as we both seem to be choosing our words carefully, and I find myself wondering who is more nervous at this point.

Finally, she breaks the silence, leaning back in her chair. "I know you probably don't want to talk about it," she starts slowly, "but you need to know that Charlie really does care deeply for you. He genuinely doesn't seem to know what's best to do." The way she says it sends shivers down my spine—is she testing me?

I take a deep breath before answering honestly, feeling the weight of those words on my heart. "I care about him, too. I always have," I sigh. "But he's the one who didn't want me. It's not up to me to make him feel better or trust him."

I see the sadness in her eyes, but she doesn't disagree with me. How could she? We fall into silence again, but Harper soon breaks it, reminding me that I promised her a snack. Remembering the cakes I made sitting in the kitchen, I head inside to get them. When I come back out, Harper and Sara are chatting away, and the sight warms my heart. Deep down, I know Sara has a good heart, and if I'm honest, I don't think she's here for any other reason than because she wants to be. For the first time, I let some of the tension in my shoulders drop, determined to try and engage with her properly rather than keeping my walls so firmly up.

The rest of the morning passes quickly once I relax, and before I know it, Sarah suggests we go to the park across the street. I hesitate—part of me wants to hide away and say no, but the other part knows that Harper deserves the chance to play with other kids her age. I know I should feel braver with Sara at my side, and Harper looks so excited by the idea, so I cautiously agree.

As we approach, I see a group of children playing together, and without missing a beat, Harper runs off to join them. The sight of her joining in fills me with warmth as she giggles, holding hands with a younger girl as a boy who looks to be her age chases after them. Sarah and I smile at the other mothers nearby and sit down on a bench, watching her play. "She's really happy here," Sarah comments softly, and I nod in agreement.

I lean back and try to ignore the sidewise glances from the other moms. I tell myself they're probably just curious, desperately trying to remember what Callum said, that not everyone is necessarily against me. "It's nice to see her so content with other pups," I reply quietly as she turns to look at me, those friendly but curious green eyes studying my face intently.

Charlie's name is hardly mentioned again, which I'm grateful for, because I don't want to ruin the first nice day I've had with a friend in as long as I can remember. I know I'll see my brother at some point the longer we stay here and will have to face our history. But I'd rather ignore all that today and pretend that my life could be normal for once. Our conversation flits from talking about Harper to reminiscing about some of the colorful characters in the pack's history and gossiping about people I remember. It's refreshing to have a conversation that appears to be genuine. It feels like a million years since I've had a friend to talk to.

Suddenly, there's a commotion as one of the boys starts throwing leaves at Harper. She squeals in delight at first, but then gasps as the boy throws more and more leaves until she's fighting them off as they land on her head. The other moms stand at the same time, clearly about to say something, when suddenly time seems to stand still, and I feel panic rising in my chest when I see sparks flying from Harper's fingertips as she tries to defend herself. They're not big sparks, more like tiny embers, but it's enough to frighten everyone around us. My heart sinks as the women rush to grab their children and pull them away from Harper, fear and disgust written all over their faces.

Before I can even process what is happening, Sara jumps into action, scooping Harper up into her arms and rushing her over to me just as she bursts into tears. I hold her close, turning away from the others and calming her, unafraid as the tiny sparks rain down on us in a shower of Harper's distress. Once she has calmed down, I lean down and pick my bag up, careful to shield her face from the women and children, because I don't want her to see their fear.

"It's okay," Sara reassures me, her voice steady despite the concern on her face. "We need to get her home." She turns to the other moms, who nod in agreement despite not being able to look me in the eye. "I'd appreciate it if we didn't make a fuss out of this. Just kids playing, and she didn't start it."

I hold Harper close, who is still sobbing quietly, and walk back toward the house, my heart aching with every step. Sarah falls in step with me but says nothing. All my fears come rushing back at once, the fear that Harper will suffer the same level of rejection in life as I have, but for a different reason. It's not that wolves aren't used to the idea of magic; after all, the alpha's family and others have gifts. But I don't think they'll accept it from my daughter. They already hate that I've returned. No one ever trusted my family, and now they'll have an excuse to reject us even more.

Tears well in my eyes as I think back to how happy Harper was playing with the other children. It's only natural that her powers rise to the surface when she's scared. It's all she ever knew with the Collinses, and I'm not sure she knows how to react any other way to a threat, even if it's just a perceived threat in children's play.

I pause on the steps and turn to Sara to say goodbye. I need to be alone with Harpers right now. "I'm sorry, I just need to get her settled."

Sara's eyes shine with understanding. "It's going to be fine, Ava. It was just kids playing." She leans over and rubs Harper's back. "She has a gift; it's not a bad thing."

Sara leaves, and I shut the door behind us, leaning back against the solid frame with Harper in my arms. I pray she's right. I still intend to leave, but it's obvious the rogues are still hunting, although I don't know why. Revenge? It seems unlikely. I never wanted to come back here, but being with Callum, safe in his home, and watching Harper thrive has been like a fairytale. And that's what I'm afraid of more than anything. Because fairytales aren't real—and neither is this.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

This is not what I was expecting.

Sitting in my office at the pack meeting hall, I scroll through several messages, beginning with the moms involved and then their mates, followed by concerned friends and family. In total, over fifteen messages about Harper, ranging from informative to hysterical, and I have to pause before replying to some: As alpha, I will handle the situation. I remind them all that we will not be dramatic where a child is concerned. I fear that ship has sailed, though, given the tone of some of the messages.

Well, this confirms my suspicions about Harper having a gift, I guess.

I had second-guessed myself after seeing what I thought were sparks when she was playing in the meadow, but it was easy to rationalize with the sun overhead that day. The evidence of Harper's magic is undeniable from the accounts I've read, but I'm yet to talk to Ava about it. If I'm honest, I've been putting off going back to the house. Confronting this means asking more questions about Harper's father. Questions that drive my wolf crazy—even more so since we fucked. Harper's lineage is a constant reminder that because I rejected Ava, another man had what was mine. It shouldn't bother me, as I never had any intention of making her my luna, but it does. My wolf seethes every time the thought even arises.

And thoughts about Ava seem to be arising more and more, especially after last night. Sinking into her tight body felt like coming home. Nothing in my whole damn life had ever felt more right—until she ran off.

And now this.

My plan was to go home and fuck her again. And now, I have to deal with my pack having a problem with arguably the sweetest kid I've ever met. Unbelievable. The thought doesn't diminish my desire for Ava one bit, but it frustrates the hell out of me, knowing I'm going to have to address it.

It also pisses me off that they're making it into a big thing. The gift of magic is a good thing. I have it, my brothers do, and so do countless other wolves to one degree or another. Witches are more prevalent on the mainland, but we have enough on the island, too. I need to know who Harper's father is so we can understand the nature of her magic. That will kill any rumors or fear-mongering in the pack.

I'm not stupid—I've already considered whether I could be Harper's father, but there's no way. Ava would have told me immediately, because that would have guaranteed her position in the pack instantly. There's no downside to hiding it if I were. Plus, I've mentioned who Harper's father might be, and although it's clear she doesn't want to talk about it, she'd never given any indication it's me. The opposite, in fact.

So, now I have to go and talk about it. The last thing I want to do.

I walk into the house, and the scent of coffee and roasting chicken wafts through the air. Ava is in the kitchen, stirring something on the stove. Her shoulders look tense even though she turns and offers me a small smile. Harper is asleep on the window seat, curled up under a quilt, breathing softly. The sight warms me, but I can't relax. Not yet. "Hey," I say softly.

Ava's smile fades when she sees my expression. "Hey," she says. She hesitates for a moment, returning her attention to the pot before asking, "I'm guessing you heard?"

"People like to talk," I say, walking over to her and pulling out a chair at the table. "But you tell me what happened at the park."

She nods and starts telling me her side of things, trying to keep it brief while also ensuring I understand everything that went down. It's not an easy task, but she manages it well enough while stirring whatever it is she's making for dinner.

I listen intently as she quietly explains, occasionally asking a question or two but mostly just letting her talk. She talks in a hushed tone and clearly doesn't want to wake Harper, who seems calm now but is obviously very upset by what happened. It's clear Ava's worried about Harper, and I can understand why. Her powers are still developing, and I know myself how scary that can be. My brothers and I got into all sorts of trouble when we were young, but the difference is that our place in the pack was secure. That doesn't mean she can't learn to control her powers or be accepted.

The question I have to ask hangs heavily until I know I can't put it off any longer.

"What do you know about Harper's father's powers?" I ask when she finishes.

Ava shakes her head, looking back down at the pot on the stove. "Not much," she admits. "There was magic, but it wasn't discussed with me..." She trails off, obviously not wanting to go into details. "But I know he's powerful."

I nod, trying not to show how much that pisses me off. I make a mental note to reach out to my brothers about anyone with such powerful magic on the island. My gut tells me he's not bothered about Ava and Harper, or he wouldn't have let them go. He's probably not a danger to the pack—not on purpose, anyway—but we need to be sure. Especially with the rogues who continue to stalk our borders and the intel that they're looking for a child. A child that has to be Harper. That must be related to the fact she has the magic.

I sigh, attempting to ignore my feelings about Harper's father. "Can I give Harper some lessons in controlling her gift tomorrow?" I ask hesitantly. Ava looks up at me, surprise all over her face, before she nods slowly.

"That might be a good idea," she says after a moment of consideration. "I don't know how to help her, and I don't want any children to get hurt. I just—"

Her voice cracks with emotion, and I step forward, pulling her into my arms. We stand there for a moment in an intimate embrace, something I don't think we've ever done. I don't want to dwell on the way it turns me on—not the time or place. "For what it's worth, my take on it is that Sam overstepped, and Harper bit back. He's a fun pup, but he's a lot and needs to be put in his place sometimes."

Ava snuffles against my chest, shaking her head. "But not by Harper. Those moms will turn on her now. I don't want her to feel even a moment of the rejection I have felt."

My heart hammers in my chest at her words, knowing that I am at the center of those feelings. Not only for my outright rejection of her that day, but my family has led this pack for generations while her family lingered as misfits on the periphery. There's no doubt Ava's parents were troublemakers and criminals, always causing problems. So, why was Charlie more readily accepted than Ava? I already know the answer: Charlie has a powerful wolf. He was willing and proved useful to the pack. Ava's wolf has always been weak, and now, it appears to be nonexistent. I don't even need to tell her what that means in terms of being accepted here.

"That won't happen," I say, rubbing her back, "I won't let it. Besides, Harper is strong. Magic is a gift. If anyone knows that, it's me. She will have a good future."

Ava straightens slightly and steps back, her eyes glistening with tears but a steely resolve etched onto her features. "She will. But not here."

I open my mouth to say something, but Harper stirs, and I drop it. What would I say anyway? Beg her to stay? We both know how the pack feels about her; the venom in the messages I received earlier only highlights how little has changed. But I won't let



any of that affect Harper. Ava is right; Harper shouldn't feel a moment of rejection over who she is. And, as alpha, that is something I actually can control.

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The next day, I wake up early and am ready long before Ava and Harper appear for breakfast. I'm not sure what Ava has told Harper since yesterday, but first, I need to gauge how well she understands her own powers. I'm still not really used to talking to small kids, but Harper is such a sweet pup that I feel like I've already built a tentative bond with her these last couple of weeks. So, as she eats her pancakes, I ask her about what happened at the park and how Sam, the boy, made her feel.

"Scared," she says seriously, even though her mouth is full of pancakes. "Like before."

Before?

I look at Ava and see her tense, the lines of stress etched on her beautiful face, and I realize she means either when they were attacked or maybe where they were living. Ava busies herself by clearing some plates away, but I can tell she's affected by hearing Harper talk about being scared. So am I.

"Well, I hear Sam is known for being a bit silly," I tell her, "but really, it's because he gets carried away and can't control himself. That happens sometimes, like with your sparks? It happens to me, too."

I lift my hand and let the tiniest flame flicker across my fingers. Harper's eyes go wide, and she freezes for a second, only to burst into a huge smile. "Mama, look!" she beams, obviously thrilled to see someone else with magic.

Ava turns to walk toward us as Harper raises her hand. "I can do that too!" she says,

reaching out and trying to conjure the same flame. Her hand starts to glow slightly, and a few sparks flicker, but it dies out quickly. “I’m not scared,” she mumbles.

“That’s a good thing. But we can work on your magic when you’re not scared, too.” I tell her, holding my hand out for hers. “Let’s take this outside, okay? We need some fresh air.”

Harper finishes her pancakes and I help her put her coat on before heading out of the house into the meadow. Ava stays behind on the deck, and I can’t help but notice how nervous she looks as she lets me lead Harper to a safe distance from the house just in case those sparks suddenly get a lot more impressive. I can tell Ava isn’t used to trusting anyone with her daughter, so I give her an encouraging nod as we come to a stop in the middle of the meadow.

First, I show her how to control her breathing and focus on the flame. I feel a bit awkward as I stoop down to her level and try to explain things as simply as possible; it’s much harder to explain things to such a young child. After a few attempts, misunderstandings, and false starts, we seem to be getting somewhere. She tries again, and this time, the flame grows steadily under my guidance until we have a small fire going between us.

“That’s it!” I say encouragingly, “Now let’s see if we can play with it.”

Working together, we bend the flames in different directions, making shapes and figures in the air. Harper’s eyes light up with wonder as she uses her magic for the first time without fear or hesitation.

Watching her delight in something I’ve always taken for granted is intoxicating. Suddenly, she spins around toward Ava and shouts, “Mama!” The sudden action causes the contained flame to shoot upward and sends us both flying backward.

“Harper!” Ava shouts, and begins running toward us. I sit up quickly and find a startled and disheveled-looking Harper staring back at me in the tall grass. For a split second, I think she’s going to burst into tears, but instead, she starts laughing. It’s such a joyful sound that I can’t help but laugh, too.

By the time Ava reaches us, we’re both in a fit of giggles. “Are you okay?” Ava asks Harper, panting and slowing as she takes in the scene.

“That was fun,” Harper giggles, standing. I assume she’s going to run to Ava, but instead, she throws herself into my arms, nearly knocking me over, and laughs, “Do it again!”

For a moment, I’m lost for words, but then I find myself hugging her back. The feeling of her tiny body wracked with giggles warms my heart. I look up at Ava and see something unreadable in her expression. It’s there, and then it’s gone. It’s as if she’s schooled her expression just for Harper, and she smiles at her daughter, masking any of the turbulent emotions beneath. Not for the first time, I’m awed by Ava’s endless ability to love Harper in the best way possible despite her own situation. She’s an amazing mother, and I’m sure no one has ever told her. I resolve to do just that, but right now, Harper is demanding more fire.

“Okay, okay, as long as it’s okay with your mom,” I laugh, looking toward Ava for confirmation. She nods, her beautiful blonde hair practically glowing in the golden early morning light. I find myself transfixed for a second and wishing that even a fraction of the capacity for love Ava has for Harper was directed my way, too.

As the morning wears on, two things become apparent. Harper’s gift is far more impressive than I could have imagined, and so is her mother.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

After spending all morning procrastinating about this decision, as I help Harper pull on her shoes, I'm still doubting myself. I don't want her to see me wavering, though. She really wants to bake Callum a cake to say thank you for helping her with her magic, which means a trip to the store.

