



Alpha's Twins (Alpha Kings Island #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I'm forced to marry the Alpha to pay off my debts.

I can't shift, I have a plus-size body, and I have no family. I'm the pack's bullied outcast.

Now I'm told that I'll be married off to another pack to secure an alliance.

I refuse and run, but my new husband catches me easily and knocks me up.

The wolves made my life a living hell, but I found my magical abilities and built a life.

Now I'm handed over to another pack's Alpha to face his torture.

I know he's a player, that he treats women like toys.

I know I'm not going down easily this time, that I'll fight him and stand up for myself.

And yet I'm unprepared for the kind of torture he subjects me to.

It's slow and sweet when he caresses my curves like he owns them.

It's hot and possessive when he kisses my lips like he wants to bruise them.

My belly is growing with his twins, and my heart is on the verge of breaking.

Can I surrender to my Alpha?

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...

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From high on the ridge, I can almost see the edges of my pack's borders—on a clear day, that is. Not today, with the undulating clouds covering the mountain peaks and cascading down into the valleys, coating everything in a hazy, thick white soup.

Pausing by the old lookout, I shift back to my human form and grab one of the spare sets of clothes my pack keeps out here, along with an energy bar from one of the all-weather containers.

Shrugging the T-shirt over my head, I return to my spot on the edge of the ridge, barely sparing the sheer drop below a glance.

The cold wind whips across my bare arms, sending goosebumps down my spine, but it doesn't compare to the icy grip that has taken up residence in my stomach. I tear open the energy bar and chew mechanically, tasting nothing as I scan the mountains and caves opposite.

I watch some birds flit along the mountain's jagged sides.

The caves themselves are completely inaccessible, even to wolves.

But not to Malik if he were in his dragon form.

The air here tastes of snow and pine, clean and sharp.

The jagged peaks stretch out into the distance, with the edges of Callum's forest to one side and the descent towards Tristen's pack in the opposite direction.

Overhead, the sky is an endless canvas of grays and whites today, slowly fading as evening approaches.

I pull my gaze back to the caves, searching for any sign of movement. It's been many weeks since we last saw Malik. The fight was brutal and definitive as far as his small rogue army was concerned. All but wiped out. But could he have survived?

If he did, his dragon would surely have been seen again by now, but still...my stomach churns at the thought that he might be on my territory. That my pack may be harboring the island's biggest threat.

Chewing on the tasteless but filling energy bar, I close my eyes and lean back against the rocky outcrop. The chill seeps through my shirt, reminding me of how alone I am here since I sent the rest of the patrol further on to cover the southern ridges.

My brothers think I'm weak because I can't find him, that I'm incapable of protecting my pack. They ask for updates every time we speak, their eyes boring into mine like they're daring me to lie.

I can feel them judging me with every passing day.

It's like they think they would have found him by now if it were their territory.

That I'm not as worthy an alpha because I'm the youngest brother, not as experienced or wise, and not having had enough time to learn under Ralph—not that he was much of a teacher.

The more we've pieced together about Malik and his brother, Emily's father.

It seems Ralph knew Malik could still be a threat, but thought he was powerful enough to contain him because Malik was weak after his brother nearly destroyed

him in their final battle.

He never bothered to take him out years ago when he could, and just assumed he was another outcast. Malik saw his opportunity when the island was split and the rogues wanted their pound of flesh.

He must have been laughing at us, thinking we were too weak to fight back once his rogue army started to grow.

And Ralph? He didn't care enough to even warn us of the danger lurking in the mountains.

But then, that's not much of a surprise.

My brothers liked to play protectors back then, shielding me from the worst of our father's behavior.

It's not that I don't appreciate what they did, but ever since the island was split, with us each taking our places as alphas of our own packs, I feel like they've forgotten that I'm not their responsibility anymore.

The situation with Malik only increased their micromanagement of my affairs.

I love my brothers, but my wolf is dangerously close to snapping at them.

They're even pissing me off about this offer from Nolan.

The rogues grew in numbers due to mercenaries arriving from the mainland, which exposed a general weakness in our sea borders.

We don't normally work with other packs, but Nolan has become an ally, and now

he's offering us an alliance to stop future mercenaries from coming over via the shipping routes.

It's a good deal for the island—a good deal for all our packs.

And beyond some financial and trade conditions, the only sticking point is that Nolan wants a traditional mate pact.

He's offering one of his female shifters as a mate, and I'm the only available alpha.

It seems a bit backward and old-fashioned to me, but I'm not one to judge.

I agreed almost straight away. It's Callum and Tristen who are far more worked up about it.

They don't get it—I have no intention of being held to some romantic standard of love that they've found with Ava and Emily.

As happy for them as I am, this is purely a business deal.

Hopefully, whoever Nolan has in mind is pretty enough to fuck occasionally, but sensible enough to know this isn't anything other than a necessary arrangement.

Once agreements become longstanding between our packs, we can quietly go our separate ways, anyway. It's just not a big deal.

They seem to think I'm trading my soul for a lifelong romantic partner.

They don't dispute the benefits of an alliance with the mainland, but their need to endlessly discuss whether or not I should accept a mate is grating.

Just because they've found love doesn't mean we're all going to, or even want to.

I don't think the apple fell far from the tree, where I'm concerned—Ralph was a cheating bastard who could never settle.

I don't intend to break hearts by pretending otherwise. I'll be honest with whatever female Nolan sends over. It's business, that's all.

The wind whips up again, and in the distance, I hear my betas howl, signaling they've reached the other peaks.

They clearly haven't discovered anything new, or they would have raised the alarm by now.

I let out a sigh of frustration. Shaking my head, I finish the last of the energy bar.

I know I should be grateful that things have returned to some sort of normalcy since we destroyed Malik's rogue army and injured, if not killed, him. But the scars of his attacks remain.

Throwing the caves one last assessing look, I growl in frustration as I shrug out of the T-shirt, let my wolf take over, and let the shift begin.

Howling to my pack, I turn my back on the mountains and all the answers I don't yet have.

As I pause on the trail, I hear my betas approaching.

Their frustration courses through our pack bond, and I know these nightly patrols are taking their toll on everyone.

Few realize the strain I'm under better than my beta Jace; he's my right-hand man, and the wolf closest to me next to my own brothers.

Hell, I almost consider him a brother; he's saved my life almost as many times as I've saved his, we've fought side by side, and shared pretty much everything. Women included.

As Jace falls in step beside me, I glance over and give him a nod.

His eyes glow with unrestrained energy that needs burning, and I'm sure my own are just the same.

As we sprint toward the town, I try to shake off lingering thoughts of Malik, my brothers, and Nolan—including his stupid idea of trading alliances for marriage.

I don't care who he's got lined up. All I care about is who Jace and I will find to fuck in the bar on the edge of town that attracts late-night visitors from across the island. Everyone there knows the score: to have fun. And that is exactly what I intend to do.

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I gasp as one of the spiked vines suddenly springs forward and cuts my finger. I knew it was going to grow; I could almost see it trembling in anticipation. I just didn't expect it to burst to life quite so quickly with my finger in the way.

The flower at the center of the vine retreats, petals folding inward almost in shame.

I sigh and run my other hand along the nearest leaf, almost conspiratorially, until the flowers begin to bloom again and the vine coils higher this time—crucially, taking its razor-sharp spikes away from my fingers.