I know it's pathetic to be scared of walking into a general store, but in truth, I always have been. Even when I lived here in the pack, something as simple as getting food supplies was always traumatic. I'd try to pick the quietest time to go, but comments and whispers would accompany me down the aisles, the staff would try to avoid assisting me, and I'd leave completely rattled.

I don't want Harper to have the same experiences as me, particularly after what happened at the park with the little boy. Although Callum has made her feel much better about it, I still feel anxious about seeing any of the other pack members in case they say anything about her magic.

Or ask who her father is.

It's getting harder and harder to watch Callum with Harper and deny the truth. He worked tirelessly with her yesterday on her magic, and as much as I didn't want to acknowledge it, their bond flourished so naturally. Although Harper looks just like me with fair hair and skin compared to his darker tones, seeing them side by side so closely makes the resemblance so much harder to ignore.

I haven't outright lied to Callum about being Harper's father because he hasn't directly asked me if he is. Everything I have said about her father not being around and my knowledge of his magic has been true. But I feel like the more pertinent

questions are coming. It's only a matter of time. And Harper, too; will she ask me who her father is? Will I admit that she played with him in that beautiful meadow, someone finally understanding her gift, and I kept it a secret from both of them?

But what is the alternative? If Callum finds out the truth, he might want Harper to stay with him—especially now he knows she has the magic. But what about me? Do I stay and live somewhere where I'll never be accepted? Would he want me to leave Harper with him? I can't see him acknowledging a relationship with me in front of the whole pack...would he deny Harper was his and hurt us both anyway?

The thoughts continue to spiral in my mind as I pull my own coat on, Harper dancing excitedly around my feet. I try to ground myself in her simple joy at a trip outside; I smile at her as she grabs my hand to pull me out of the door, wishing I could bottle some of her perfect innocence so that she may stave off the realities of this world.

Harper continues chattering away as we lock the door and walk down the steps, taking in the beautiful day. The streets are quiet, and I'm hopeful we won't bump into too many people as the morning rush is over. She's so excited about finding the right ingredients for Callum's cake that she asks questions about what we're going to make it look like, her eyes shining with anticipation.

We enter the beautiful old general store. It's huge, and I don't know where anything is anymore, so we begin wandering the aisles in peace as Harper asks questions about what we're going to make.

A bell jingled above our heads as we stepped inside, drawing attention from an old man sitting behind the counter. He immediately looked up from his newspaper and gave us a nod, obviously recognizing who I was. However, he didn't say anything, which I was grateful for. He just went back to his reading. Maybe this will be easier than I thought.

Harper spots the rows of ingredients and decorations, pulling me toward the baking aisle. Her small frame is surprisingly strong when she's determined. We begin to gather the ingredients, ticking them off the list Harper is clutching. I hear the bell jingling, signaling that more people have come into the store, but when I look around, I don't see anyone. However, I soon hear voices from the next aisle.

"...and I don't know why he's decided to take them in," one of the women says, her voice hushed but still audible.

"It doesn't make sense. She could be working with the rogues, but he's too blind to see it. That family was never right," another woman replies, equally hushed.

"Yes, but we all know how stubborn Callum can be. Just like Ralph. I think he's trying to prove a point to his brothers, handle the whole thing by himself." The first woman sighs. "I just hope this doesn't blow up in our faces."

"Well, I heard it's not his brothers' packs that are being targeted; it's ours. Because of them," the second woman offers. "I know there's a child involved, but the whole thing is making Callum look weak. There's a few of the men that aren't going to stand for it."

"Are you going to the meeting? The one Jake is organizing to discuss alternatives?" one of them whispers. I don't hear the reply, but it appears they've moved to the front register, as I hear the old man ringing something up for them.

My heart is suddenly heavy because I fear they're talking about some kind of meeting that will go against Callum. I can't believe they'd so readily turn on their alpha. Callum's father, Ralph, ran this pack with an iron fist; no one would have dared question him. But Callum is still establishing his rule, along with the new divides between his brothers' packs. Perhaps taking us in like this is more damaging for him than I could have imagined. Harper suddenly tugs on my sleeve and asks if we have

everything yet, a small frown forming between her eyebrows when she sees my distraction.

"Everything?" I ask her softly, trying to keep my voice light. She nods emphatically, still unaware of the gossip surrounding us. I give her a reassuring smile, and when I hear the jingle of the bell, meaning the women have left, we head to the front to pay.

I cautiously lead Harper from the store, checking if any of the women may still be on the street and perhaps realize we overheard their conversation. Thankfully, the street is quiet, and we begin to walk back to Callum's house. We cross the street, and I'm so lost in thought, replaying the women's conversation in my head, that I don't even notice Harper tugging on my arm.

"Mama, park!" she beams at me as she finally gets my attention. I glance over and notice the park is empty.

Seeing how enthusiastic she looks, I relent. "Five minutes, okay?"

She looks so happy as she takes off toward the small climbing frame and sand pit. At least with her occupied, I can really consider what to do about what I overheard. The idea of some kind of secret meeting to discuss alternatives to Callum's decisions about the rogues is worrying. They can't take matters into their own hands. It's not right, and it won't solve the issue. The rogues have caused problems for years and need to be dealt with properly, but I don't want Callum to suffer for trying to help us. Deep down, I know if he was helping almost anyone other than me, the pack wouldn't have an issue. It's depressing to note that their animosity toward my family is as strong as ever. I wonder if Charlie ever gets grief over it or if he has sufficiently distanced himself.

I don't dispute the fact that my parents and other distant relatives were troublemakers. Criminals, really, always fighting or stealing, certainly never conforming to pack life.

But that wasn't Charlie's or my fault; we never followed their path. I never got into trouble at school. I worked hard—not that it mattered.

Harper calls out and waves; I fake a big smile and wave back, but inside, I crumple slightly. Looking around, the town looks so beautiful as the first fall leaves begin to appear, but I can't fully appreciate it with the weight of all this hanging over me.

One thing I do know, though, is If I'm going to continue on with Harper to the mainland, I'll have to decide soon. It would be better to get ourselves sorted before winter. I wish it felt simpler to leave Callum, and I curse myself for the feelings underpinning everything. I wish he hadn't kissed me. I wish I'd pushed him away instead of sleeping with him. All I've done is hurt myself all over again. And the thought of never seeing him again, or Harper never seeing him again, only clouds my thoughts.

My wolf continues to linger on the edges of my consciousness, but I've felt her more in the last couple of days than I have in years. Perhaps being near Callum and reigniting the bond, if only from my side, is bringing her back to the forefront of my subconscious. If my wolf returns, I'll be stronger for Harper. But who's to say my wolf won't vanish again if Callum rejects me once more?

I feel like burying my head in my hands, but I know I can't. I don't want Harper to be afraid if she sees me falling apart. I have to be strong for her—we've come so far. I just need to hold it together a bit longer. In the middle of giving myself a pep talk, out of the corner of my eye, I see some people cross the street seconds before Harper jumps down and runs toward the gate.

"Sara," she calls out, waving frantically.

I feel momentarily calmer until I realize who she's with. Charlie. I haven't seen my brother in years, and even before I left the pack that day, I'd only seen him in passing



for a couple of years before that. He did his utmost to avoid being seen with me. I can't even bring myself to look at him, afraid of what I'll see reflected back in his face. Disgust? Indifference? Regret? I'm not even sure which would be worse.

"Sara, Sara, look," Harper calls out as she runs back to the sandpit to hold up some of the toys that she's found. Sara waves and gives her a thumbs up.

"Have you ever seen anyone as happy as her?" Sara marvels, her eyes shining as she smiles at me. "You're so lucky; she's gorgeous. That's Harper," she says to Charlie.

For the first time, I risk a glance at Charlie. He's looking directly at Harper and I catch a small smile tug at his lips. "She looks like a cute kid," he finally says, glancing toward me and then quickly away again.

"Thank you," I reply, attempting to keep my voice level. "She's perfect."

Sarah steps into the park and calls out to Harper, "Let me push you on the swings." My heart sinks because I know she's deliberately leaving me to talk with Charlie, but before I can think of anything to say, she and Harper are already heading to the swings, leaving Charlie and me standing in awkward silence.

As the silence stretches on, Charlie shifts his weight, shoving his hands in his pockets. Finally, he mutters, "Subtle, isn't she."

I smile. "She means well. She always has."

"That is very true," he relents, turning toward me. "How is she? Harper? She really is very cute."

I glance over toward the swings and listen as Harper shrieks with delight as Sarah pushes her. "She's great," I reply. "We'll figure things out, and she's going to have a

great life. Wherever we go.”

He turns to face me fully, and I see him properly for the first time in years. He’s noticeably older now and more mature. His beard is thicker than the last time I saw him, and I can see why Callum has picked him as a beta with his large frame. “You don’t think you’ll stay here?”

I can’t help the sigh that slips out, but I see no point in lying to him. “I have nothing here, and I want Harper to have everything.”

He winces at my honesty, but he doesn’t outright deny my words. Instead, he seems to mull something over before speaking again. “I think you should try to have something here. The rogues have only stepped up the attacks over the last few days,” he begins. “I don’t know everything, but Callum thinks the kid they’re looking for is Harper. I think you should let us try to protect her. For now, anyway.”

I want to bite back and tell him we don’t need his protection. After all, he didn’t care about protecting me when it mattered. But I don’t. I also don’t tell him that not everyone in the pack shares that sentiment. Honestly, I just feel blindsided by his statement and know I need time to think. Besides, what if Charlie already knew about the meeting that was going against Callum? What if saying something actually only makes things worse? So, I simply nod, and I turn to find Sara and Harper running back over to us.

“Harper was telling me you have to go because you’re baking a surprise?” Sara asks, raising her brows at me.

I blush but nod, pulling Harper in for a cuddle. “Yes, Harper wanted to bake Callum something nice for letting us stay.”

“Well, could you save some for me?” Sara asks and smiles. “Maybe I could pop

around and check on you both tomorrow?”

Harper claps, and I can't deny it feels nice to know someone wants to spend time with us. I nod and say goodbye quickly. It feels awkward to drag things out with Charlie, and he obviously feels the same as he nods, smiling at Harper. As we leave the park, Harper begins to ask questions about who Sarah's friend is and how I know him. I try hard to change the subject without lying to her, but I can't quite bring myself to tell her the truth about the brother I loved more than anything who broke my heart.

The one thing I do know, though, is that I can't let Callum walk into a trap. Whatever he has done to me in the past and how he feels about me now is irrelevant. He's still Harper's father and has helped us. I owe him my loyalty in this.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Seething doesn't even begin to cover it. Byron watches as I pace the full length of my office, the steps doing nothing to calm me down. "How is it that Jake and his idiot friends think they know better?" I rant.

Byron begins to chuckle, but his laughter dies when I focus my glare on him. Instead, he clears his throat. "Well, we've both known Jake a very long time. When did you ever know him not to be an idiot?"

"And surrounded by fucking idiots," I mutter, finally sitting back in my chair and leaning back.

Of all the things I thought Ava could possibly want to talk to me about when she appeared in the kitchen last night after putting Harper to bed, this was not it. I briefly hoped she was feeling the same way as me and itching for a repeat of the other night, but the look of sheer concern on her face quickly quelled that notion.

We had been enjoying the cake that Ava and Harper had made earlier, and she didn't give away any signs that something was bothering her. Harper had told me all about seeing Sarah and meeting her 'friend' Charlie. I raised my brows at Ava but didn't say anything. She obviously didn't want to confuse Harper about having a surprise uncle—or put Charlie on the spot, I guess. Still, I was glad to hear they'd seen him; it had to happen eventually. Besides, a cloud of guilt follows Charlie around over how he treated Ava, I think they would both benefit from finding a resolution to their shared history.

Ava hadn't mentioned anything about the conversation they'd overheard in the store until she came back downstairs. She'd stood in the doorway, shifting nervously, and I

could instantly tell she was weighing something up heavily. I waited for her to begin speaking, suddenly afraid she was going to say they were leaving despite the risks. When she began to tell me about the conversation they'd overheard, the pack's dissent, and Jake's plans for a secret meeting, I had to fight to keep my expression neutral.

I'm going to kill that idiot. It's not the first time his loud mouth and half-baked ideas have caused problems, but deliberately going against the alpha...that's just plain stupid.

Ava disappeared upstairs as soon as Byron arrived. She's still so skittish around other members of the pack—though most people are nervous around Byron due to his size and the mean looking scar that runs down his left cheek. Under his rough exterior, he's more fun than he looks, but even that's not true tonight. He looks as pissed as I feel.

Byron glances down at his phone. "Charlie has the details," he tells me with a grimace. "Seems to be fairly small, but this needs quashing. I'll have him round up the other betas and we'll get over there."

I nod, standing. It's not unusual for an alpha to have to assert his dominance, I just didn't expect it to be this soon. Jake's wolf is no match for mine, though, and he knows it; we've been sparring since we were kids. He's an even bigger fool than I thought if he actually makes an official challenge.

"You told your brothers?" Byron asks as we're leaving.

"Hell no," I snap, "I don't need them lording this over me at the next meeting or thinking I can't run things right."

Byron sighs. He grew up with all of us and knows how feisty our dynamic can be.

We love each other, no doubt, but we can't work together on anything. The alpha council is a tentative attempt at building something stronger as adults, but the scars Ralph left still run deep. "Your brothers will no doubt face similar trials eventually," he says. "Everyone is suffering from the rogue's disruption."

Walking out of the house through the quiet, dark streets, I see the other betas waiting in the distance. "But no one more than us," I reply. "The two rogues caught last night weren't even from the island, but they were still looking for a child with magic. You and I both know that's Harper. But she's not the only magical child ever born. I think they were being paid to hunt her. Why?"

Byron shrugs. "One thing I do know, Jake and his idiot friends don't know shit about this situation. Or how to handle it."

I bite my tongue. There's so much more I want to say, but I'm saving all my rage to direct it to the right person. And also because I don't want to push the conversation toward things I don't want to talk about—Ava. Do we protect Harper because we don't know why the rogues really want her, and it's in our best interests to figure the situation out? Do we protect them because I don't want to let them go? Do I have to admit my feelings either way?

We join with my betas and walk in relative silence to the spot in the woods where Jake and a small group are, faces shadowed by hoodies and trees. As we approach, many spin around instantly, standing up straight, respectful but defiant. Byron and the others take their places beside me, unfazed by the group's show of force.

"Jake," I begin, "I understand you have some concerns about our current situation."

Jake steps forward, looking around at the others as if searching for support. "You should step down as alpha," he says simply. "You can't handle it." A few of the others nod in agreement behind him,

“We need someone stronger on this,” I hear from toward the back of the group.

I can feel the heat rising in my chest, but I don't let it show. This is what I need them to see. “You're right,” I say, voice steady and cold. “You want someone stronger? You want someone who will make sure the pack is safe?” I step forward, closing the gap between us. “Someone who knows how to hunt rogues and won't back down from a fight?”

My betas growl in agreement behind me, their loyalty clear. Jake's eyes dart around before he looks away, embarrassment coloring his cheeks. He knows he can't win a direct challenge, not after losing every sparring session we've ever had so badly.

"You've already got it," I continue, “because I'm not going anywhere. Our pack is in danger, and we're going to fight back. Together. Jake's a damn fool if he thinks he has the inside track on this. We are narrowing down the key players and their routes. We've stopped their routes from the mainland, and we're close to identifying exactly who we need to stop to end this. They're not organized; they never have been. Whoever is propping them up is who we need to eliminate.”

“Are you with us or against?” Byron growls to the small group that is flanking Jake.

Many instantly bow their heads, others mutter amongst themselves, but no one makes a move against me. Instead, they begin to ask questions about the plan, how we'll handle things, and our next steps. It feels good to be united again, even if only for a short while.

The meeting disperses, and we begin to walk back along the trail. Jake lingers to the back of the group, but as the path branches out, I fall back and stop him in his tracks. “What about you, Jake?” I ask, leveling him with a stare, “You wanna help, or do you just want to be another problem for me to solve?”

A few other wolves hang back, waiting to hear his answer. It's one thing for him to be compliant in the group, but I need to know this dissent isn't going to spread. The look of fear in his eyes tells me he knows exactly what is at stake. His throat bobs as he dips his head. "Just let me know how I can help."

I nod. "Byron here will set you up on patrol. Be a part of it rather than bitching from the sidelines, okay?"

He nods, and we all continue back toward town, discussing strategy and scouting missions for the upcoming week. I'm glad this didn't end in a challenge. I'm glad I didn't handle it like Ralph would have—instant death.

"What about Ava and Harper?" someone asks, almost taking me by surprise as we approach the main square. "Do they stay or go?"

I look over at the group as they stare back at me. Without hesitation, I reply firmly, "They stay."

I see the questions lingering in Byron's eyes, too, as I nod and turn away toward my own house, but I won't be drawn into it. I can't. Delving into that topic would mean having to talk about the things I cannot bring myself to admit. My feelings for Ava, the bond. A bond I cannot accept with such a weak wolf and outcast. It's a damn mess, but as long as I just focus on doing the right thing, protecting a woman and child, I can buy myself time to deal with the rest.

I close the door behind me and lean back against the frame, suddenly feeling exhausted by my own thoughts. I should be happy. Dissent quashed and a challenge avoided. Why do I feel so uneasy? My wolf feels more anxious now than it did out in the forest. I think he would prefer a fight with ten wolves over the emotional torture of being so close to who he wants and yet knowing he can't keep her.



I hear the sound of footsteps and look up to see Ava coming slowly down the stairs. I'm not sure she realizes that the light behind her illuminates her curves and causes her flimsy nightgown to become almost translucent. My wolf growls, determination flaring as I push away from the door and stalk toward her.

She pauses on the step, uncertainty flashing in her eyes. "H-how did it go? Are you okay?" she stammers.

I nod but don't stop, taking the steps two at a time until I stop in front of her. Without a word, I pull her toward me, no words, just passion. Her breath hitches as we crash into each other, and her arms wrap around my neck. I kneel on the stairs, pulling her toward me until she's practically resting on my knees, one hand running down her back while the other cups her ass.

The cool wood of the steps under my hands feels good against my skin, grounding me as we move together in sync. The scent of her hair, mixed with fear and desire, is intoxicating. I consider taking her to my bed, but I know I won't make it. Instead, I lift her slightly, spinning her around so her hands and knees are on the stairs, her ass pushed out toward me, and I press against her from behind.

Her eyes widen as she feels my hard length through our clothes, but doesn't say anything. She knows what this means. I nip at her earlobe gently before trailing kisses down her neck and collarbone. She trembles under my touch, and I hear a soft sound of pleasure escape her lips. My hands roam over her body possessively as my tongue dips into the hollow of her neck, sending a shiver down her spine.

I pull my cock free from my pants and groan as I feel her wetness against my hard flesh. With one swift motion, I lift her nightgown up over her ass. I slip my hands underneath to cup her cheeks, spreading them wide apart. She gasps in surprise as I thrust into her from behind, burying myself deep inside of her as she struggles to grip the stairs.

The stairs creak under our movements as I fuck her right there on the stairs. Her gasps and moans fill the silent house as she rides me, meeting every motion with equal force. It's raw and primal, a claiming that I think we both need right now. We're moving together in perfect harmony, completely lost in the heat of the moment.

I brace myself over her body and reach around to run circles over her clit. Ava's fingers dig into the wood of the steps as she tenses beneath me and climaxes hard. I remove my hand and clamp it over her mouth to muffle her screams, but I don't stop pounding into her tight heat. I'm unable to hold back any longer. The feeling of her walls contracting around me is almost too much for either of us to handle, and I grip her hips like a vice as I pump my cum into her.

When I finally still, we stay locked together on the stairs for a few moments, me buried inside of her and us both trying to catch our breath. Part of me just doesn't know what to say. I look down at her, her nightgown ripped slightly, her hair mussed. She turns slightly, and I see her beautiful face properly. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips look so soft that I want nothing more than to kiss them again. She looks like an angel, and I've just fucked her on the stairs like an animal, with Harper sleeping only feet away.

I lean back and smooth her gown. "I'm sorry," I say, "I shouldn't have done that."

Hesitation flickers across her face, but she just nods. "I understand," she says, pushing herself up and taking a few steps toward her room. "I, um, I'd better check on her."

I watch her go, aware that this is the second time she's run off after we've had sex. Correction: after I've jumped her. I pull my pants back up and sit on the stairs for a moment, contemplating the fact I may have told the pack she's staying, but it appears staying near me is the last thing she wants to do.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Sitting with Harper on the window seat, I help her correct some of the letters we've been practicing. Sara brought over some coloring books with numbers and letters a few days ago, and it's been a joy to see how quickly she's taken to it. Sarah also mentioned the playgroup in the pack hall, but I can't even bring myself to consider it, even though Sara said there's been a real softening in the pack since Callum confronted the troublemakers.

Sara means well, but she's never suffered any of the problems I have. Everyone loves Sara; she has a heart of gold and a strong wolf. She's the perfect pack member. She's also trying to be a good friend, so I said I'd think about it. In truth, I know Harper would benefit from playing with others her own age. Before the incident with Sam at the park, I could see how much she was enjoying herself playing with other pups. But then the incident did happen, and so many question marks hang over how the pack would accept her magic. It doesn't feel worth the risk.

Sara isn't the only one trying to push me into venturing out more, though. Callum has been hinting at various ways I could mingle with the pack, mentioning that folk are beginning to think it's strange they don't see us and that, although he knows I'm just trying to keep Harper safe, it's actually only causing more problems. I am trying to keep Harper safe, but I'm also trying to keep myself safe—safe from the tormentors of my youth. Safe from the pain of seeing Charlie again. Safe from acknowledging that I will never be accepted.

I sigh, leaving Harper with her books for a moment to refill my coffee. Callum mentioned the pack is holding a craft fair in the hall later today. I know it was more of a suggestion than just mindless conversation, especially when he said he'd be back earlier and to think about it. I should feel grateful that he'd even thought of taking us;

he's already done so much more than he had to. He rescued us and took us in. Although I'm sure we wouldn't still be here if it weren't for the direct threat to Harper, I'm more than aware that we may be overstaying our welcome, and I don't want to push him.

I hated him for rejecting me. I hated him for the fact I suffered, and Harper suffered, but I can't deny his help now. He didn't have to take us in; no one would have thought badly of him if he didn't help us. I know he's just using me for sex, just as he did before. I won't be fooled again regarding his feelings. However much I wish it meant more.

I sigh again, pouring myself a coffee and heading back to Harper. Deep down, I know I'll have to venture out again sooner or later if Callum asks directly, forcing my hand. I might as well get it over with now.

"Harper, what do you think about going to see the craft fair this afternoon?"

Harper looks up from her crayon work and smiles at me. "Is Cal-um coming too?" she asks excitedly.

Her growing bond with him makes my heart clench. On the one hand, seeing Harper with her father is a beautiful thing, but it's tinged by disgrace and regret, because I feel as though I'm lying to both of them. I'm doing it to protect them both—Callum because he would be in an impossible position with my place in the pack, and Harper from losing something she can't have. And I'm protecting myself from the risk that he may want to keep Harper but not me. A little voice whispers that I risk hurting everyone with this secret, but I push it away and nod.

"I think so. He mentioned coming back for it," I tell her. "If he does, then we'll go. If not, we'll bake some more cookies, okay?"

I know I'm giving myself an out. If Callum doesn't mention the craft fair again, then I can say we were going to go with him. That might buy me a few more days before he mentions mixing with the pack. I feel like that's all I'm doing here—buying time. For what? Before we leave? Before the pack magically accepts me, Callum declares his love so we can live happily ever after?

Tears spring to my eyes, but I brush them away, grab Harper's drink, and walk back over to the window seat. She looks so content here that I decide to push away the negativity and focus on her for the morning, safe here in our little bubble.

I know my out has failed as soon as Callum walks through the door, and Harper runs to him, full of enthusiasm about the craft fair. He raises his brow at me but looks pleased.

“Thought I'd have a fight on my hands there,” he says, then seeing my obviously reticent expression, he adds, “It will be good. Fun for Harper, here.”

We both look at Harper as she continues dancing in place. It's hard not to be swept up in her enthusiasm despite my feelings at such a public outing. That's another thing; actually going with Callum is going to cause a stir, I know it will. It's one thing for the alpha to be seen to take in a woman and child who were being attacked, though I'm sure that has raised a few brows. But it's another for us to be out together as though we're pretending to be a couple and playing a happy family. I feel like it puts a target on my back that Callum just doesn't see. Perhaps he just thinks it's such a ridiculous notion; no one would even consider it a possibility anyway.

Despite my feelings, I go upstairs and brush my hair, taking time to check my appearance and make sure I look okay before we go out. I must admit, I look healthier after just a few weeks of being here. There's a glow to my skin, and my hair looks shinier. Looking at my reflection for a second, I almost see the girl I once knew staring back at me, but she's gone in an instant. In her place is just a mom who has to

be strong to make sure her daughter gets the life she deserves.

Downstairs, I find Harper has put her shoes on herself and has even attempted to brush her own unruly curls. She's now sitting on the stairs, bouncing up and down with excitement. I can't help but smile at her. Her enthusiasm is infectious; maybe it won't be as bad as I think.

We walk across the street to the pack hall where the craft fair is taking place. Music fills the air as we enter, and I feel eyes on us immediately. Callum is seemingly oblivious to the stares, which makes me even more aware of them. People murmur as we walk by, and some nudge each other, but no one says anything directly to us. Callum stops to talk to some of the guys I've seen at the house, his betas. They smile at Harper and give me a polite nod. To be honest, I'm grateful no one tries to have a conversation, because I feel as though I'm close to a panic attack.

Harper sees an interesting stall and takes off, so I follow her, leaving Callum to talk. Away from the safety of his proximity, the stares grow more obvious. I try to avoid making eye contact, but as Harper begins to point at some of the baked goods I promised to get her, I know it's inevitable that I'm going to have to engage. I take my purse out and find some coins so that Harper can pay—she loves playing pretend shopping, so I know this will make her happy.

The woman behind the counter looks familiar, but I can't remember her name. I smile politely and tell Harper to point to the ones she wants and say, "Please."

The woman is stony-faced as she glares at me, but thankfully, her face softens when she speaks to Harper. The seconds seem to stretch on forever as she bags the cookies, and she glances at me now and then. I'm sure she's about to say something.

Suddenly, I hear my name being called and turn to see Sara and Charlie walking toward me. Sara doesn't stop until she's wrapped me in a hug, one that I'm so

grateful for. I respond in kind, whispering, “Thank you.”

She gives me a final squeeze of solidarity before turning to Harper and asking to see what she’s bought. I can feel Charlie looking at me, so I turn and smile, hoping for a good response. He smiles and accepts a piece of cookie as Harper hands it to us.

“Thank you, Harper, that’s very kind,” he says softly to her, and she beams.

I thank the woman behind the counter, who simply nods. Her stony expression has returned, but she doesn’t say anything in front of Sara and Charlie, so I breathe a sigh of relief, my shoulders relaxing slightly as we step away from the counter. Unfortunately, I don’t miss the gossip that starts while we’re still in earshot, the whispers with other customers, and a few others pointing in our direction. I glance at Charlie and notice how uncomfortable he looks, but he doesn’t say anything; he just carries on talking to Harper about the cookies. She’s telling him about the ones we made and how she wants to be a baker when she grows up.

Sara, sensing my rising panic, tries to talk loud enough to drown out the whispers that follow us and begins to guide us back over to where Callum is still talking to Byron and a few others.

“The nerve, causing all this trouble and then showing up here,” someone mutters from a stall as we pass.

I assume they mean trouble with the rogues, but that’s like blaming Harper because bad people are looking for a child. I try to swallow the bile in my throat and keep walking, but the next comment stops me in my tracks.

“...a runt, just like her mother.” The insult is whispered but loud enough for most nearby to hear.

Before I can even think about the consequences, I spin around. “What did you say?” I ask, my voice unwavering. “What did you say about my daughter?”

The hall falls so silent that you could hear a pin drop. Everyone turns to look at me, and their expressions go from shocked to embarrassed.

"You know what?" Charlie finally speaks up, placing a hand on my shoulder to try and calm me down. "We're done here," he says, his voice like ice.

“Well, you can’t blame us,” a woman steps forward. “The situation with the rogues was bad enough, now it’s even worse with more and more coming. All because of them.”

“And you think insulting a small child helps? You think that’s deserved?” Charlie snaps. I look on in shock and relief.

The woman looks suitably cowed, but a man also steps forward. “The girl is an issue, though. Her magic is what’s brought the rogues here,” he mutters. “Now, I’ve always liked you, Charlie, but you know your family ain’t right, and this just proves it. Whoever that kid’s father is, he’s evil. And she’s to blame for bringing us all more trouble.”

My heart shatters, and Harper, not fully understanding the words but sensing this is growing serious, cuddles into my side. I can feel Charlie’s rage building as the crowd parts, and Callum steps forward.

“What the hell,” he growls. “I’ve made my position on this clear, and we do not bully women and children in this pack.”

“We defend our pack,” the man snarls back, “we always have. You need to decide if you’re going to defend us from what they bring. The child has already shown her



magic can harm us.”

I knew someone would eventually mention what happened with Sam, but I’m seething over how it’s being portrayed. I straighten my spine, ready to defend her, but Callum is already speaking. “She’s not the only child with magic, fool. It’s no different from the families we have all over the island.”

“We don’t know that,” the man replies, and murmurs of agreement follow from the crowd. “There is darker magic; without knowing where she comes from, we just don’t know. Maybe the rogues want her because she has dark magic.”

“There are spells that can check,” a woman calls out, and my blood runs cold. They want to check Harper to see if she has dark magic?

I spin around to face the crowd, “No one is touching my daughter. She is—”

“You’d say anything,” the woman scoffs. “I bet you don’t even know who her father is.”

A ripple of laughter goes through the crowd, and my face burns. I see Charlie has dipped his head and Sara looks concerned at where this is heading. I can’t even bring myself to look at Callum, but it’s Harper’s wide-eyed fear and confusion that completely undoes me.

“Mama?” she asks, tears pouring down her face at the animosity surrounding us.