I look up to where the vine has already reached the ceiling and watch as it blooms into a cascade of flowers that shoot across the cramped space, intermingling with all the other high-reaching blooms in the shop.

Satisfied that another of my plants has reached its potential, I give it a celebratory spritz from my watering can and shuffle the base of its pot back an inch in the already overcrowded space.

I step back, admiring my handiwork as the flowers dance and jostle for space around me.

My little shop is alive with its color and fragrance.

It's a constant and stark reminder of the contrast to the cold isolation that surrounds me in my pack.

Here, though, I can pretend none of that matters.

This is where I belong—in and amongst the flowers that seem to understand me better than any other wolf.

I take a deep breath, the scent of fresh soil and blossoms filling my senses.

My fingers trace the delicate petals of a peach-colored rosebud that has just begun to unfurl its velvety leaves.

It seems to sense my touch, pulsing gently against my skin, beckoning me closer.

A smile tugs at my lips as I lean in to inhale its sweet perfume, and the leaves open in my hand, tickling my fingers.

For so long, I wanted to be like the others.

I wanted a wolf that could shift, hunt, and run like the others.

Maybe then, I would look athletic and tall, like the other women in the pack, rather than being so curvy.

Perhaps then, I would have been accepted instead of growing up on the periphery of the pack like an unwanted guest, even in my uncle's home, where I was raised after my parents died.

But as I grew and began to discover my abilities with plants, I found something that was just for me.

As the pain of being ignored by the pack began to lessen, I realized that I couldn't make them want me, but I could still build my own future right here.

That isn't to say their constant veiled sneers and disregard still don't sting, but when

I'm here working in my store, Serena's Floral Fantasy, I can forget all that.

Besides, since becoming a hit across the mainland, my blooms and designs generate significant revenue for the pack through producers, delivery contracts, and events, not to mention all the tourists who come to visit the store but also stay to explore the rest of the town.

It's not the same as being respected as a shifter within the pack, but my store at least allows me some peace.

And probably most importantly, some dignity.

The people who flock here from across the mainland and order months in advance online for large events don't care that I can't shift or have no status in my pack.

They don't care about the fact that I grew up an unwanted burden to my uncle, an outcast at school, or picked on because of my weight. They just love my plants and flowers.

I'm not even sure where my ability to make flowers bloom or plants grow beyond expectation comes from.

My uncle doesn't talk about my parents much, but I get the sense he blames my mother.

It seems she didn't have a wolf either, and my father, his brother, lost a lot of status being with her.

But magic was never discussed; he would often dismiss my gift as some kind of latent witchcraft within my mother's bloodline.

Clearly not wanting it to be seen to taint his own.

The local witches came to see me when I was just a pup and didn't entirely agree.

It's magic, but not connected to spells or any of their other methods. It's more innate.

Most in my pack see it as some kind of cute consolation prize.

I can't shift; none of the men in the pack would look twice at me due to my family background, lack of a wolf, and curves...

but at least I can arrange pretty flowers.

I'm inclined to agree with them most of the time.

Sometimes, though, I feel something so much greater behind my connection with the plants, something untapped and thrumming beneath the surface.

Perhaps I'm imagining it or hoping for too much.

The desire to be something other than what I am—a disappointment.

But on days like today, with the vibrations of my plants undeniably strong, I feel like I could conquer the world.

I look down at my hands, and they practically glow with life. I sometimes wonder if it's me who makes the flowers bloom, or if it's the other way around. The power in my little store feels so tangible, yet all it achieves are beautiful flowers.

Sighing, I look around at my latest creations, an installation for a huge event out of state that will be shipped later today.

It's stunning, and, as usual, all my plants will be sent potted so they can live on long after the event is over.

It's something I feel very strongly about.

Obviously, there are smaller flower arrangements that are just for show, but the plants themselves must be cared for.

Some suggested that it would hinder my business, but the truth is, I think people appreciate my USP, even if they don't understand the magic, and I often receive e-mails from clients showing my plants thriving months later.

I'm lost in thought as I work with one of the pink Monstera to develop its leaves to perfection, ready for shipment, and I barely notice the tiny bell ringing above the door until I see my assistant Hannah weaving in and out of the towering plant arrangements toward me.

"Sorry I'm late," she says, clearly out of breath. "I was helping Ron organize his trip to the island and lost track of time."

She stops and looks around at the almost-finished display with the same expression of wonder she gets every time we send out a completed batch.

Stepping back and looking at it through her eyes, I can understand why.

The arch of colorful blooms, sky-high foliage, and cascading leaves has created a stunning effect.

I can't help but smile as pride wells within me.

It's a rare feeling and one that I cherish on the rare occasions I have reason to feel

good about myself.

Suddenly, I register what Hannah said. “Ron’s going back to the island? Again?” I ask, surprised. “I thought his ships were still avoiding it?”

Hannah shrugs slightly and lets go of a breath.

“He says it’s fine. All that trouble seems to be over, and we need the business.

” She picks up the shipment details from the counter and walks over.

“Besides, if it was dangerous, he wouldn’t risk it.

He knows I’d kill him quicker than any demon living on that island. ”

I laugh, knowing that’s probably true. Hannah and Ron have been mates for years, and are still so in love.

Looking at Hannah, you would think she could be my grandmother, but she’s fitter and healthier than most wolves half her age.

I have no doubt she could still run circles around Ron.

But I also know how afraid they were when Ron’s ships were attacked by that monster Malik’s rogues.

He stopped trading with the island for a while, but I guess the danger must really be over if he’s started traveling again.

There’s no point in me making her worry, even if I wouldn’t want to set foot on that island. It still gives me the creeps.

The island has always been a place of mystery, even before Malik's rogues attacked Ron's ships; first, with their old alpha being more like a dictator, and then with the island split between his sons. But with Malik apparently defeated, it seems like the perfect opportunity for trading to resume.

Still, I can't help but feel uneasy about it all. There are not many people I count as friends in the pack. Hannah and Ron mean the world to me.

"Are you sure?" I ask, looking up at her anxiously. "What if there are still... things lurking there? You know how strange those attacks were."

She smiles reassuringly, the lines around her eyes creasing slightly.

"Oh, Serena," she says in that tone she often uses with me.

"You worry too much. Ron said he has everything under control now that Malik, whatever he was, is gone.

" Her voice trails off for a moment before adding softly, "Besides, we need the money. "

I can't argue with that, knowing how tough things are for everyone, so I keep my mouth shut, and we get to work on organizing and securing the plants onto the large pallets for delivery.

One of the pack's largest freight operators, owned by Alpha Nolan himself, is due later to collect the shipment, so it needs to be ready.

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As we finish loading the pallets and get ready for Nolan's people to arrive, I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. Seriously, he makes me so nervous.

Nolan always shows up for these big deliveries; he seems to enjoy micromanaging his people.

He also has a habit of always checking out women in a really obvious way, but barely listening to a word they say, making me feel like I'm not even here half the time.

It doesn't help that I know he thinks I'm useless because I can't shift or hunt like the other wolves. I wish my breasts weren't so big, because it always feels like I'm super exposed, no matter what I wear, when I see him, his eyes lingering on my curves in the most uncomfortable way.