“Exactly,” the man says. “She could have mated with a warlock or anyone. She’s a—”

“Callum,” I say, my voice trembling but clear. “Callum. He’s Harper’s father. It’s his magic. It’s your own pack’s magic that you admire so much. So, leave my daughter

the hell alone.”

I scoop Harper up, trying to ignore the absolute uproar that ensues, and rush her from the hall. I can feel Sara’s presence behind me, and I sense Callum trying to stop me, but I push straight past. I can’t even bring myself to look at him, knowing I’ve just blown his world up in front of everyone.

It's his magic.

Her words echo around the room, but I can barely concentrate on what else is being said.

The room feels strangely silent but incredibly loud all at once. Everything moves so quickly, and I realize the deafening sound is simply the blood rushing in my own ears as I stare at the crowd, which appears as dumbstruck as I feel. But I know I can't show it. I can't show weakness, and I can't be seen to be blindsided by this, not after the dissent that has been plaguing the pack.

Straightening my spine, I roll my shoulders and focus on the scene in front of me. Ava doesn't look at me, but Harper does, her eyes wide with fear and confusion. The hall is a riot of incredulity now, and she is right in the middle of it. My heart breaks as tears fall down her face. She shouldn't be hearing all this, but I don't blame Ava. The ridiculous finger-pointing and faux concern in this pack has been toxic ever since Ralph's days. The rogues are an increasing problem, but the pack's longstanding dislike of anyone they deem to be an outsider or not good enough is what drives the issue.

The pack never thought Ava was good enough. And they were turning that same sentiment on Harper.

I open my mouth to say something, but Ava is already moving. She scoops Harper up and rushes through the crowd. No one stops her; despite the uproar, she appears to have shocked everyone into submission for at least a moment. My eyes remain fixed on Harper's terrified face, and I reach out to try and stop Ava, but she shrugs me off

and keeps going, Sara following close behind. My instinct is to follow, too, but as I turn, I see Byron's face, and his intent is clear; I need to get a grip on this situation first. Now.

I can almost hear Ralph scoffing from hell as I face this down. I turn back to the crowd, and they eye me cautiously. "Enough," I growl, quieting the crowd. "I will deal with this."

I turn to leave, but a familiar figure steps forward. "You've been lying to us," Jake taunts. "You knew the child was yours. Is Ava your mate? Where's she been? Why hide it?"

"Ashamed of that wolf," someone mutters from the back of the crowd.

I want to tell them to fuck off, and I know my silence speaks volumes, but I don't know what to say. Yes, I was ashamed; I never claimed her because I knew they'd never accept her wolf. The pack decided long ago she wasn't good enough for them. But as I stand here now, I see how stupid that is. Why isn't she good enough? Because her wolf is weak? The strength she's shown as a mother completely eclipses that.

"I didn't lie," I grind out. "I didn't know."

A murmur gathers around the room until Jake scoffs. "As if she wouldn't tell you. Being the alpha's child guarantees acceptance. I call bullshit."

I'm about to reply when Charlie steps forward, glaring at me before he turns toward Jake and the crowd. "Y'all are so busy deciding who gets to be accepted and how. Did you ever stop to think Ava didn't tell him because she didn't want your precious acceptance anymore? And no, I didn't know, either."

“Charlie, I—” I start, but he spins around and storms from the hall.

I let him go, knowing I’ll have to rebuild a bridge there. Charlie’s been a good friend and an excellent beta, and he just found out I not only got his sister pregnant but rejected her. I look back and see Jake’s fire has dimmed and several of the other pack members look more subdued.

“This is a private matter, and I will deal with it—for the good of Harper and Ava and the pack,” I say, my voice unwavering. “But you all need to consider how you treat a young child regardless of who you think she belongs to. We are better than that.”

I walk away from the hall, knowing we’re not better than that, not yet, but we’re sure as hell going to be.

Outside, the cool night air hits my face, and I take a deep breath. I need to find Ava, explain everything, and apologize. She deserves better than what I or this pack have so far given her. I walk toward the house and just pray it’s where they went. As soon as I step through the door, I hear the sound of Ava’s voice from upstairs, along with Harper’s muffled sobs. The sound is heartbreaking, and I’m about to go upstairs when I hear Ava’s voice soothing Harper with a story about what their new home will be like. How they’ll be happy, and no one will ever hurt them again. She’s promising Harper that she will always keep her safe and that they’ll live happily ever after, just like she promised.

Listening to the words, my heart clenches. I want to blame the pack for the way they treated Ava and her family or Charlie for not looking after his sister better...but the truth is, the heartbreaking cries coming from my daughter are all my fault.

My daughter.

The thought hits me like a ton of bricks all over again, and I lean against the wall.

The crying has stopped, and Ava is singing a song I've heard before. I think it's an old pack lullaby. Her voice sounds so perfect, and I just stand there like a fool, listening.

Eventually, the song slows to a whisper, and I assume Harper must be falling asleep as I hear Ava's gentle footsteps retreat from the room. I stand in the shadows at the bottom of the stairs and watch as she pulls the bedroom door too, and rests her head on the solid wood, her shoulders sagging. I think back to the other night when I came home and saw her in the same spot, that thin nightgown highlighting every curve of her body. I took her right here on the stairs like an animal. My wolf demanded more and more. My wolf has always known the truth about Ava. So why have I fought it?

I know why. Pack expectations feel like a pretty pathetic excuse when I consider Ava and Harper. But what do I do now? Charlie was right—the only reason Ava didn't tell me was because she didn't want me to know. I'm the alpha; I could have improved their position, but instead, she would rather just get away from here. She didn't want me to be Harper's father. The truth stings, but can I blame her? Look how I treated her.

Am I any better than Ralph?

Ava turns and looks down the stairs at me. She doesn't seem surprised to see me, but she does look hesitant. I gesture toward the kitchen. "I could do with some coffee."

She nods and follows me wordlessly into the kitchen, lingering by the island while I put a fresh pot on. I keep my back to her longer than necessary because I'm struggling to find the damn words, but she beats me to it.

"I-I'm so sorry, Callum," she starts, the emotion in her voice clear. "I-I shouldn't have done that. I'm so sorry. We'll go, in th—"

Her voice breaks, and I turn to see tears falling freely. I push away from the counter and pull her toward me. I can feel the tension in her body at first, but as the seconds tick on, she softens against me. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I didn’t think they’d turn like that against a child, especially in front of me,” I murmur. “Heads are going to fucking roll.”

She shakes her head. “No, that will only make things worse,” she says sadly. “It’s best we just go.”

Now, I’m the one shaking my head, “I don’t think you understand,” I say, tilting her chin. “Harper is my daughter. No one is going to treat her badly, and no one will treat her mother badly. It’s not safe to leave. Tristen and Aiden are reporting problems with the rogues, too; traveling anywhere beyond the town would be foolish. And besides, I don’t want you or Harper to go. I want you to stay. I want you both to stay.”

She eyes me warily, her tears slowing but not fully stopping, and I can see the conflict in her mind.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I finally ask, already knowing I won’t like the answer.

“The Collinses already had me before I even knew.” She snuffles, and my wolf rages at the thought. “They’d already threatened to leave Harper somewhere, take her from me. I wasn’t expecting to ever see you again, and when I did...I couldn’t risk you wanting to keep Harper.”

I’m confused. “Wouldn’t that be a good thing?”

She shakes her head, stepping back slightly. “I will never let anyone take her from me.”

For the first time since she returned, I see her wolf flash in her eyes, and my wolf responds, itching to pull her close again. “I would never take her from you, Ava.” I reassure her, “I’ve been an asshole, and I don’t deserve it, but I want to know her. I want to be her dad. She’s funny and clever, so sweet. This pack would be lucky if she wanted them .”

Fresh tears begin to fall down Ava’s face, but I see her small smile too. She’s understandably proud of Harper, and I’m not sure she realizes how close her wolf actually is. I’m beginning to think Ava is stronger than she realizes. I reach for her and pull her back into my arms. “This pack would be lucky to have you, too. I’m sorry that I ever made you doubt that.”

She wipes her tears away and tries to steady her voice. “You don’t have to say that,” she says.

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. I haven’t gone soft, and I’m not lying,” I tell her seriously. “My wolf knows what he wants; he always has.”

Ava’s eyes go wide, but I don’t even wait for her to respond. I know she needs to feel my intentions, not just hear it. My lips crash onto hers, and I taste the saltiness from her tears, which give way to sweetness as she parts her lips. My hands run through her hair, cupping the back of her head and pulling her closer. I can feel her wolf responding to me, and I know it’s mutual. Our tongues dance while I push her against the kitchen counter.

I pull away briefly to look at her flushed face. She bites her lower lip, a small moan escaping her mouth as she looks up at me with desire in her eyes. “Fuck,” I whisper before pressing my lips to hers again, harder this time. Our breathing is heavy as I try to keep myself from just taking her again; she deserves so much more.

Ava rolls her hips tentatively at first but then with more certainty, making my already



hard cock pulse almost painfully. I barely break contact as I trail kisses down her neck, lifting her dress as I continue to where her neckline dips tantalizingly close to her breasts. I bunch the fabric in my hands as I drop to my knees in front of her and begin to kiss my way up her thighs. I can feel her leg tremble as I lift it onto my shoulder, hook a finger under her panties, and rip them away.

I take a deep breath as I look at her, and I can't resist running my tongue over her folds. Her scent is intoxicating, and I focus on that as I lap at her, tasting the sweetness of her arousal and the tang of her desire. She cries out, her fingers digging into my hair as she pushes herself against my face. I groan at the taste, loving how wet she is for me and how much she wants this.

I part her lips with two fingers and thrust them inside her, feeling how tight she is around me. She's always been tight, but now...she feels like heaven. My tongue finds her clit again, teasing it gently. Ava gasps and moans above me, arching her back off the ground as she tries to get closer. With one hand still on her hip for support, I reach down and pull my cock from my pants, stroking slowly while watching her face. Her eyes roll into the back of her head, and I can feel how close she is. I suck her clit into my mouth, and she comes hard, crying out my name as I continue to finger fuck her, in awe of how tightly her walls clench around my fingers.

Desperate to feel that tightness on my cock, I waste no time standing and bending her over the counter. She gasps as I fill her from behind on one hard thrust, hitting deep inside her and then pausing as we both adjust to the sensation. I don't want to hurt her, but I need to start moving before I embarrass myself. It feels too damn good. I grip her hips tightly and start a rhythm that has us both moaning immediately. Her walls squeeze around me with each stroke, and I can't hold back as I pound into her relentlessly.

We begin to lose control, and every movement becomes more desperate. Both chasing our release. With my wolf urging me on, I bite down on her shoulder for the

first time, tasting her skin and marking her. She cries out, her nails gripping the counter.

"Fuck, Ava," I growl as I thrust harder into her.

Ava's tight walls clamp down on my cock as she cries out my name again, and I follow seconds later, filling her with hot cum while buried deep inside her. We stand there panting for what feels like an eternity before I pull her down onto the kitchen floor with me and pull her against my chest.

Tonight has changed everything, and for once, I don't give a fuck what the pack thinks.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Telling Harper that Callum is her father was the easy bit. After all, she had heard most of it at the craft fair. Confirming it over breakfast felt like a formality, as she nodded while continuing to play with the little toys Sara had brought around for her. She took it all in her stride, and I was just glad she had woken up seemingly unscarred by last night's events.

On the other hand, Callum looks more nervous than I think I have ever seen him as she shows him her toys and listens to us explain. He fidgets with his coffee cup, eyes darting between Harper and me. I can feel the tension in the air and don't know how to break it. I try to make small talk to ease the tension, but each word feels forced out of my mouth.

Everything felt much simpler last night. There's certainly no denying how much we seem to want each other. My wolf feels closer than ever, and I know that's because she senses her mate, something that pisses me off because I needed her to come back for Harper and me, not him. But that was physical, and hasn't he shown before how easily he can have sex with me without it meaning anything more than that?

But right now, this is about Harper and her father, who wants to step up. Part of me is screaming at me to trust him, that this could help Harper—could help both of us. But another part remembers what happened before and how easily he can hurt me again.

He clears his throat and puts down his cup, taking a deep breath before speaking. "So...um...do you think we could maybe practice your magic later? You know, in the meadow? After I've finished some work." It takes me by surprise, but it also warms my heart that he wants to spend time with Harper on something they can connect about.

Harper looks to me, and I nod. "Sure," I finally manage to say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. Everything feels so out of balance today.

We finish breakfast, and as I look out the window at the quiet street, I suggest walking to the park while Callum does his work. Despite the enormity of her morning, Harper seems completely unfazed and leaps from the table to get ready. As I wash the dishes and get our things ready, I wish I had her youthful innocence for just a moment. Something tells me Callum might just feel the same as I catch him watching me. He looks as though he's going to say more, but then turns away. I find myself wondering if he regrets what he said last night. It'd natural if the emotion of finding out about Harper confused his feelings.

I shake my head, knowing I have spent so much of my life trying to understand Callum's feelings, and that deep down, they are intrinsically linked to the pack. From what I saw at the craft fair last night, the pack will never change its feelings about my place here. There's no point even considering my feelings about Callum. In some ways, I feel as though they are almost insignificant. My feelings have always been insignificant.

Except where Harper is concerned.

When we finally make it outside and head toward the park, the air is crisp and clean. I hold Harper's hand tightly, feeling protective after last night and just grateful the streets are quiet. I was tempted to stay in the house, but with Callum there and the weight of last night's revelations, a part of me wants some time alone with Harper to gauge how she's really feeling.

As we walk, she chats excitedly about everything she wants to learn from Callum and how big and strong her daddy is. She seems genuinely thrilled at the prospect of spending time with him. I'm not sure what I wanted to hear; I want her to be happy, but hearing her enthusiasm only makes the pit in my stomach grow.

We arrive at the park, and I watch as Harper immediately runs to the swings, her laughter ringing out in the air. It's such a simple thing, but it feels like everything is right in my world when she's happy. I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding and try to push aside my worries for a moment to join her, feeling the wind ruffle my hair as I sit in the swing next to her. The sun is still warm on my face, but a fresh chill in the air makes me shiver.

I hear the soft squeak of the swing chains as we start moving, and the world around us fades into the background. Harper's smile is infectious, and I can't help but smile back at her as we swing higher. We stay like this for a while, Harper is fearless and although I have to help her a few times, it amazes me how far she has come since being here.

Eventually, I look around and realize more people are out now. Pups are heading for the park, which means their parents will, too. The sound of laughter soon fills my ears, and I realize a couple of families are setting up on the other side of the park. Harper looks at me, and I notice concern in her eyes. The incident with Sam and last night's craft fair has affected her. "Everyone loves the park, Harper. They're just here to play, too," I say soothingly, and she nods.

I try to concentrate on pushing Harper on the swings, but eventually, I hear it—the whispers, full of talk about last night. People look at me with a mixture of confusion and disdain. It makes me feel exposed and vulnerable. I stand up quickly, pulling Harper with me. "Okay, sweetie," I say, trying to keep my voice light, "let's head home."

I almost expect her to argue, but instead, she looks up at me questioningly as we gather our things and start walking back toward the gate. My heart feels heavy in my chest as the whispers grow louder with every step we take away from the park. I distract Harper by telling her what we'll have for lunch, and then she'll play with Callum.