I try to focus on Hannah's light banter as she talks about their upcoming vacation plans now that trade has resumed and they can afford to go away, but all I can think about is getting everything ready before Nolan's men arrive and just praying he doesn't turn up, too.

The shop door opens suddenly, and both our heads snap up to see Nolan himself standing there.

I gulp involuntarily as he steps inside, taking in his broad shoulders and the air of dominance that seems to surround him.

He never bothers talking to me unless it's about pack business or deliveries, which makes it all the more surreal when he walks straight up to me.

“Serena,” he greets me, his voice smooth. “I’m glad you’re here. I was hoping to talk to you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Hannah’s face drop as she mutters something about getting a coffee and rushes off. Thanks, Hannah.

Returning my attention to Nolan, I can barely meet his eyes, “M-me? Why?” I ask, realizing how stupid I sound. It’s probably just about the delivery. That is why he’s here, after all.

He doesn’t reply immediately. Instead, he simply stares at me strangely, almost as if he’s seeing me for the first time, and I feel my cheeks burn even hotter.

“I’ve been thinking,” he finally says, leaning against the counter and looking around the store.

“You really have built something useful here. You should be proud of how it’s helped the pack. New business and all that...”

I’m so taken aback by this that I struggle to form a reply, nodding and waving my hand at the plants waiting to be packed. “Oh, okay. Thank you,” I say, falling over my words. “I’m glad it’s helped the pack. I, er, it’s important to help the pack.”

I silently question whether the pack has ever considered helping me, but I don’t say it. I couldn’t. Not to the alpha.

He must be happy with my reply, because his eyes light up, and he nods enthusiastically. “I’m so glad to hear you say that. It’s exactly the attitude we need.”

This conversation is getting even stranger, but I simply smile and hope he’ll say we can load the plants up soon.

Instead, he steps forward, towering over me as he puts his hands on my shoulders.

My whole body trembles involuntarily, and he smirks.

Something tells me he knows damn well that at twenty-two, this is as close as I've ever been to a man touching me.

"I have news, and I want you to remember how important it is to help your pack," he says smoothly, staring down at me with a slight flash behind his amber eyes, compelling me to dip my head.

"We have a new trade deal with the alphas on the island. I know we're all glad to put that nasty business to bed. "

Unsure why he's telling me specifically about this when I've never been involved in pack business, I nod along, trying to look knowledgeable. Really, all I know about the island is gossip, and bits and pieces from Ron and Hannah.

I have no intention of interrupting Nolan, and he doesn't appear to want my input as he continues, "The good news is, our pack is going to come out of the new arrangement very, very well. Obviously, we need assurances, though, which is where you come in."

"They want some flowers?"

I watch in surprise as his face creases into laughter at my question.

"That's one way of looking at it," he chuckles.

"You are to be an alpha's mate; the youngest one, I believe.

Aiden. Not only can you help your pack, as I know you like to do, but you're also getting quite the upgrade in status.

Something you'd never have on your own."

I'm so shocked I can't speak, and Nolan smirks, "No need to thank me, Serena. This works well for everyone."

"No, it doesn't," I reply, snapping out of my reverie. "I'm not going to the island. My store, my plants. I have a life here."

Nolan shakes his head and steps closer. His alpha aura suddenly feels crushing. "Not one that's worth more than this deal."

"Why me?" I ask quietly.

"When push comes to shove, you're the only one I can spare. Flowers or not." He shrugs. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

I nod blankly, and he simply turns his back and walks away.

The plants towering around me all seem to dip slightly, leaning in toward me like a canopy of solidarity.

And that is how Hannah finds me, in the center of a collapsing display.

She tries to comfort me as the reality of how unimportant I am to the pack sinks in, the knowledge that I am completely dispensable.

However, even she can't argue with the truth.

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I lean against the rail on the back deck of my bedroom and look out into the forest beyond, trying hard to ignore the sheer number of people milling around my home and in the yard beneath me.

My brothers always made fun of me for building the largest home, teasing me over my desire to have the flashiest of them.

I never cared what they thought, and right now, I'm glad it's so big so I can ignore everyone.

My head is still sore from the bar last night.

Typically, shifters aren't particularly affected by alcohol, but the witches mix special batches of moonshine-style liquor that hits the spot.

I sure love the way those witches like to party, and when Jace pointed out it was practically my bachelor party, things took a turn.

While it was fun at the time, I now have a house full of people ahead of tomorrow's mating ceremony, including my brothers and their families, and all the judgments that come with them.

I could see the look of disappointment on my brothers' faces when I opened the door this morning, looking worse for wear. Jace was still crashed out on the sofa, and Emily, Tristen's mate, had to chase a couple of her fellow witches out of my bedroom.

I don't see why everyone's so upset. The mating ceremony is just part of a trade deal and alliance.

There are no feelings involved, no delicate sensibilities to protect, and no reason I can't still have fun.

I love my brothers' mates, but even Emily and Ava looked unimpressed, all agreeing it's not the best start. Whatever that means.

In all honesty, I couldn't care less.

The only thing on my mind right now is that my house being full of people and the damn ceremony taking up two whole days means two days my patrols aren't out searching for Malik.

The more I'm told to just relax and enjoy the festivities, the more the knot in my stomach twists.

The longer we go with no sightings of him since the final battle, the more everyone's guard seems to drop—but not mine. He's still here, I'm sure of it.

This alliance with Nolan ensures our sea borders and freight connections with the mainland, something I don't take lightly, despite my territory only having one small harbor to the north.

I'm more than willing to do what is necessary for the island as a whole, but that doesn't mean I appreciate being told what to do.

And right now, I'd rather be fucking those witches or out on patrol than stuck here playing host to my brothers and every other shifter who thinks they're going to watch me take a mate and give up my freedom.

No chance. I might be taking a mate, and this weekend might be slowing down my patrols, but the moment this is over, it's business as usual—in every respect.

A knock at my bedroom door draws my attention, and I signal for whomever it is to enter.

Turning, I see Jace strolling in, looking decidedly better than I feel.

He's holding a tall glass filled with an amber liquid, which he holds out to me with a wicked grin.

"Got to love the witches," he laughs. "Emily mixed up a hangover cure for that supernatural brew from last night. Looks like you could do with it too, you look green."

I grimace as I take the glass, not wanting to admit how hard I hit that witch's brew last night, and knock back the sweet liquid.

A magical warmth immediately spreads throughout my body, and I feel the remnants of last night's excess begin to disappear almost straight away. As my head clears, thanks to Emily, I briefly regret being short with my brother's mates earlier.

I also probably have a couple of witches to apologize to next time I run into them at the bar after they were run out of here earlier.

I wouldn't like to get on the witches' shit list.

Jace nods to the glass as I put it down, "Great stuff, isn't it? I'm trying to talk her into mixing us a batch for the next time we decide to drink like devils." Then, chuckling, he adds, "If your mate lets you out again, of course."

I scoff, shaking my head as I pull on a clean shirt. “Don’t start that again. I heard enough last night and this morning. Nothing's changing.”

“If you say so,” Jace continues as we make our way downstairs to face the festivities I’ve been avoiding.

Personally, I think everyone just wants an excuse for a party after all the stress with Malik.

I don’t blame them—after all, I love a party.

I just wish it weren’t in my house. The sooner this is all over, the better.

I’ll get my mate settled, finalize the alliance, wrap up the weekend, and get back to my regular patrols.

If I’d thought my brothers or betas would give up their nonstop game of teasing me over taking a mate as the day wore on, I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The mood only becomes more raucous as the cookout goes on well into the evening, and Jace returns from settling Nolan, my new mate, and their party into one of the large guest cabins on the edge of town.

Everyone’s keen to know what she’s like; I pretend not to care, but of course I do.

I may have no intention of being faithful, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want an attractive mate I can have some fun with.

Frustratingly, Jace didn’t even see her; he just hung out with Nolan and his betas for a bit, making sure they were comfortable, and went over the plans for tomorrow.

I don't want to make it appear as if I'm bothered, because it will just set them all off again, so I pretend not to care and throw some more steaks on the fire.

It's going to be a long damn night, and I suddenly wish those witches had left some more of their brew.

As the evening wears on, I struggle to ignore the restlessness building inside me.

My mind keeps drifting back to the forest, the mountains beyond, and the way my wolf is riding me to keep searching for Malik.

He feels relentless at times, torn up by the knowledge that everyone thinks Malik's been hiding in my territory, and I didn't stop him.

Eventually, people start drifting off, especially as the pups begin to tire, and I'm able to slip away and change into my running gear. I tell myself I'm not going far and don't need to shift, I'm just heading out for a jog to clear my head. I just don't want any company.

So instead of going through the house, I step out onto the balcony, and the scent of pine and earth immediately fills my lungs.

Climbing down the steel and wood frame, my feet hit the ground, and I slip into the trees, weaving through the ancient roots and branches until I hit one of the pack's well-worn trails. It was never about clearing my head; it was about needing to feel like I'm doing something, being the alpha I should be, and protecting my pack.

Normally, I would run with some betas, at least Jace.

But deep down, I know they don't get it; they're not under the same pressure.

I suspect they think I'm being irrational about Malik, even if they don't want to say it.

And to be fair, part of me hopes they're right, but for tonight, the only thing that will calm my mind is being out here and feeling the peace in my territory for myself.

My wolf feels edgy as I pick up my pace, heading away from the town.

He can sense our guests in the cabin not far from here.

Instinctively, he seems to search for our new mate, but there are too many conflicting scents to pick up an individual female.

I take the low trail that leads away from the town and weaves through the valley, passing through a ravine before dipping toward the sea.

My plan is to run the ravine and scan the mountains on either side before returning to the house, but as I turn into the valley, I pick up the distinct scent of a stranger moving along one of the parallel trails—a female.

My wolf is immediately on high alert—of course, he is.

I smirk at the thought, but the alpha in me is more concerned about who this unknown is.

We had so many problems with rogues during Malik's reign of terror, but they have been defeated, and our defenses are secure.

This is unlikely to be a direct threat, especially as my wolf is clearly only picking up one scent, but who is it?

Someone from Nolan's entourage? Surely, he wouldn't be so foolish as to have

someone snooping around.

They are welcome guests, but, as with all pack interactions, there are protocols in place.

One of which is to definitely not snoop on another's territory.

Whoever it is isn't moving very quickly, and clearly hasn't shifted, so I don't bother either.

Instead, I creep through the trees silently, closing in on my prey.

I can feel her heart racing. Her senses are clearly not as good as mine.

As I spot her ahead, her dark brown hair shines under the moonlight, and she spins one way and then the other.

She knows I'm out here, but she doesn't know where.

Cutting across the path, I move lightly through the tree line until I can see her better.

She's surprisingly small for a shifter, though from her scent, I know she is one.

Short but curvy. Most shifters are athletically built, but she looks soft and cute.

As she turns slightly, I get a perfect view of her figure and the sight of her full breasts straining against the fabric of the thin dress she's wearing sends a shockwave straight to my cock. Cute and sexy—my favorite.

Her fear is palpable now, and it almost seems cruel to drag this out, but I'm enjoying myself more than I probably should.

Besides, every time I try to get closer, the trees seem to grow thicker instead of thinning out, so I move around them again.

I don't remember this trail being so dense.

Any suspicion that she's out here snooping vanishes as I take in the flimsy dress and unsuitable shoes she's wearing.

The pale blue fabric strains over her breasts, shows off a small waist before skimming full hips.

She must be one of the shortest shifters I've ever seen, but rather than looking weak, she seems resilient, pushing on through the forest even though fear is rolling off her in waves.

Perhaps she's trying to escape Nolan, I chuckle to myself.

Despite his charm, he's always struck me as a bit of an insufferable prick, so I wouldn't blame her.

But on the other hand, I can't have any drama upsetting this new alliance.

She's almost at the ravine now, clearly unsure of which way to go, which confirms she's not from the island.

She stops to assess her surroundings, and as she casts a worried glance behind her, I make out full pink lips and her flushed cheeks.

Malik isn't even on my mind now as my wolf's entire focus is on the woman in front of me.

The damn trees seem to grow before my very eyes, distorting my path, but I've had enough.

I want to see what my prey is up to tonight.

In one movement, I sweep aside the leaves and vines, stepping out onto the trail a few feet from the woman. She spins around to face me, and for a moment, I think she's going to actually faint. The blood drains from her face, and she takes a step back.

"P-please don't hurt me," she stammers, and as I step closer, I'm amazed at how small she is next to me, my alpha frame dwarfing her. Her curves, though...they look even more tempting up close.

My wolf feels ravenous, and she must see something in my eyes, because she looks like she's about to run. I raise a hand. "I'm not going to hurt you," I soothe, "I was just out for a run. You shouldn't be out here. Part of Nolan's pack?"

She looks unsure for a moment, but then nods, almost reluctantly. Definitely running from Nolan, then. Interesting.

"Nolan is my guest. Whatever you're doing out here, I'm going to have to take you back," I tell her, and her eyes go wide as if she's just realizing I'm the alpha. She glances around as if she's considering running, which would be ridiculous. "How did you get out?"

She seems to weigh my question before answering. "I climbed out the window," she finally admits.

I chuckle at the thought of someone so short scaling a building.

"I'll tell you what. I'll take you back, but if you can get back in the window, I won't

tell anyone about this.

Okay? If you need some help, you'll talk to the witches at the ceremony tomorrow; I'm pretty sure they'd love to put a hex on Nolan, anyway. ”

Her eyes flicker to mine, and after the briefest of pauses, she laughs, really laughs.

Her heart is still racing, but despite the ridiculousness of her situation, the genuine humor on her face disarms me for a moment, and I simply watch, entranced.

As the beautiful sound fades, she levels me with a suddenly sad stare. “You won't let me run?” she asks.

I shake my head, “Not unless you give me a good reason right now? There's a lot riding on this alliance.”

She seems to consider what I said for a moment before shaking her head.

My wolf huffs with disappointment; for some reason, he wants the chase with this one.

I think he wants a lot more than the chase.

Unusually for me, I feel like an absolute bastard as I take her back and watch her climb through the window, watching the way the flimsy dress rides up and makes my cock ache.

Something feels so off about all this, but I can't blow up the alliance.

I make a mental note to have Nolan's group checked out tomorrow before they head back, in case she's lying and is in danger.