She squeezes my hand and says, "Daddy, not Callum."

My heart clenches, but I nod and offer her a smile. I don't know why, but I expected some resistance to the idea. She's so young, though, and Callum has been so nice to her; she welcomes the idea, perhaps because of the bond they share with the magic. Maybe she feels the connection. It would make sense.

We get back to the house, and Callum is waiting for us on the porch, finishing a call. I see something like worry flash in his eyes as he studies my face, but I brush it off.

"Park was great, wasn't it, Harper?" I say brightly, trying to sound upbeat. She nods, and I just hope he wasn't watching our quick exit from the park. I hate that he thinks I'm weak.

Callum frowns but doesn't press the matter. Instead, he ruffles Harper's hair and winks at her. "Ready to practice our magic?"

She bounces on her feet with excitement and beams at him. "Yes!" she squeals, practically vibrating with excitement. He shoots me a look over her head, and something in his eyes softens as he says, "We won't be long. Why don't you get coffee?"

"It's fine, really, take your time," I say, watching them disappear through the house toward the meadow at the back. I see them holding hands, and my heart aches.

I'm about to close the door when I hear my name.

"Ava," Sara calls, taking the steps two at a time. "I'm glad I caught you. I just wanted to check in with you after last night."

Sara walked us back from the craft fair without asking a single question about the

revelations, and I was so grateful for that. She just walked with us and let me hold it together for Harper's sake. I turned and smiled at her. "I'm making coffee. Do you want some?"

She accepts, and we head toward the kitchen, where I put a fresh pot on, and we watch Callum with Harper from the large picture window. The sound of Harper's laughter carries from the meadow as she tries and fails to control her magic. The flying sparks and accompanying bang would have terrified me before, but now, with Callum there to guide her, I find myself smiling.

"Well," Sara says, laughing. "I guess I don't need to ask how Callum took the news?"

I shake my head, watching as Harper beams up at him before trying again. "He's been great with her," I say, not able to keep the nerves out of my voice.

"I'm glad," Sara replies, and I look at her over my shoulder. She seems genuinely happy for me, and the tension in my chest loosens a little. "And how was he with you? Charlie wanted to come over too, but I think he still needs some time to process it all."

"Is he embarrassed?" I ask, cringing.

"No," Sara replies emphatically. "Not at all, that's not what I meant. He's pissed. At Callum and the whole pack."

I groan and cover my face with my hands. "Please don't let him jeopardize his place in the pack just for me," I plead, knowing how much the pack means to Charlie.

Sarah rubs my back. "Let him be pissed, Ava," she says, "It's the least he can do. Besides, Callum already called and left a message for him this morning apologizing for not being better on all counts. Charlie's not in the wrong here."

I sigh, fighting the tears that threaten to fall. “Callum didn’t know. He didn’t know I was pregnant when I left. Neither did I,” I say quietly. “He rejected me, not Harper.”

“Oh, Ava,” Sara says, hugging me as we continue to look out the window. “That must have been so hard. What about now? What does he say about everything?”

I sniffle, wiping my tears away. “He wants us to stay. He wants to know Harper.” I smile as he chases Harper through the tall grass. “He really seems to mean that.”

Sarah nods, watching the scene. “He does. And what about you two? What does he want?”

I blush crimson as she eyes me, remembering how easy it is for a shifter to sense when people have been together. “I’m not sure what I want matters; the pack will dictate. And we already know how the pack feels. I don’t even know how Callum feels. I know he wants Harper, I believe him on that. But is that enough for me to stay? Can Harper actually build a life here?”

Sarah scoffs. “They will have to accept the alpha’s daughter and her mom.”

“I think you’re being optimistic.” I say, “Everyone is so perfect here; they don’t allow for anything or anyone they don’t think fits in.”

Sarah shakes her head. “Things aren’t always what they seem. Folks may pretend to be perfect, but there are enough bad apples here, they’d give the rogues a run for their money.” She adds sadly, “I’m working with a committee to house women fleeing domestic violence right here in the pack. I’d like to open it to women in the rogue communities, too, but that’s going to take some time.”

I look at her, shocked. Growing up, there was never much talk of bad relationships or women leaving. However, I saw enough examples of it in my parents’ marriage. And



my experience with the Collinses only highlights that abuse is still very much an issue.

I'm lost in thought as Sarah continues, "You know, if you stay, I think you could really help some of these women. Some have children or pups on the way. And you're just about the strongest mom I know."

I don't know what to say. Her kind words almost breaking the last of my resolve as a tear rolls down my cheek. Just then, I hear Harper shouting for me and look up to see her waving while controlling a collection of tiny sparks. Sarah claps, and I wave, smiling brightly. Callum stands next to her and looks proud as they laugh together. Sarah reaches out and holds my hand, sensing my tidal wave of emotion.

"I'm scared to want anything because I'm afraid of losing it," I say with raw honesty.

She squeezes my hand and nods. "Just give yourself some time, okay?"

I nod, and we watch the scene in the meadow as Callum and Harper build what looks to be a strong foundation. It's like the father-daughter bond was always there, waiting to be ignited. But where does that leave me?

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

I've been a father to Harper for all of two weeks now, and it's been the most rewarding two weeks of my life so far. I thought being alpha was everything until Ava and Harper came along. If anything, the experience has raised more questions in my mind about how twisted Ralph was, to never really want the best for his pack or children.

Two weeks in, and I already know I'd give the world for Harper, and I only want Ava to realize how much she belongs here—with me.

I sense her reticence about mixing with the pack, and I understand. The craft fair is still fresh in my mind, too. Byron was right, I needed to tackle it head on, and I did. I personally visited each pack member we identified as having way too much to say about Ava and Harper at the fair and I had it out with each and every one of them.

Ralph ruled this pack with fear and mind games, happy to pit wolves against each other to save themselves. Looking back, the blood tournaments, encouraged rejections, and pack dynamics weren't about who was best, it was about keeping folk scared. Better to turn on someone else than have the pack turn on you.

Despite not wanting to be anything like Ralph, it looks like I continued in the same vein. Strength, power, and control. The pack above all. Those were the mantras I bought into as well. And look at what it cost me.

Does that mean the pack is ready to accept Ava? I'm not so sure; those roots run deep. More to the point, is Ava willing to accept the pack? Her walls are up so high, I'm not sure she's even going to try. The attacks and raids on property continue along our borders and she seems set on staying for now, but she's been researching

opportunities on the mainland, even eyeing a scholarship with housing at the college. She was set on a whole new life with Ava before coming here, and although we're reconnecting and I'm keen to rebuild that bond, it doesn't seem to be enough to change her mind.

I meant what I said to Ava: I'd never separate her from Harper, and I've been her dad all of two minutes, while Ava has done it all. But I don't think I can let them go, either.

My wolf is demanding I lock this down, tell her she can't go, tie her to me, and never let her go. He's riding me hard, wanting to declare his mate, and I'm having to do everything to hold that part of me back. I know I risk losing her completely if I push it. I want her to want to stay. But if it comes to it, I don't know what I'll do or how my wolf will react.

I want to show her I'm serious about her having a fresh start in the pack and being accepted. I want to show her it could work. That's why I'm doing something I didn't think I'd ever be doing—inviting my brothers back to the house, into my pack, to introduce them to my daughter.

I'm determined to show Ava that I'm ready to accept her, no matter how strong her wolf is or what the pack says.

Charlie and Sarah are already here, along with Byron and a couple of the other betas. They fired up the BBQ out back, and Ava spent the morning preparing food before disappearing to get Harper ready. I know she's nervous; I can feel it rolling off her. With our bond growing stronger every day, I can sense how tense she is, even though she's trying to hide it from Harper.

I step out onto the porch to wait and hear the crunch of gravel as Tristen pulls up first. Aiden follows right behind, and I figure they must have met up when Tristen passed

through Aiden's pack. They're both slightly smaller than me, but catching up fast as they mature into their alpha roles. We all have the same dark hair and eyes that remind me so much of our father. However, I think Aiden takes after our mother the most with the lightest coloring of the three of us.

Tristen steps forward first, his blue eyes studying the house with a mix of surprise and curiosity. "Wow, Callum, this place has really changed. Looks good."

"Thanks," I reply, feeling a rush of pride. It was their childhood home, too, after all, but it's been mine since the packs were split, and they've never seen the changes.

"How's the pack?" Aiden asks as he steps inside.

"They've been good," I reply, leading him into the kitchen. "A lot of angst over the rogues. Some of the farms on the outer ridge have said they've seen higher numbers encroaching on the pack."

"That's what we're hearing, too," Tristen nods. "They're getting bolder, and it's all centered on your pack. We thought it was coming our way, too, but it seems all the focus is here. You sure it's about Harper?"

Aiden gives a low whistle and slaps me on the shoulder, "I still can't believe we're here talking about your kid. Where is she, anyway? I want to meet my niece."

I can't help the smile that crosses my face at the thought. "She'll be down in a minute," I say. "But yeah, I'm sure it's Ava and Harper they're looking for. I know she ain't the only kid with gifts, but it's just too much of a coincidence. They're not stopping, either."

Aiden shakes his head. "Makes no fucking sense. Rogues have been living on the fringes for years. Why start causing trouble over a kid?"

“It’s only going to get them smacked down,” Tristen agrees.

This is what troubles me the most. We’re so busy fighting fires and trying to contain these attacks we haven’t figured out why they’re happening. “Let’s shelve this conversation until we’ve got some food in us,” I mutter as Charlie and Byron walk in from the deck to greet my brothers.

We stand around reminiscing about old times, studiously avoiding mentioning Ralph so as not to crush the mood. I know Aiden won’t tolerate much talk about our father, especially being back in the house. He looks visibly relieved to see it all looking so different, and I see him start to relax as Byron hands him a beer. Despite being the youngest, Aiden always hung around with Tristen’s and my friend group, constantly trying to keep up. Now we’re all grown, and I see the affection between my betas and my youngest brother is as strong as ever.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and then Ava appears in the doorway, holding Harper's hand tightly. My heart swells seeing them together; Ava looks radiant in a blue dress, and Harper is adorable with her riot of blonde curls.

Tristen immediately walks over, offering Ava a smile before kneeling down in front of Harper, his eyes wide with wonder. “Hey there, little one. You look just like your mom with all that pretty hair,” he says softly, reaching out to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “I’m your Uncle Tristen.”

Aiden crouches down on the other side of her, giving her a playful wink. "Hello there, kiddo! You must be Harper. Your dad’s been telling us so much about you."

Harper smiles but shrinks back behind Ava’s skirt, and I have to remind myself it wasn’t too long ago she was living in fear with Ava’s captors. I step forward, crouching down, too. “All right, don’t let these goons scare you. They’re my brothers, and they just wanted to come by and show you some of their magic. Is that okay?”

Ava chuckles, and I realize she knows what I'm doing. Harper is obsessed with her gift, and as soon as she realizes my brothers have it too, she reappears, more confident this time.

"I hear your gift looks a lot like mine," Aiden tells her, a fireball appearing in his hand.

I slap his arm. "Not in the house."

Tristen laughs before summoning a gust of wind and blowing Aiden's fire out, causing Aiden to feign outrage and make Harper laugh. My brothers look pretty proud of themselves as Harper rushes outside with them to show them what we've been working on. I wince as tiny sparks fly before she's even out of the kitchen. I have a feeling her gift is going to cost me repairs at some point.

I turn to Ava, who looks nervous. "Are you okay?" I ask, pulling her close. She hugs me tightly, her eyes closed, as she takes a deep breath against my chest and nods. "Let's get outside and have some food. Keep an eye on our little firecracker."

We walk outside to find my brothers showing off their magic to a captivated Harper. Aiden lights a small bonfire in the fire pit with his fire while Tristen creates a tornado that spins around them, making everyone gasp except for Harper, who claps and laughs, dancing on the spot. Growing up, our gifts were never used for fun. Ralph was always strict on ensuring our gifts were seen as raw power, not silly games. Watching Harper's innocent joy at my brother's antics feels refreshing. I can't even remember the last time I saw my brothers at ease in this meadow behind the house we grew up in. Maybe never.

I look around at the beautiful meadow, freshly cut grass, and smell the barbecue in the air. I feel something shift inside me like a weight lifting. I don't know what it is, but it feels good. The smell of burning meat from the BBQ signals that the food is

ready, and we all start handing plates around as my brothers bring Harper back to the house, looking exhausted and ready to eat.

Soon, we're all sitting around the large table, which is laden with food. This afternoon has gone better than I could have hoped. Ava seems much more relaxed even though she's still keeping a distance from almost everyone, using Sara and me as a buffer. I already warned my brothers she's skittish about other wolves, and they're doing a good job so far of trying to talk to her but giving her space. Neither are known for their subtlety, but they have their own demons, and I know they get it. Probably more than Ava could ever know.

As we finish eating, Sara leans over to get my attention. "Callum?" she asks, and I nod. "I was going to wait until the next council meeting, but I just wanted to check if you'd looked through the refuge proposal? If we can't get the funds, I'll have to think of something else. Some of these women can't wai—"

I wave my hand. "Don't worry, I was going to catch you later anyway. You're right, this is too important. I'll have the funds made available immediately, and we actually have a building that has just become available that you can use for free."

Sara gasps and beams at Charlie and then Ava. It's actually embarrassing that the pack had no provision for helping those in need.

"Thank you so much," Sara gushes as Ava smiles.

"Please don't thank me. It should have been in place long ago," I say.

Sara turns to Ava. "I was hoping you could help us out by meeting some of the women and hearing their stories. Maybe telling your own, " she says. "They often feel sidelined by the pack, and your experience might be really helpful."

Sarah's eyes plead with Ava, who looks shocked but nods hesitantly after a moment. "I don't know how I can help, really, but I'm happy to try," she says.

My wolf practically leaps with joy. It's the tiniest of steps, but it feels significant. Looking around the table, despite the rogues on our doorsteps, I feel...light. Just then, Harper jumps onto my knee, and I instantly begin tickling her, making everyone laugh. I look up and watch Ava. The way she looks at Harper is pure magic, and then, just for a second, she looks at me with the same magnetic look, and I feel like I'm ten feet tall.



*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Harper skips on ahead, and I smile, watching her kick the fall leaves. They're really starting to pile up now that the season has shifted. It's such a simple thing, but I see how happy it makes her, and I can't deny I feel a tentative peace beginning to settle. Decisions always feel easier when I think about what's best for Harper. And right now, that is the safety and happiness she's found here.

But what does that mean for me? I envisaged a whole new life for us on the mainland. All we had to do was get away from the Collinses and head to the coast; I knew I'd stolen enough money to get us on the ferry and set us up for a few weeks. I was scared senseless about it, but it felt clear. I was saving us. All by myself.

Callum stepping in to save us changed everything. Firstly, it reminded me of my failings—that I can't really protect Harper by myself, after all. And secondly, that I can't outrun reality.

Harper is Callum's daughter, and the weeks she has spent here in the safety of his pack, learning about her magic and finally feeling safe, have transformed my already beautiful daughter into the best version of herself. She's thriving. To take her away from that would be incredibly reckless. To leave the security he's offering her for the unknown on the mainland and poverty, not to mention the rogues that keep attacking the town and border properties—I know they're looking for Harper, but I just don't understand why when they wanted to get rid of her. It makes no sense.