More than anything, sending her back before I could find out more about her just feels like a disappointment.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

Sitting with my back against the slightly rough wood of the cabin wall, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to steady my breathing.

The sun is coming up, and I was so damn close to escaping.

Ever since he brought me back here and watched from the tree line as I climbed back through my cabin window, I've been torturing myself.

I should have tried again, but I just knew he was watching.

Besides, I didn't want to admit it, but when he'd found me on the trail, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing or where I was going.

Everything happened so quickly after Nolan arrived at the store that I barely had time to help Hannah arrange the next shipment.

She's going to try to keep the store going, but realistically, I don't see how that will work without me.

Despite everything, Hannah seemed thrilled that I'm going to be mates with an alpha.

It doesn't appear to matter to anyone what I want.

The thought that an alpha may want me seems too good to be true—except it's not.

I don't want to be traded off as part of some deal and lose my store, the only thing that has ever been truly mine or brought me any kind of respect or happiness.

Besides, Aiden doesn't want me. He doesn't even know who I am.

He agreed to all this as some kind of pact, and he clearly doesn't know what I look like, because he just assumed I was running away from Nolan last night.

I groan, letting my head fall back. I didn't tell him who I was, and now he's going to think I'm a complete idiot when I have to see him today.

I couldn't tell him, though. I saw the look of shock on his face when he realized how small I am.

It's the same one all shifters get when they take in my short, fat frame.

I just couldn't handle facing his disappointment right then and there.

Not that this is going to be any better.

I'd half hoped that perhaps female shifters on the island might look a little different, but all the ones I've seen so far are strong, tall, and beautiful.

I know exactly how this is going to go for me.

It doesn't help that Aiden is also extremely good-looking.

I suspected he was from all the gossip I've heard over the years about the alphas on the island, but nothing could have prepared me for seeing him.

I knew someone was following me, but my senses aren't as strong as other shifters, and it wasn't until he stepped out onto the trail that I realized just how vulnerable I had been sneaking out.

Aiden is huge, almost twice my height, and has unruly dark brown hair.

Even in the darkness, I could see his tanned skin and muscular frame.

He had obviously been out running, as he said, because his T-shirt and shorts clung to his ripped body in a way that demanded attention.

I may be completely inexperienced, but I'm not dead inside—he's hot, which is a complete nightmare, because I am objectively not hot.

I can hear people are already up downstairs, and I know it won't be long until someone comes to tell me to get ready.

This alliance is a big deal to Nolan. He's tried to play off that it's a symbol of support for the island after the monster, Malik, attacked them, but our pack suffered enormous financial losses when trade faltered.

Hannah and Roy were open about how desperately the pack needed Roy's freight to keep running.

Our coast was also flooded with strange rogues and mercenaries, all trying to go to the island, clearly believing that Malik would take control because he was growing stronger and stronger.

I'm not sure if they were paid to go or simply following Malik, like some kind of cult, but I know Roy lost ships, and many other businesses were vandalized or had things stolen.

The island may have had to deal with Malik, but our coastal pack suffered the fallout, too.

This deal is important to Nolan and the rest of the pack, including Roy and Hannah.

And as tempted as I am to climb out of the window again and run, the truth is I have nowhere to go, anyway.

Even if I could get off the island now, I doubt I'd be welcome back in my pack, at my store...

I've always known that my place in the pack is conditional.

Firstly, it relied upon me being as small and grateful as possible so that my uncle and the pack would care for me out of pity.

Later, my success with the store brought in money for the pack.

And now, this is simply the latest condition.

A knock at the door startles me, and I scramble to my feet as the door opens.

I already know it will be Nicola, one of Nolan's cousins, who has travelled over with us under the guise of keeping me company, but I can tell the last thing she wants is to have to talk to me.

I don't want her to find me sitting on the floor, which would give her another reason to look at me with even more disgust than she usually does.

"There you are," she says breezily. "Big day. Nolan told me to come check on you. I'm surprised you're not already dressed, with an alpha waiting for you."

She keeps mentioning that Aiden is an alpha, and I suspect she might be a bit jealous about that.

She's engaged to one of Nolan's betas. He seems nice, though; you'd think she'd be happy with that.

Someone who genuinely wants her and a place at the heart of her pack, not traded off over shipping routes to an alpha who will probably reject me the moment he knows I'm his bride.

I'm practically poised for public humiliation—one I'm sure Nicola fully expects, too, given the thinly-veiled amusement on her face.

Over the years, I have perfected staying as neutral as possible around pack members like Nicola.

It also helps that we're the same age and I've been dealing with her ever since our school days.

As Hannah pointed out, perhaps moving to a dangerous island filled with monsters, rogues, and warring witches won't be as bad as dealing with some members of Nolan's pack.

I straighten my spine and smile, nodding to the dress hanging on the closet door. "I was just about to get ready."

She turns to look at the dress and scoffs lightly, "That's what you're wearing?"

To her credit, she tries to recover slightly when I'm too stunned to reply. "I'm sure it will do." She chuckles. "Besides, it's not a real mating ceremony, is it? More of an inter-pack meeting. It's a nice color, anyway."

Her words cut more than I'd like to admit, especially after meeting Aiden, but I brush them aside, nodding. "Well, exactly," I laugh, "I don't want to look too keen."

At that, she bursts out laughing. “I wouldn’t worry on that front, he’s a total babe. I doubt he’ll be hassling you.”

It’s a sucker blow and she knows it, her smirk in place as she breezes back out of the room, leaving me staring at the dress, determined not to cry.

I will not cry. She’s right, after all. This is more of an inter-pack thing, and it’s not really about me.

I’m sure he won’t care what I look like, anyway; he’ll probably never even speak to me after today.

That is what I tell myself as I get dressed, do my hair, and makeup.

The silence in the small room is deafening.

I wish Hannah and Roy could have come, at least, but there was no time.

The flowers were due to go out, and the next event is only days away.

I don’t see how the store can run without me, but at least Hannah can complete that order before closing the doors.

The thought of all our hard work just ending like this breaks my heart. There is nothing for me here.

I step out into the hallway, but the weight of my lack of choices suddenly feels overwhelming, and I stop at the top of the stairs to try and steady myself. It’s then that I hear the laughter and voices downstairs more clearly.

“It’s a win-win. We won’t be responsible for a shifter without a wolf anymore, and

the trade terms are better than before,” Nolan chuckles. It’s nothing I didn’t already know. I’m literally the only one in our pack without a wolf, and the pack doesn’t like it when people’s faces don’t fit.

I hear a woman’s voice and quickly realize it’s Nicola. “She’s going to bust out of that dress. Are you sure he won’t back out when he sees her?”

There’s more laughter, and I don’t need to look to know it’s at my expense.

I should have known better than to think I could ever build something within the pack and be free of their ridicule.

I’m still the same shifter without a wolf, only now I’ll be shackled to an alpha who doesn’t even want me and will probably reject me as soon as he has a good look at me.

It’s hard to feel anything other than shame when I know they’re right.

The pit in my stomach only grows as we head to the ceremony.

I make a point of wearing my neutral mask so well that hardly anyone even bothers to speak to me.

My pack, people I have known all my life, are about to discard me on this dangerous island, and they barely have two words to say to me.

For a while, I fooled myself into thinking that I was earning their respect with my store.