But still, it's hard to give up the dream I had of a new life away from the island. Away from the prejudice that has dogged my life every step of the way. Callum says all the right things about wanting us to stay, but I know that's because he wants to keep Harper close—of course he does. He's stepped up, and I think he's going to be

an amazing dad. I know he wants me, but it's like when we were younger. He can't keep his hands off me when we're alone, but there's no declaration about being mates, no sign I'd be a part of his life in the pack. Outside the house, he's getting on with his life as alpha, dealing with the rogues and pack. There's no us. I know I should be grateful that he accepts Harper so readily. She's the one who matters, but what if he takes a luna later, and I'm just left to live on the periphery again? Maybe that's my place in life, and all I can hope is that Harper has better.

I'd be a fool to fall for him again, yet that's exactly what I'm doing, because he's all I ever wanted. As a man, he's maturing into someone even better than I imagined. His exterior may still be demanding and hard-headed; I see through that, especially when I watch him with Harper.

Harper stops to pick up some leaves, and I glance at the time. I promised Sarah we'd be at the new refuge building in an hour after walking to meet some of the women at the old property. Things have moved fast since Callum confirmed the funds for the refuge and offered the use of the new building. After seeing the conditions the women were staying in at the cabin just outside town, it couldn't come soon enough.

The worn-out single story reminds me of my childhood home and reeks of desperation, which is the last thing these women need after fleeing violence and abuse. Even the cabin's position at the very edge of town was deeply unsuitable, as it left them vulnerable to their ex-mates constantly trying to reach them. Callum had already thrown two of the ex-mates out for abuse, but they've probably just joined the rogues, because there's no other option on the island. You're either in the packs or you're rogue. Banishing wolves just creates instant enemies, which is why abuse went unchecked by Ralph.

I'm glad to see Callum is punishing the men, but that's not the end of these women's stories. I was reluctant to get involved with the shelter, but I promised Sara I'd go down with her. Initially, I was dismayed when I saw a few other women from the

pack I recognized, and they looked unsure, too, but as we worked, painting the old building and preparing the rooms, things started to get easier. Tentative conversation slowly gave way to small jokes and stories, and as the days passed, I realized I no longer felt nervous.

The rest of the pack still feels daunting, but I'm starting to see friendlier faces. Perhaps because these women have either already suffered misfortunes themselves or are already open to helping those who the pack deems to be on the outside. Harper began playing with some of the children from the shelter while I talked to the moms about what they've been going through—although they were with their mates rather than strangers, their situations sounded very similar to my treatment at the Collinses. Seeing their dingy accommodations in the shared cabin only made me appreciate how well Harper was thriving at Callum's and made me more determined to help these women in any way I could.

Given today is the final moving day and by tonight all the women and pups will be settled in the new building safe in town, I decided to take Harper for a walk over to the cabin to see if I could help Elena and Lucy, the two women who left sorting things at that end. It's quite a walk through the park trails, but it's such a beautiful day that it hardly seems to matter. Harper hasn't complained once about the walk. In fact, she's bonded so much with all the women at the shelter that she's just excited to be a part of it all.

As we walk down the trail, I hear the leaves rustle behind us, but when I look back, no one is there. It must be the breeze, but it's oddly persistent. Harper is still slightly ahead, collecting leaves and flowers. Suddenly, she gasps and points into the trees. At first, I think it's just her imagination, and there are always shadows and animals moving around in the forest. But then, something moves out of the corner of my eye, sending chills down my spine.

Three wolves leap from the cover of the trees. I instantly know they're rogues, and

scream for Harper. One lunges for her, but she's too quick and bolts toward me, hiding behind me as the wolves block the trail ahead. "H-harper, you turn and run, scream all the way, and don't be afraid to use your gift. Scream at the top of your lungs. Okay?" I ask, keeping my voice low. I will fight these wolves with everything I have, but I need Harper to run; she can't just stand here. "Go. Scream."

I push Harper back slightly, and she starts running and screaming. The wolves in front simply look bored, and I know they'll chase her down if I don't fight. The fear inside me gives way to rage, and I feel her rising, my wolf fighting to the surface. My wolf surges forward as if in slow motion, pushing my human form back until it feels like my bones are snapping and then melting into the ground. In reality, despite not shifting for years, it only takes seconds, and I'm on all fours, snarling at the wolves who would dare hurt my child.

They don't wait, the first lunging and snapping at me, but I twist and clamp down on the bone in his leg, tossing him to the side. The next body slams me and is so much larger that I'm tossed to the side. One tries to run past me to go after Harper, but I leap with all my strength to crash into him. We roll and take out the other wolf, trying to shake off his injury. In wolf form, I can hear them talking.

"Leave the bitch, we only need the kid," one snarls.

I don't understand why. I jump back, missing a snap, and the other two wolves fall in behind him. "She's just a child," I say. "Leave her alone."

The third wolf laughs, "We don't give a fuck about the kid, just her power."

My blood runs cold, and I know I have to stop them. They're still advancing, but I stop retreating and instead lunge at the first, locking my jaws around his throat. He screams as blood flows freely to the ground. I waste no time turning my attention to the next, trying the same move but catching the side of his face and biting down. This

time, though, the other wolf leaps onto my back, sinking his teeth into my shoulder.

I know I can't escape this. It's a fight to the death. But every second I keep them here, Harper takes longer to reach the town. She must be almost there now, and I heard her screaming all the way down the trail, so hopefully, someone else will have heard, too. The pain is excruciating as he pulls his jaw from side to side, and I scream, releasing my grip on the other wolf. I'm flung against a tree, unable to move.

"Get that little bitch while I finish this one," the wolf snarls. "She's killed him."

I weakly look over to where the other wolf has bled out on the ground, feeling glad at least one of them is dead. I try to lift my head, but I can't. The other wolf takes off down the trail, and I close my eyes, praying Harper has made it to town. The second wolf turns to me, my own blood dripping from his jaw. "Right, bitch. You're done."

He lunges at me, and I close my eyes; a picture of Callum and Harper practicing their magic in the meadow appears in my mind, and a tear slips from my eye as I consider it's everything I ever wanted. At least I got to pretend to have it for just a moment.

A blood-curdling cry fills the air, and I snap my eyes open to see a wolf I'd recognize anywhere pinning my attacker to the ground: Charlie. I watch on in disbelief as he tears into the attacking wolf, flinging his dead body onto the ground within seconds. He instantly shifts back and rushes over to me, my body half shifting back, struggling with the injuries.

"H-Harp," I whisper. "W-where?"

Charlie grabs some of the torn clothes and uses them as bandages over my wounds, pressing hard. "More wolves on the trail. We heard the screaming and came. I haven't seen Harper. She'll be okay."

My tears flow freely. I just need to know she's safe.

"Where is she?" I hear Callum's frantic voice as he tears into view. My body has almost completely shifted back as he kneels down beside me, another wolf's blood covering his body. He turns to Charlie. "You take out these two?"

Charlie shakes his head, inclining it towards me. "Ava had already taken one out; it looks like she took multiple wolves on."

Callum's eyes snap to me, and I see a mixture of fear and pride in them. He nods. "Call the others and make sure Harper has been found."

Cold dread seeps through me despite the burn of my wounds. The panic in Callum's eyes is real. Where is Harper? I watch my brother make the calls, each one increasingly frantic. By the time he turns to us, I already know the answer.

Harper is gone.

They took her.

Charlie's words have been echoing around my head as chaos breaks out all around me. When the first attack was spotted on the edge of town, I had no idea Ava and Harper were going to get caught up in it. It appeared to be a lone attack or mugging at first, but then other wolves were spotted on the trails that crisscross across the park, and my heart dropped. I knew Ava had set off for the women's old refuge cabin to help them get moved.

I raced up the trail with Charlie while Byron and the other betas dealt with the first attacks, but soon, we were caught up in another ambush. Realizing I could deal with them myself, I sent Charlie on ahead to find Ava and Harper. That's when I heard Harper screaming. I could hear she was running toward me, so I finished off the attackers and raced toward her. The screaming stopped, and by the time I reached Charlie and Ava, I had hoped to see her there.

They took her.

I don't understand how they took her from right under my nose, in my pack, in my town. My rage builds until I can barely see straight. I watch on through the window as Charlie and a couple of the other betas gather outside the clinic. Turning slightly, I watch as Ava sleeps, sedated by our pack doctor to help her injuries heal quicker. The injuries she sustained trying to save our daughter. The fight must have been brutal, and no one could quite believe how well she fought, taking on three shifters all by herself.

But none of that matters to Ava. She was inconsolable before they put her under.

Despite the lacerations and internal injuries, she was still trying to get up, determined to find Harper herself. Even amid my fear and desolation, I see that everyone knows Ava behaved like a true warrior. The respect my betas and the clinic are showing her is immense. Ava's experiences, and those of the women at the shelter, have exposed a real ugliness to pack life that I think I was willfully blind to for a long time, but I'm determined to put it right. And I think others in the pack are with me.

But none of that matters without Harper.

I know that nothing will matter to Ava if she wakes up and I haven't found Harper. It will destroy her. It's already destroying me.

I hear a gentle knock on the door and turn to see Byron through the glass. I glance at Ava to make sure she's still comfortable and step out into the hall, praying that he has news.

"How is she?" he asks, looking past me into the room.

"Comfortable," I sigh, "but she'll heal soon enough, and I have to have Harper back by then. Tell me you have something. I need to get back out there."

"I took the liberty of contacting your brothers," he replies, and I raise my brows. "I know we handle our own business, but this is family. Aiden has already blocked all the main roads and trails into the mountains, and Tristen has secured the northern port. Your brothers will head our way once their men are secure."

I nod. "You did the right thing. Anything to get Harper back," I reply. "So, they can't get out. We just need to narrow down where they are within the pack's borders."

"Did they say anything to Ava about why they wanted Harper?" Byron presses carefully.



I shake my head. “Only that it was Harper they specifically wanted. She’s just a kid, Byron.”

“I know, I know. We’ll get the bastards,” Byron mutters. “They obviously want her magic, so they’re not going to hurt her.”

“We don’t know shit,” I snap.

Byron falls silent, and for a moment, I feel as though I’m about to explode. Just then, I notice Charlie approaching. He must sense the tension in the air, but it doesn’t seem to faze him, his face set in determination. I know he’s feeling this, too.

“We just got a call,” he says, still holding his phone. “The McCall property spotted a group of wolves and a couple of trucks at one of the old outposts a few days ago, and even more activity today. They’re lying low, waiting for us to get out there.”

“I’ll call your brothers and tell them to head straight out that way to meet us,” Byron says, already moving.

I glance back into the room at Ava, a nurse sitting by her bed. As I opening the door, the nurse looks up. “If she wakes and I’m not here, tell her I’ve gone to get Harper back,” I say.

“I’ll tell her,” the nurse I think is called Becca replies. “Be careful, alpha, and get your little girl back safely.”

I nod, walking quickly from the building and straight into the truck that Byron has pulled around to the front of the clinic. “We’ll be quicker by truck up to the head of the trail, and then we’ll shift,” he says.

I let the rage build in my system as I drive. It’s a rage driven by fear, but whatever the

root cause, I know it will be useful in the inevitable fight. Nothing will stop me from getting Harper back and smashing the rogues once and for all. Nothing. I spent far too much time trying to just keep them at bay, assuming they were simply wanting to live off the scraps of our community. But if they want a war, they've got it now.

Abandoning the truck at the head of the trail, we immediately shift and sprint through the forest. I know Charlie and the other betas are right behind us, and soon, we're traveling at speed as a pack. The McCall's property comes into view on the left, and over to the right, across the ravine, I see the outpost tucked away. It's camouflaged but still just about visible when you know what to look for. I can also just make out a truck that has been partially covered by foliage in an attempt to disguise it.

I stop and signal for everyone to do the same. I don't want to storm the place if Harper isn't even there or if these aren't the rogues we're looking for. We watch for a moment, aware of shadows behind the building and looking for any sign of Harper. Suddenly, I hear pine needles crunching underfoot and spin around, ready to face whoever is following us up the trail. I'm face to face with what appears to be my wolf's reflection, but I instantly recognize Tristen. Our wolves have always been like twins, with deep auburn coats and amber eyes. Following behind is Aiden; his wolf is the darkest black I've ever seen, and his bright golden eyes are unlike any other wolf's. Apparently, he takes after our mom's old pack—there's certainly no wolf like his on the island, and it looks damn impressive.

They already know about the outpost, so I don't need to bother explaining; we simply nod at each other, our heads fully in the game.

I motion towards the outpost, and we all begin to stalk forward, ready for whatever may come. As we close in on the building, we suddenly hear shouting from inside and then see a sudden flash of light. My heart drops into my stomach.

Suddenly, one of the windows explodes outwards as if hit by something. We all tense

at the sight of flames licking through the cracked glass, and I hear Harper scream. I race across the ravine towards the outpost, my fury propelling me forward. Tristen, Aiden, and my betas are right behind me, matching my speed with ease.

The closer we get, the more I smell Harper's fear and sense the chaos of her magic filling the air around the outpost. I burst through the door and I'm hit by a wall of magical heat that nearly takes my breath away. Smoke swirls everywhere, obscuring my vision, but I can just make out a figure running towards a back exit, dragging Harper with them. I crash through the wolves in my way, leaving my betas to subdue them as I focus on the man trying to flee with Harper.

Crashing out of the back of the outpost, I notice runes and motifs on the ground and trees, along with a strange altar. The man has thrown Harper into the center of a circle made of rocks and bones.

"Get the hell away from her," I snarl.

The man turns and laughs, shifting into a silver wolf as he stands between me and my daughter. "I'm not stopping now," he replies calmly, "I'm too damn close."

I lunge forward, but some unseen force pushes me back, and I land with a thud. "Harper, run," I say, but she cowers toward the back of the circle, looking dazed.

Behind me, I sense Byron and Charlie appear with my brothers, each covered in blood but victorious. They look confused when they see I'm not advancing. "Some kind of magic. He doesn't look like a witch, though," I mutter.

He chuckles darkly and then calmly turns his back on us, moving toward Harper, who whimpers.

"Stay the fuck away from her," I bellow, but he doesn't stop.

“You’re right, I’m no witch,” he says, bending down and stroking some hair out of Harper’s face. “I’m a collector. So I get all the benefits of our world’s gifts without the hassle of birthright.”

“I don’t think he’s a rogue,” Aiden whispers. “He’s something else. The ones in the cabin were all known rogues, though.”

“When I heard about an unbound child with new gifts, it was very exciting,” he continues, helping Harper to her feet. She glances over at me, her bottom lip trembling. I pound on the invisible shield, lightning surging from my hands every time I make contact.

“She’s not unbound, or whatever that means; she’s my daughter,” I snarl, watching in disbelief as he stands over her, a light in his eyes beginning to glow. Harper screams as he looms over her, and a strange light glows between them. “He’s going to kill her. Aim at the same spot,” I scream.