Now I see I was merely earning their temporary tolerance.

It's only as we walk into the clearing where the ceremony is being held that the sheer scale of it hits me.

The island really has gone all out. Everywhere I look, there are colorful banners and flags, people milling about, gawking at us as we approach the center.

I tug at the front of my dress, suddenly very aware of how revealing it is.

Unfortunately, everything I wear seems to only highlight the size of my chest, so Nicola was partly right about me busting out of it.

I look around and don't see Aiden, but so many unfamiliar faces stare back at me that it makes me want to disappear.

I feel dazed as we move through the crowd, and I try to keep my head down.

Nolan appears to be lapping up the attention, though, as he greets some of the island's betas like long-lost friends.

Nolan can really turn on the charm when he wants to.

When we finally reach the front, I'm surprised to see so many witches. We don't really mix on the mainland, but there seems to be a lot here. I don't have time to think much about it as Nolan suddenly squeezes my arm a little too tightly and leans in close.

"Just get this done, Serena. This is as good as it gets for you," he whispers as Nicola hands me a bunch of wilting flowers, and they leave me standing there alone at the end of the aisle, with everyone looking on.

I stare at the sad-looking flowers as the wind whips gently around me and try to

steady my breathing.

A sound from the side of the stage draws my attention, and a strange feeling of warmth washes over me as Aiden steps up, making eye contact with me.

I brace myself for his reaction, an outright rejection or some kind of comment about last night.

Instead, he holds my gaze and smirks slightly.

It's not entirely unkind, perhaps just a sign of recognition.

He turns to Nolan, and I wonder if he's going to tell him about last night after all, but instead they simply shake hands, and he steps toward me.

"Well, Serena?" he says quietly. "Nice to meet you, officially."

His eyes sparkle with amusement, and it only makes him look more attractive. I feel like my brain is going to short-circuit as I struggle to find a response. Instead of waiting, he simply takes my hand and signals for the officiant to begin. He obviously wants to get this over with, too.

The ceremony itself is simple but quite sweet—or at least it would have been under different circumstances.

I slip into autopilot, pointedly ignoring the way goosebumps rush along my fingers every time Aiden has to take my hand.

I refuse to let anyone see how much he affects me, and I don't want to give them any more reason to make fun of me. He looks so handsome, it's almost painful to look at him. We must look ridiculous together.

I grip the tightly bound stems of the bouquet as the witch reads an incantation of some kind, focusing on the familiar buzz of energy from the flowers.

Something tangible I can hold on to. When Aiden is told to take my hand again, his practically engulfs mine, and I cannot ignore the strange sensation that overcomes me at the contact.

I try to stuff it down again, and this time, the energy seems to flow directly into the bouquet as the flowers bloom between us, soft leaves and delicate pink flowers growing and cascading to the floor.

My cheeks burn bright red, and the crowd gasps in awe.

Dimly in the background, I hear Nolan explain that I have a gift with flowers and how pretty it is.

I steal a cautious glance at Aiden and find him staring at me with something completely unreadable behind his handsome face.

I wonder if it's the witch's incantation or simply Aiden's imposing presence, but I feel the whole world suddenly tilt, and I have to steady myself by holding his hand, the flowering bouquet between us.

I try to rein in the flowers as they trail along the floor, but I fear there will be no reining in my emotions where Aiden is concerned.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

I'm not really sure what I expected from having a mate. I'll admit I probably didn't give it enough thought; I was too caught up in the ways I didn't want things to change. I never anticipated what my mate might be expecting.

Discovering that Serena was the sexy woman I caught trying to leave the night before the ceremony was one thing—that she was trying to escape me, that was a first. I don't usually send women running, but apparently this one is different.

The second is that she barely wants to look at me, never mind talk to me.

She seems completely immune to any of the usual ways I charm women.

She looked completely radiant during the ceremony.

Nervous, but radiant. I was tempted to tease her about her near escape, but something in the way her eyes kept darting to Nolan told me to leave it alone.

Her fear out on the trail was real, and I felt like a total jerk as I sent her back to her pack, but the fallout would have been immense if one of Nolan's party had run away—so much worse if it had been the woman they'd brought over to be my mate.

I'd almost told my brothers about my encounter with the beautiful, tiny shifter this morning, but now I'm glad I didn't.

I don't know why, but once I realized who she was, joking about a woman running from Nolan didn't seem as amusing.

Even if I still think Nolan is an asshole.

What is even less funny is that my mate still appears to want to run, even now that she knows who I am. So is Nolan the asshole, or am I?

It appears the answer may be both of us, given that Serena appears less than happy about being my mate.

I didn't expect this reaction; I was so caught up in my feelings that it didn't even occur to me that she might not be happy about her part in it.

Women like me, after all. I wasn't expecting a great romance, but I at least thought we'd consummate the mating and have some fun.

I was right about one thing: she was happy enough to be leaving Nolan and even the people traveling with him.

She barely gave them a backward glance as I introduced her to Ava, Emily, and my brothers.

She seemed genuinely shocked to discover that Tristen's mate is a witch and almost as short as she is.

The pack party after the ceremony continued well into the evening, but Serena retreated to the house at the first opportunity when the girls offered to show her where she'd be staying.

Once she was in the house, she pretty much locked herself in the spare room—so much for consummating the mating.

I didn't want her to feel awkward as the party continued, so I stayed at the house, too;

I bet everyone thought we were having a wild night.

I scoff at the thought as I slam my fist into the bag hanging from the pack gym's roof.

It's been forty-eight hours, and I still can't shake the irritation every time someone ribs me about my mate, insinuates we fucked all night, or asks how it's going.

My wolf feels more on edge than ever. Even getting back to patrolling last night didn't help.

I assumed I was just feeling restless over Malik, but it feels so much bigger than that.

How can anything feel bigger than Malik's lingering threat?

I hit the bag again and again until I feel a satisfying burn in my knuckles.

The guys are beginning to arrive for tonight's patrol, and I can feel my wolf's stark need to run coursing through my veins.

I need to run or fuck, and only one of those outcomes is likely tonight.

I know I could technically hit up the bars on the edge of town—I've no doubt those witches would like another round, and goddess knows I could do with a drink if that had any more of that batch.

But something about being seen as cheating on my mate within two days of the ceremony doesn't seem as appealing anymore.

The truth is, I don't even know her. I still maintain I shouldn't care.

But she makes me feel off balance somehow.

Out on the trail that night, and then again when I took her hand during the ceremony, I noticed that my wolf reacted so strongly.

I would assume it's confused by the mating ceremony, but it happened before that, too, when I didn't even know who she was.

It's only when she's around, or I think of her, that the feeling rises so fast and so intensely.

Like I need her in some primal way that I've never felt before.

It's unnerving. I don't like being unnerved.

I also don't like having no clue what's going on in my own home.

I saw her briefly in the kitchen this morning, blushing furiously as she grabbed some food that I'd told her was there, before shutting herself in her room again.

She's probably still in there right now, hiding out while I'm gone.

I need to figure out what the hell is going on with her. Is it me, or is it something else?

I snarl at the bag as it swings, turning away to join the rest of the patrol. I pull on my shirt, ignoring the curious looks. I know they're wondering why I'm not in my usual easygoing mood. I'm beginning to wonder the same thing myself.

"There you are," Jace says as he walks through the gym door. "I was going to call by the house but didn't want to interrupt anything."

He laughs, but when I don't reciprocate, his amusement trails off.

I notice Sam and some of the other betas drifting away, obviously knowing better than to get in my way.

Jace, my oldest friend, seems resolved to take a different tack.

“I’m just joking, man,” he shrugs lightly, grabbing the bag I’m punching to steady it for me. “Things going okay there?”

I ease up slightly and sigh. “She’s still not talking to me,” I admit.

Jace chuckles, “Not the first time you’ve upset a woman, Aiden.”

I roll my eyes and slam my fist into the bag again, sending him staggering back to steady himself. “I usually have to at least talk to them first before they’re pissed off; Serena arrived upset.”

Maybe it’s because I sent her back to Nolan, but why didn’t she just say who she was then?

“Have you considered that she didn’t want the ceremony?” Jace asks, causing me to stop suddenly. “Maybe she didn’t want to come here.”

I feel stupid for a minute as I stare at him, trying to process what he said. I’ve been so hung up on how my life would change that I didn’t really consider the process from her side. “I mean, don’t most female shifters want to be a luna?” I finally say, cringing at how it sounds.

Jace laughs. “Are you saying you’re a catch, Aiden?” He continues laughing even after I’ve swung the bag at him.

Deciding I can’t take any more of this and unwilling to have a deeper conversation

about any of it standing in the gym, I turn to Sam and the others who are busy pretending they're not listening.

“Ben Thompson called in to say his cattle were skittish in the top fields boarding the valley, so we're going to concentrate over that way tonight, check it out for him. ”

Everyone nods; they're a well-oiled machine at this point when it comes to patrols.

I know it's a long shot, but Ben was pretty stressed when he called, so it makes sense to patrol the valley tonight.

Besides, I'm glad of the distraction, but I can't help but notice that the rush of adrenaline I'd normally feel before a patrol is missing.

I shake my head, like I can physically push the thoughts away, and lead the others out of the gym.

I shift as soon as we're past the tree line, hoping my wolf will settle and push me into the right headspace.

It doesn't. We start the patrol, and I focus everything on doing it to the best of my ability, my senses scanning for threats as we run hard through the dense night.

It feels good, but not good enough. The wind is fresh and bracing, but something feels missing. My wolf is restless, and I wonder why it's not enough to be out here. I push us harder, my paws pounding the ground, but the feeling lingers, an itch I can't quite scratch.

The patrol is uneventful. We find no signs of Malik's pack venturing this far.

Not even the stray scent of a lone wolf.

There's nothing to suggest why Ben's cattle are nervous, but we make a long sweep of the valley anyway, just to be sure.

I'll call him in the morning to reassure him.

Hell, I can't blame anyone for still being suspicious when I'm the one still patrolling so hard.

The guys are all in good spirits, but I know they can tell I'm not.

I'm distant and pissed off, even though I try not to show it.

We return from the patrol around midnight, and the others head back to the gym to change.

I go straight to the house, still in wolf form, and circle the perimeter.

I have no reason to think there's any threat, but it feels like something I should do.

I'm not sure who I'm trying to reassure more, really.

I shift back as I reach the front door and grab some clothes from the hamper I keep on the porch.

I feel weary in a way I'm not used to as I walk into the house.

It's quiet inside, and I guess Serena's probably asleep.

Tomorrow I will have to try again. Try harder, perhaps, if this is going to work.

Maybe I could get Ava or Emily to talk to her.

Maybe that will get me some answers without me having to ask for them myself.

I notice the door to her room is slightly open as I walk down the hall, and for a moment, I consider that she might be waiting for me.

The hope dies as I peer in and see she isn't there.

The bed is still made, like it hasn't been touched.

I curse under my breath, not sure if I should be more annoyed or simply worried.

At least it's a change from the door being shut in my face, I guess.

I move through the house to the back door, scanning the dark yard for any sign of her.

I don't see anything at first, but then I notice her.

She's out past the edge of the garden, by the old woodshed.

I watch from the shadows, trying to figure out what she's doing out there.

For a moment, I wonder if she's planning to run again, but she's not dressed for it.

Her light, flowing shirt is almost luminescent in the moonlight, catching a breeze that lifts the edges around her like a halo.

I almost want to laugh at myself for the sense of calm I feel when I realize she's not about to take off. It's ridiculous.

I close the distance between us, still unsure what she's doing out here.

I'm about to call out her name when I see the flowers she's looking at.

It's strange that I didn't notice them growing here before; they're tall and wild-looking, but the way they react to Serena's touch is even stranger.

She's crouched in front of them, and as she reaches out, I see the flowers physically turn towards her, like she's the sun.

They begin to flourish, the same way her bouquet did at the ceremony, this time rising upward and twisting to form an arch before cascading down in a beautiful display.

Despite only having the moonlight, I can see the colors bursting to life.

I stop dead in my tracks, sure this isn't something that's supposed to happen.

I don't know what the hell it means, but it's beautiful, and I can't take my eyes off her.

Her hair is loose, and her head is tilted slightly as she watches the flowers.

Her expression is so soft and serene that it makes my chest tighten.

I'm caught up in it, in her, when suddenly she seems to sense something.

Someone. I should just step out and talk to her, but that just feels too hard.

I never usually have a problem talking to women, and I didn't expect this to be any different.

But then I've never had a mate before, and I never expected it to be someone as

intriguing as Serena.

I slip back into the house, and a few minutes later, I hear the back door click shut and the sound of her rushing quietly back to her room. I wonder if she's ever going to stop hiding from me.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

I hear the front door slam shut and breathe a sigh of relief, the sound echoing through the walls like a long exhale.

I watch him from the window as he moves around to the back of the house, his frame disappearing behind the trees that surround the property.

The morning is still, and for a second, I can almost believe I belong here. Almost.

I wait, counting the seconds, and then slip out of the bedroom.

The kitchen is cool, the tiles chilling my feet, and the sunlight spills golden across the floor.

I pull open the fridge, searching for something quick, something I can take back to the room and pretend like I'm barely here.

There's a carton of eggs, a loaf of bread, a block of—

“Serena?”

His voice is sudden and close, making me jump. I spin around, clutching the bread to my chest like it might protect me. Aiden stands in the doorway, keys in hand, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“I thought you'd left,” I say, the words tumbling out awkwardly, making it completely obvious I was deliberately avoiding him.

“Just getting something for the car.” He leans against the frame, casual and easy. Everything I’m not. “Hungry?”

I nod, my throat tight, wishing I could just shrink away.

“Stay,” he says, and I weigh up whether it’s a request or an order.

His expression is easygoing, but I can sense the alpha power brimming beneath his laid-back exterior.

I open my mouth to argue, but he’s already moving, taking the bread from my hands and setting it on the counter. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Uh, scrambled?” I say, like I’m not sure. Like I’ve never had eggs before.

“Scrambled it is.” He cracks the eggs with one hand, whisking them with a fluidity that makes me feel even more awkward, like my limbs are too heavy, too graceless. Like the rest of me. I hover by the fridge, unsure if I should sit or stand, if I should stay or make a run for it.

He glances over at me, eyes bright and curious. “You can sit, you know. I don’t bite.”