Byron and Charlie stand back slightly as I blast the shield with lightning. Tristen summons a stream of hurricane-force wind, and Aiden burns it with the hottest stream of molten lava I have ever seen. For a horrible second, I don’t think it will work, but then I see the faintest crack appear. Without waiting, knowing I don’t have time, I leap forward and burst through, propelled forward by my brother’s magic. The man spins around, the magic he was using on Harper disrupted; I watch in horror as she’s flung back onto the ground, unconscious. The wolf in front of me growls and seems to grow in size, his eyes shifting from amber to red. Behind me, I feel my brothers stepping closer, our combined magic growing into something far larger than ourselves.

The wolf appears to assess the situation, and then, just as I’m summoning my lightning to attack, he shifts again. His bones break, and his silhouette twists and morphs into something I struggle to recognize until he unfurls giant webbed wings.

The massive dragon rises up into the air, and I instinctively dive forward, covering Harper. Tristen wastes no time summoning wind and blasting the dragon, destabilizing it as it takes into the air. Hiding Harper behind me, I unleash my lightning, firing on the dragon and striking it as it twists and turns in the sky before disappearing over the ridge.

“D-Daddy,” Harper cries behind me, and I turn, scooping her up into my arms, completely overcome by emotion. “I want Mama.”

“What the fuck was that?” Tristen mutters, stepping forward with the others to check on Harper, too.

“I have no idea,” I say, keeping Harper pressed against me. “Round up anyone who’s still alive. We need answers. We need names. And I need to get Harper out of here.”

“His name is Malik,” Harper says. I lift her away slightly so I can see her face.

“That man’s called Malik?” I repeat.

She nods, tears falling down her face. “He said I was going to die,” she sobs.

My heart clenches and then turns stone cold. I pull her against me as I take in the other’s equally stony expressions. “He was lying, you’re safe. Daddy’s got you. He’s the one dying.”

Rushing Harper back to the truck and heading toward Ava, only one thought dominates my mind. I will do anything to keep my family safe. And that is what Ava and Harper are, my family. Now I’ve just got to make sure Ava sees us that way, too.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

“Mama,” Harper cries as she comes tearing through the door. The nurse had already explained that Callum and the others had her and were on their way to the clinic, but I knew I wouldn’t really believe it until she was in my arms.

Harper leaps onto the bed and buries her head in my arms. A sob escapes me as I ignore the burning pain from my healing injuries to pull her closer. Then, after a moment, I lift her slightly away so I can check her over for any injuries, my eyes darting to Callum for reassurance.

He stands at the door, looking a mixture of relieved and full of rage, his shoulders almost sagging as he takes in our reunion. “She’s okay,” he assures me, “The doctor is going to come in and check her over here, but she seems alright. Her gift seems unaffected.”

“Unaffected by what?” I ask, and then listen in horror to what happened. A sob breaks free as Callum details what they saw during the rescue and the monster that had been holding Harper. I pull her closer, and Callum walks to the bedside, crouching down beside us and pulling us both into his arms. I breathe in his masculine, steadying scent. My wolf, who hasn’t calmed down since they woke me from the sedation, calms for the first time as Harper, Callum, and I embrace in silence, and I realize that it’s not possible to feel more whole as a family than I do right now.

Eventually, Harper begins to squirm, restless from being held so tightly, so Callum steps back, and she snuggles against me in the bed. “So, it wasn’t the Collinses?” I ask, deeply confused.

Callum shakes his head. "Byron stayed on with the others to interrogate the surviving rogues," he replies, and I wince as Harper settles against my healing wound. Callum looks concerned, but I urge him to continue. "Apparently, the Collins were mouthing off about the trouble Harper caused with her gift, and it caught the attention of some kind of shapeshifter, Malik. He was already on the island. We knew the rogues were suddenly more organized. We just didn't know why."

"Malik?" I ask.

Callum nods. "We don't have the full picture yet, but it seems he steals magic, growing his own powers. He arrived and immediately took out some of the witches that live near Tristen's pack, but no one noticed because they were rogues."

"By took out, you mean killed?" I ask, holding Harper tight.

"When the magic is removed, the person dies," Callum confirms, his face stony. He reaches out and takes my hand. "She's okay, though. We got there in time."

"She's just a little girl," I say, tears falling down my face as I try to stay calm for Harper's sake. Then, whispering over her head, I ask, "Is he coming back?"

"I'm not going to let that happen," Callum replies, still holding my hand. "Tristen's pack has a coven who has agreed to provide protection; a witch is arriving tomorrow. He's also bringing in what's left of the rogue witches to keep them safe."

"But if the witches were attacked themselves, how can they help protect Harper?" I ask, my mind racing with a thousand questions.

"The rogue witches came up with some kind of talisman; that's how the rest survived. We'll know more tomorrow," he says, and I see the weight of all these revelations coming down on him. "We've never seen anything like Malik before. The rogues that

survived seem like true followers. Disciples, almost.”

I look down at Harper, her soft golden curls hiding her face. She seems to have fallen asleep; no surprise when I consider all she’s been through. “The Collinses never mentioned anything about Malik or magic. They just seemed annoyed or scared by Harper’s gift.”

“I don’t think they’re central to the rogue uprising,” Callum shrugs. “The ones Byron has interrogated didn’t have any information on them. If Malik had known about Harper before you fled, he’d have just taken her from there. Word must have gotten out after her fire caused the damage at their property.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice at the thought. If I’d stayed at the Collinses’ after Harper caused the fire, Malik might have attacked there, and no one could have saved Harper.

Callum seems to sense what I’m thinking and squeezes my hand. “No one is ever going to hurt her, hurt either of you ever again, I swear.” He glances down at our interwoven hands and takes a deep breath, “Ava, I—”

He’s interrupted by the doctor, who knocks and cautiously enters. “Can I check Harper now?” she asks, as Callum stands. “I can come back.”

“No, it’s important. Let’s get her checked over,” Callum says, turning to me. “We can talk later.”

Harper stirs as I gently wake her for the doctor to begin her checks. At first, she seems disoriented, and it breaks my heart as she recoils from the doctor’s touch. “Shush, it’s okay,” I soothe her as she clings to me, and sparks begin to fly from her fingers as her distress builds.



Suddenly, she looks toward Callum, and he instinctively reaches for her. “How about I hold you the whole time,” he says, and she nods. I watch as she calms in his arms as the doctor carefully listens to her heart and checks her for injuries; luckily, these appear to be mainly just scrapes and bruises that are already healing.

“And we can see her gift is still intact,” the doctor muses as tiny sparks continue to flicker. Turning to Callum, she says, “Have the witch stop by the clinic too, if she will, to update us.”

He nods, thanking her before she finishes checking Harper, and turns to me. “If those wounds are healed enough, we should be able to get you home tonight, too. As long as you promise no more heroics.”

I brush the comment away. “There was nothing heroic about it. I didn’t save her; Callum did.”

The doctor scoffs. “You took on three male wolves on your own. Put one down and carried on fighting. There’s not a wolf in this clinic that doesn’t think you’re a hero fighting for your daughter like that.”

“Damn right,” the nurse who sat with me earlier, Becca, says as she enters the room. “Now, let’s get those bandages changed so you can get into your own bed to rest.”

Back at Callum’s house, I’m sore but healing fast. I’m grateful I can manage enough to help Harper get ready for bed. I can see how worn out she is; no child should go through all that she has. I pull the covers back and let her climb into the bed we share, tucking her in while I put some pillows behind me and lean back.

Almost wordlessly, she curls up and closes her eyes as I begin to tell our usual bedtime story. Only this time, there’s a twist. I begin to tell her about how her daddy is the most powerful alpha on the island, and he loves her more than anything in the

world, how they're going to practice her magic in the meadow, and we'll all play in the tall grass. As I talk, I can feel the last of the tension leave her body, and the sound of her breathing evens out. I softly stroke her hair. "Sleep tight, my little angel. Know that your daddy is right downstairs, and the whole pack is out tonight to protect you."

With patrols taking place around the clock, I know that much is true. Having Harper safe in her bed means everything tonight, and as I slip from the bed, I go to look out the window and see the guards stationed around the house and down the street.

Feeling grateful for the security of the pack, I go in search of Callum and find him in his office, just finishing a call. I hear him saying goodbye to someone as I approach the door, and he jumps up when he sees me coming, rushing to help me sit down in one of the chairs by the fire. "You shouldn't be walking around," he grumbles.

I chuckle. "You know I'm nearly healed," I say, but he still looks skeptical. "Okay, it does hurt, but I can walk around. I think I ache from shifting more than anything."

"Did you have any signs your wolf was coming back?" he asks.

I nod. "She'd been getting closer ever since we—" I pause, blushing. "She's been closer recently, but when they attacked, she just broke through."

"For Harper," he nods. "You really are a super mom. I'm so glad you protected her like that; if they'd taken her straight away, Malik would have had longer to extract her magic."

I can feel the tears welling as he speaks, and I brush them away. "I've never been so scared, I thought they were going to kill her," I sob, the tears breaking free. "I thought we'd never see you again."

Callum crouches down in front of me, my head falling onto his shoulder as emotion

consumes me. My wolf howls in distress at the memory of telling Harper to run, knowing I couldn't hold them off for long. In my distress, at first I barely notice the waves of calm that seem to be coming from Callum as he simply holds me. It's only after a minute that I realize those feelings are coming through our bond.

After a moment, he leans back slightly, lifting my chin with his hand. "You feel it too," he says quietly. "The bond."

I nod as time stands still. "I do. It's been in the background for a while. But I feel it stronger now."

"It's always been there," he replies. "I've just been a fool not to let myself feel it. Not to let myself have what I've always wanted."

I shake my head. "You don't have to say these things because of what's happened or because of Harper," I say. "I won't take her away from you. I know she's safer here in the pack, with her dad, and I want her to be happy. But you don't owe me anything."

"I love Harper, but I'm talking about me and you," he says, his wolf staring back at me through the shifting Amber in his eyes. "I love you, Ava. I love you and Harper."

I search his face for a hint of deception, but all I see is hopeful honesty. In my mind, I remember those weeks we spent together when the rest of the school was at the tournament, and our bond developed until he threw it away in the blink of an eye.

"You rejected me once, Callum, how do I know you won't do it again?" I ask. "I would rather you be honest. I don't think I would survive it if the bond were broken again."

He dips his head, taking a deep breath. "I was scared. I knew my father would never

accept you, and I never wanted to challenge him. We lived in constant fear of upsetting him,” he begins. I knew some of it, everyone knew what Ralph was like, but I couldn’t have known the extent of it. “When he died, the pack was fracturing, and they expected me to step up, and I panicked. I acted just like him when all I ever wanted to do was be your mate. I have no excuse. I just ask for your forgiveness.”

“You could never be like Ralph,” I say, lifting my hand to cup his face.

“I fear that’s exactly what I’m like,” he replies, “but you and Harper make me want to be better. I want to be a better man, wolf, and leader. But more than anything, I want you. I want us to be a family.”

Tears roll down my cheeks, but this time, they are happy tears; I can feel his sincerity shining through the bond, and it almost takes my breath away. “I love you, Callum, I always have. And you are already a better man and a better father.”

He kisses me hard, the salt of my tears drowning in the sweetness of his embrace. I grip his shoulders as he deepens the kiss, drawing me to him as though he’ll never let me go, though careful of my wounds.

“I will spend forever making sure you feel my love,” he says, and I find myself believing him.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

Standing at the door to the pack hall, I pause for a moment and watch the chaos unfolding before me. It seems as though the whole pack is here, filling the space with bustling activity. There may be thick snow on the ground outside, but it's actually a bit too hot in here with all the people rushing around and the heaters turned all the way up.

Charlie spots me and waves, walking over with a huge basket in his hands, looking as lost as I feel. "I have no idea what to do with this, " he says, gesturing to the basket.

I stare at the thing, bursting with ribbons. "Well, I don't know," I laugh.

"It's your ceremony," he grimaces, "you should know."

Feeling a bit overwhelmed, I glance around the hall. It looks completely transformed. The usually bare ceiling beams are decked with lights and fabric, the chairs are draped and arranged in a circle, and flower displays fill the space. With the snow coming down outside the large windows, it really does look like a winter wonderland.

"But I didn't plan any of it," I admit, panic rising as I stare at the basket and then glance around the room until I spot Sara heading our way. "Thank the goddess for Sara."

Charlie turns, too, looking visibly relieved at the sight of his mate. "Sara, what on Earth are these?" he says, lifting the basket. Sara laughs, taking one of the ribbons and attaching it to the back of a nearby chair.

"Chair ribbons, silly," she says, kissing Charlie's cheek. "Now, quickly, put them on

each chair. I've got to go finish getting Ava and Harper ready with the girls."

Sara rushes off, and we get to work quickly, but it's fiddly work with large hands. I'd normally get frustrated as hell, but as I look around the room, all I can think is that I can't wait for Harper to see it and for me to see Ava's face.

From the moment we got Harper back, I knew this was what I wanted. To claim my family in front of everyone and bring them into the center of the pack. I think Ava was still worried about the pack accepting her, but she needn't have worried. She already had a growing number of people who respected what she was helping Sara do with the women's refuge, including those at the clinic who were involved in their care. Their opinion goes far around here. Then, taking on the rogues alone and showing the kind of strength in defending her child that defies natural ability means she's earned the pack's enduring respect.

And my enduring gratitude.

I feel so lucky that Ava is my mate and my daughter's mother, and the pack can't wait to accept her as their luna. It's been almost two months since the attacks and revelations about Malik. Amidst all the uncertainty and new threats, the pack has gone all out on a reason to celebrate. This hall and the involvement of the pack in getting it ready is a testament to that. I only hope that Ava sees that when she arrives, and it dispels any lingering notions she may have about not being wanted here.

Just as I'm finishing the last of the chairs by the door, I feel a gush of cool air as the doors open. I hear them before I see them as Byron escorts my brothers and their party inside the hall. From the amount of snow they're having to shake from their clothes, it has really started coming down outside.

"I don't think you'll be making it back over the mountains in this," I say, going to greet them.

Tristen nods, but Aiden shakes his head. “You know I will,” he remarks, his smile easy but the determination behind his eyes clear. I don’t say anything; today is not the day to question why Aiden has such a lingering issue with his childhood pack. I suspect I know, anyway: Ralph.

Perhaps an occasion like today will help him see that we’re moving on here, and it will help him to as well. I welcome the rest of the small group and listen as they gently rib me about my attempts to decorate the chairs before helping me to straighten a few of the bows out.

Tristen comes to stand next to me as I finish the last one. “Your defenses looked strong when we passed,” he remarks. “The runes will need replacing next week—maybe sooner with the snow, though.”

I nod, knowing it’s going to be a long winter of maintaining the witch’s runes to ward off further attacks from Malik. Thankfully, they seem to be working so far. The witches learned that because he has the ability to absorb other magic, he’s left vulnerable to one single protection spell. And while that is a good thing for now, everyone knows only one protection spell isn’t enough. With more sightings of Malik across the island and a worrying trend of rogue attacks using magic they didn’t have before, the threat is far from over.

“Thank the goddess for the witches,” I reply.

Tristen scoffs. “If you say so,” he mutters as I roll my eyes. I won’t argue with him today of all days, but his issue with the witches is becoming a problem I’m tired of hearing about. I get that he doesn’t trust them, but the fact is, we need them. We definitely can’t afford to piss them off. Which is exactly what he seems to excel at.

As if on cue, Emily, one of the witches who travels to protect the runes, walks into the hall. She’s become good friends with Ava and Sara and has been at the house

helping the girls get ready. Harper especially loves Emily. As far as I can tell, she's a nice, if slightly quiet, girl. Clearly very strong magically, but she's never been a problem. If anything, we're more than grateful for her help, which makes Tristen's outright hostility to her all the stranger.

I catch the moment he spots her, his wolf bristling. "Not today," I snap. "I don't want to hear it."

Now it's his turn to roll his eyes, "I won't ruin your big day with the truth," he says, clapping me on my back. "Besides, you want to worry more about our little brother chasing after all the available women here before running off in the night."

We both turn to see Aiden holding court with three young she-wolves. I sigh, knowing his intentions all too well. On the surface, he just looks like a carefree young man flitting from one woman to the next, but I don't think that's all it is. I sigh again as I hear the unsuspecting girls laugh at something he's said.

"I don't want anyone crying at my mate's ceremony because he can't choose which girl to take home tonight," I mutter.

Tristen smirks. "I'll keep an eye on him," he replies. "I might have to take one off his hands."

I turn to tell him not to make the situation worse, but when I do, I find him glaring at the witch again. I clap him on the back and walk off to find Byron instead. I suspect both my brothers have their own issues to sort out. Right now, I just want to focus on Ava and Harper. Speaking of which, the ceremony is due to start in less than five minutes. I glance around the hall, the seats filled with excited pack members waiting for the service to begin, and notice some of the women from the refuge and Becca from the clinic have taken their seats, which means Ava must be here, too.



Suddenly, the doors open, and I see Sara usher Harper into the room. She looks around nervously, taking in the sheer number of people gathered in the hall. As she steps forward, my heart clenches at the sight of her in her beautiful, soft blue party dress. She'd been so proud of it when she showed it to me the other day, but she wouldn't let me see her wearing it until today. It was worth waiting for, I think, as she sees me in the center of the room and takes off running straight for me, her blonde hair falling from the clips Ava probably spent ages putting in. The result is only more adorable, and as I sweep her up into my arms, she laughs, "Daddy!" causing a chorus of awws from the crowd. Harper buries her head, realizing all eyes are on us, but I lift her slightly so she can see her mom walk down the aisle, too.

And there she is, my luna in an emerald green gown that hugs her curves and cinches at the waist, her blonde hair falling in waves. She looks stunning, her eyes locked with mine as she holds her head high and walks toward me. I can't believe I ever doubted she would be a good luna—she's incredible.

By the time she reaches me in the center of the hall, I'm sure my emotions are etched into my face. I take her hand, still holding Harper, as the officiant steps forward to begin the ceremony. Ava repeats the vows first, her voice even, though I can sense the emotion behind each of the ancient words. She grips my hand as if it's the only thing tethering her to this world.

When it's my turn, I repeat the vows, but then pause at the end. I know Ava deserves so much more than I can ever give her, and I know how important this moment is. I take a deep breath and begin to recite the special vows I wrote just for her.

"Ava, words cannot express how grateful I am that you came back into my life and gave me the opportunity to win back your love and trust. You have given me everything, including a beautiful daughter," I say, holding Harper close. "I don't deserve you—your strength, resilience, beauty, and grace. But I'm going to spend every day of my life earning it. With you by my side as luna, I know our pack will go

from strength to strength, built on foundations of love and respect. I am honored to be your mate.”

Ava’s eyes are glossy with tears she’s fighting not to shed, and I can feel the emotion in the room as the officiant declares us mates, and I pull her into my arms. Harper wriggles and laughs as I kiss Ava gently, with a knowing look between us that promises so much more later.

As everyone cheers, someone starts the music, and I swirl Ava around as the chairs are quickly removed for the celebrations to begin. Considering how quickly we arranged the ceremony, everything works like clockwork, and soon, there is a dancefloor, and food tables are being brought out. Harper eventually feels confident enough to run off with some of the children she’s getting to know, and I’m able to kiss Ava properly, pulling her to the edge of the hall and cupping her cheek as I tease a featherlight kiss along the seam of her lips until she gasps slightly and I slip my tongue in, crushing her body against mine.

By the time we pull apart, I chuckle at the desire I see reflected back at me. “Happy?”

She nods, “I’m not sure I could be any happier,” she smiles, her lips and cheeks flushed.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I say, my hand on her hip, turning her slightly so her back is flush against my hard body and she’s able to watch the party in the hall. “I’m glad Harper’s excited about her sleepover with Sara and Charlie, because I’m going to make sure you’re happy over and over again tonight.”

Her breathing hitches at the promise in my words, and I feel her hips rock silently against me. Leaning down, I nibble the delicate skin behind her ear as the party really gets going, causing her breasts to rise and fall with a shudder. I groan, wishing I could just whisk Ava away to my bed right now. This is going to be a long night.

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm*

The cheerful music from the pack's annual spring festival filters through the open windows, and I hear Harper downstairs running around, desperate for us to get out to the fair so she doesn't miss a moment, her laughter and enthusiasm filling the house. I hear Callum's voice telling her to wait for me, and I'll be down soon.

I stand up from where I've been hovering over the bowl and splash water on my face. We've all been looking forward to it so much, and I'm supposed to be helping run the refuge stand and judging the bake sale, so I need to pull myself together. Just then, my phone beeps, and it's Becca. I asked her to pull some blood yesterday to confirm my suspicions, as conventional tests aren't always accurate on shifters so early. She promised to send me the results first thing this morning, though after another surprise bout of sickness before I could even contemplate breakfast, I think I already have my answer.

Opening the text, I keep my fingers crossed as I scroll down.

Congratulations, Mama, you're pregnant!

My heart swells as I reread the message and then fire off a reply thanking her and saying I'll see her at the fair but won't be telling everyone just yet. She replies that my secret is safe with her, and I know it is. I look at myself in the mirror, amazed that even though I still feel nauseous, happiness is radiating from my face. Even the sickness feels momentarily worth it as I lay a hand on my still-flat stomach and feel a rush of love wash over me. I finish drying my face and quickly apply some blusher to bring my skin back to life.

I'm tempted to run downstairs and tell them both the news, but as I hear Harper's

impatience about getting to the fair, I decide to hold off and let her enjoy her day out. I know she's going to be excited, but that can wait. I want the focus to be on her. She's doing so well in the pack, attending nursery, making new friends, and controlling her gift admirably. It's more than I ever could have hoped for.

I find myself thinking back to the bedtime stories I used to tell Harper every night. About how we would escape, flee the island, and build a new life far away. We'd have our own home and a garden where she could play and be safe. My emotions threaten to overwhelm me when I consider how her reality is now so much more than this—more than I could have dreamed for her.

I wipe my eyes, brushing the tears aside as I chuckle. Pregnancy hormones are obviously already wreaking havoc. I take a deep breath and head downstairs, where I find them in the kitchen putting the last of the lunch things into our basket. Callum turns, and a look of pure appreciation crosses his face. I know it's because I'm wearing the blue sundress he likes, and I blush at the way he can make me feel beautiful with just one look filled with heat. I almost tell him about the pregnancy there and then, but we're running late, and there's so much to look forward to today. Harper has already shot past me toward the door.

"You feeling okay now?" Callum asks as he walks around the island.

I nod, picking up the bag of supplies I packed earlier. "I'm fine. We'd better get going, though, or we'll be late."

Callum laughs, "No chance of that with Harper on our case."

She's way ahead of us as we walk across the park, heading to the stalls. I look to the skies for any sign of danger. I can't help it. Ever since we learned about Malik's shapeshifting ability, I keep looking. The island is big enough for him to hide, and although some are hopeful he went back to the mainland, there are still incidents of magical beings being targeted, many seeking refuge closer to town or trying to hide

their abilities. Plus, the rogues seem more affiliated with him than ever, as though they are loyal followers of a cult.

We owe the witches a huge debt for helping us defend our borders, but even they're running out of ideas. Being female-led, they're happier dealing with me, so I've set up a committee of women to help them research new protection methods using combined magic. It appears it's not only Malik who can use more than one gift. Perhaps that is our best way forward. To beat him at his own game.

But today, the skies are clear, and the festival is just getting started. Hundreds of happy faces mill around the stalls, playing games, buying sweet treats, and enjoying the music. It was never like this when I was young, and it makes me so happy to see all that Callum is achieving as alpha. The town is prosperous and happy despite the challenges from the rogues and Malik.

I head to the refuge stand, and as the morning wears on, I distract myself from any lingering sickness by interacting with the rest of the pack and watching in amusement as Callum and Byron run the kids' mini-tournament directly across from me. I try and fail to control all the pups, including Harper, who hasn't stopped running around all day so far.

Around lunchtime, I see Callum holding his hands up in mock defeat and handing them over to the next group. He waves before stopping off at a stand and picking up some drinks for us before walking over.

"I probably need this even more than you," he laughs, taking a sip. I do the same, but the sweet cinnamon reignites all of my previous sickness, and I quickly put it down. He looks concerned. "Are you okay? You look green."

I nod, almost afraid to speak. "Hmm," I reply. "I'm fine, honestly."

I force a smile to reassure him, but he doesn't look entirely convinced. Just as he's

about to say more, Sara comes over to grab me for the bake sale judging. It's just an honorary position as luna, but I've had so many people stop me in town to talk about it this week; I know it's going to be a lot of fun. I just hope my nausea stays away long enough for me to taste the cakes.

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The baking contest is a huge success, even more so because I manage to eat very little, nibble ginger biscuits, and keep my sickness at bay. As the afternoon wears on, the heat intensifies under the midday sun. The scent of barbecue fills the air along with the laughter of pups and adults alike as they dance to music from a local band.

By four o'clock, Harper is finally starting to slow down, but she's not alone. Most of the pack is winding down for the day, too, after a day filled with fun and games. I've just finished packing the refuge stall away when I see Callum carrying Harper over toward me, his large form dwarfing hers as she lays her head on his shoulder, falling asleep. I watch him cradling our daughter, his muscles flexing beneath his shirt. He's been so attentive today. Knowing about the pregnancy, it's almost impossible not to fall in love with him all over again.

"She's completely done," he says with a grin, gently placing her in my arms. "I think she's finally had enough. Let's get her home. The stalls are staying up until tomorrow, and Byron said he'd help finish up."

I smile back at him, feeling his love for our daughter radiate from him. As we start walking back toward the house, the cool evening air starts to settle in, and I can feel my energy returning. The day has been a success; pack morale is high, and summer is well on its way.

Back at the house, Callum heads straight upstairs to get Harper settled, and I walk into our ensuite to wash my face. My stomach is feeling much better and I'm relieved to have made it through the day. I hear Callum enter our bedroom and turn to find

him stalking toward me.

“Now, are you going to tell me how you’re really feeling?” he asks, stepping closer and caging me in against the counter. “You think I can’t tell when my mate is putting on a brave face?”

I take a deep breath, my heart beating faster as I look up into his amber eyes. “I’m pregnant,” I whisper, feeling the words leave my mouth.

His mouth drops open for a moment before he pulls me into his arms and kisses me passionately. His lips are warm against mine, tasting like the sweetness from all the festival treats. I can feel his heart pounding against my chest as he holds me tightly. When he finally pulls away, he searches my face for any signs of uncertainty or fear.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly, cupping my cheek in his hand.

"I am now," I reply with a small smile, leaning into his touch. "I was going to tell you earlier, but I only just found out, and Harper was so excited about the fest—"

He kisses me again, cutting off my train of thought and short-circuiting my brain. Pulling away, he looks down at me, grinning. "I am so damn happy," he smiles, running his hand over my stomach.

He takes my hand and pulls me toward the bed, turning me so I sit on the edge as he pushes my dress from my shoulders. The fabric pools around my waist; I don't wear a bra, so my breasts fall free, and I see his eyes darken with desire. As he cups my breast with his rough hands, I immediately notice how much heavier they feel, and as his fingers flick over my nipple, I hiss at the increased intensity, the sensation shooting straight to my core.

Gently, Callum nudges me back until I lie down, and he settles on the floor in front of me, kissing my calves and spreading my legs. My stomach tightens in anticipation of

the pleasure I know he will give me, and he trails kisses all the way up my thighs before gently sucking my clit into his mouth.

I gasp at the sensation, lifting my hips off the bed in an attempt to get even more contact.

I watch as he looks up at me, his eyes dark and intense, and I feel myself almost melting under his gaze. He continues his assault on my sensitive nub, licking and sucking until I'm squirming beneath him, trying to conceal my moans. The feeling of his tongue circling my entrance only heightens the ache growing between my legs. He pushes a finger inside me slowly, before adding another, stretching me while he continues to tease me with his tongue.

When he adds a third finger and begins to pump them rhythmically, I can't contain myself any longer. My back arches off the bed, and I cry out as waves of pleasure wash over me. His fingers pump in and out of me in time with his mouth on my clit, sending shockwaves through my body until I can feel it building up again.

"Callum," I whimper, my voice hoarse from all the pleasure. "I'm going to—"

Suddenly, I feel the pressure build up inside me and then release in a powerful surge. I've never felt anything like it, and my whole body tenses as I squirt all over Callum's fingers and mouth.

"Fuck, that's so hot, baby," he murmurs reverently as he shrugs off his pants quickly and mounts me. He leans down, and I taste my desire on his lips as he kisses me roughly; his hard cock lays impossibly erect between us, and I can almost feel his desperation. I reach down and stroke his steely velvet length before he quickly stops me. "I'm gonnaf explode, Ava."

I chuckle at his tone, but when I look up, I see the truth in his eyes. He's almost completely undone. I reach up and kiss him, whispering, "Then take me."



It's all he needs to hear before thrusting forward and filling me in one hard movement, his cock stretching my walls more than his fingers ever could. I grip his broad shoulders as pleasure threatens to overwhelm me immediately. He starts slowly, burying himself as deep as he can, but then picks up the pace until his hips are slapping against my own.

The bed creaks under our movement, and I'm dimly aware of the sound of rustling sheets as we push harder and faster. Our breaths come in ragged gasps, mixed together as we chase our release. Callum's grip on my hips tightens as he plows into me relentlessly—it feels like heaven as his cock hits that sensitive spot deep inside. His mouth is pressed against my neck when I finally feel him on the verge of coming; he tenses, groaning my name and filling me with his liquid heat.

The ecstasy of the moment overwhelms me, and I bury my face against his shoulder, muffling my scream as I come hard. My body tightens around him, my insides rippling with each pulse of pleasure. We collapse together, sweaty and sticky, but unable to move for what feels like an eternity.

Finally, Callum pulls out of me gently and rolls us onto our side, his hand instantly finding my belly and holding me gently. "You are so fucking amazing," he murmurs, kissing my shoulder. "I don't deserve any of this, but I thank the goddess for you."

I turn slightly to look at him. "That's where you're wrong," I say quietly, "you do deserve this, and so do I. We deserve to be happy."

He smiles, his eyes bright with emotion. "I love you," he says simply. "More than anything."

I reach up and cup his cheek, my fingers tracing the lines of his stubble. "I love you too," I whisper, turning in his arms to kiss him softly. "And I can't wait to spend the rest of our lives together, being happy."

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THE END