I laugh, a small, nervous sound. He gestures to the table, and I finally move, pulling out a chair. The wood is cool beneath my fingers, grounding me as I watch him.

“So,” he says, his back to me as he stirs the eggs. “How are you liking the town?”

“It’s nice,” I say, which sounds lame even to me. I clear my throat, trying to find words that don’t stick. “I mean, I haven’t really seen much of it, but it seems different. From what I’m used to.”

He nods, turning to face me. “You haven’t been out much yet?”

I shake my head, not wanting to admit I haven’t been anywhere since the ceremony. He sighs, “Sorry, that’s my fault. I should have taken you out, or you know, arranged something.”

I’m surprised; I hadn’t even considered that he might bother taking me out, anyway. I wave the thought away with my hand. “I don’t need you to do anything.”

He stops what he’s doing for a moment and looks up at me, the slight glow to his amber eyes unsettling me for a moment. “I don’t do anything I don’t want to, Serena,” he grins. “Besides, you’re the luna here now. You need to know the town and the people. I think they’re all quite keen to meet you.”

“Oh,” I reply simply. I hadn’t even considered anyone here would actually want to meet me.

He looks at me closely, like he’s trying to piece me together, and I feel the urge to hide, to curl inward. Instead, I force myself to sit up straighter, to meet his eyes. He slides a plate over to me and starts digging into his own breakfast as silence falls between us for a moment.

“What’s that thing you do with the plants?” he finally asks, his voice casual but his expression intent.

My heart skips a beat, wondering how he knows. “I just arrange flowers. Make them look pretty.”

He raises an eyebrow, unconvinced. “Pretty, huh?”

I nod and shrug, trying to make it seem like nothing. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I saw what you did with the bouquet during the ceremony,” he reminds me. “It was pretty and magical. Do you have other gifts?”

I can feel the blush creeping over my cheeks, and I shake my head, staring at my plate. “No, just pretty flowers. I have—had a store on the mainland, we supplied events.”

He looks genuinely surprised, and I wonder how much he actually knew about me before agreeing to this. “Supplied? Did you stop?”

I can’t help but scoff gently, “Well, I can’t run my store from here.”

He raises his brows again, and I see a flicker of understanding cross his features before he starts eating again. “You know,” he says in between bites, “being a shifter and having magic isn’t so unusual here. My family has magic, too.”

Now it’s my turn to raise my brows. I’d heard rumors that there was something strange about the alphas on the island, but I’m surprised to hear him so openly admit it.

Nolan’s pack works with witches but still views all magic with a certain level of suspicion.

He leans back in his chair, appraising me in a way that makes me want to squirm.

“You should talk to Emily, Tristen’s mate.

She’s a witch. Might be interesting to talk to you about the type of magic you have. ”

My fingers fidget with the edge of my plate, and I try to keep my voice steady, carefully dismissive. “It’s just flowers.”

He shrugs, a slow smile spreading across his face. I wonder if he knows how good-looking he is. Does he make all women feel like this? “I think it’s more than that,” he finally says.

I don’t know how to respond, so I focus on eating, the eggs warm and soft, the silence stretching between us. Finally, he breaks it again.

“My brothers and I have gifts too,” he says, casually, like he’s telling me the weather forecast. “As well as being shifters.”

I meet his eyes, a flicker of curiosity getting the better of me. “Gifts?”

He nods, and there’s a spark in his eyes that’s more than just reflection. “Fire’s kind of my thing. My brothers have lightning and the wind; my niece appears to be a bit of a mixture.”

“Fire?” I echo, disbelief and intrigue mingling in my voice.

“Yeah,” he says, a playful glint in his gaze. “I can show you sometime. Maybe if we take our wolves for a run sometime?”

And there it is—he doesn’t know I can’t shift. I push my chair back and busy myself clearing the plates. The shift in energy between us is awkward and palpable. He must feel it, too, because he stands and carries his plate to the sink, where I take it. “I’ll sort these,” I tell him quietly.

“You sure?” he replies, trying to catch my eye, but I swiftly brush him off.

“Of course, you cooked, and besides, you must be very busy.”

I breathe a sigh of relief when he takes the hint and makes his excuses to leave.

He pauses at the door, but I deliberately keep my back to him and focus on washing the plates, only relaxing when I hear the front door click.

How could Nolan not even tell him I can't shift?

I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, who would volunteer for a defective mate?

I feel the familiar weight of inadequacy settle over me, and I grip the edge of the sink, the cool metal pressing into my palms. The garden calls to me with its quiet promise of solitude.

The air is so crisp, the ground damp beneath my shoes, and I head over to the flower arch I helped create last night.

I can lose myself here, in the tangle of stems and leaves, in the illusion that I am something more than an obligation.

I kneel in the dirt, sinking my hands into the earth, and try to focus on the small, green lives in front of me.

I am so absorbed in teasing the tender new shoots appearing that I don't hear them approach.

"Serena?"

I nearly jump out of my skin, my heart racing as I turn to see three women standing at the garden gate. The tallest, a redhead with an easy smile, waves. "We didn't mean to scare you," she winces.

I scramble to my feet, brushing dirt from my knees. "It's fine," I say, but my voice is shaky. "I just wasn't expecting anyone."

“We thought we’d come say hi, welcome you to the pack,” says the woman with dark curls, her voice warm and genuine.

The third woman, petite and freckled, holds up a basket. “We brought cookies. Sarah here baked them.”

“Oh,” I say, stupidly, “that’s really nice.”

I can’t hide my surprise, and they seem to notice. They exchange glances, and I brace myself for the ridicule that used to follow when I was in the mainland pack.

Instead, the redhead, Sarah, says, “We can go if you’re busy, but we’d love to chat if you have the time.” She sounds like she means it.

I shake my head quickly, feeling flustered. “No, stay. Please. I was just...tidying up.”

The women all smile and walk through the garden, setting the basket of treats on the small table.

I wring my hands, hoping they won’t notice how nervous I am.

I try to calm my nerves by focusing on maintaining a friendly and neutral expression.

I’m so used to expecting the worst from others in my pack that I’m ready for whatever they say or do.

“So, Serena,” Sarah says, getting out the treats and taking a seat, “how are you settling in?”

I hesitate before sitting, unsure what to do with myself. “It’s...different,” I say, immediately regretting it. It sounds negative, ungrateful. “I mean, it’s nice. Everyone

seems welcoming.”

The women share a look, and I brace for what comes next.

“We’re so glad to have you here,” the one with beautiful freckles says. Her voice is light and sincere. “I’m Cate, by the way.”

“Yeah, it’s been pretty hard around here with everything that went on...” the curly-haired one adds before trailing off. “We were so excited when Aiden told us you were joining the pack.”

I blink, trying to process her words. Excited? About me? I reach for a cookie to busy my hands, and the sweet smell feels intoxicating. “Thank you,” I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

Emily leans forward, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Aiden said you’re a florist?”

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So, Aiden has talked to them about me. Did he ask them to come here? The question feels safe, though, like a familiar patch of ground, so I grasp on to it. “Yes,” I say, “I have a store on the mainland. A friend is looking after it.”

“Will you open one here?” Sarah asks, glancing around at the flower arrangements beginning to take shape in the previously derelict yard.

I pause for a moment, all the questions I’ve been asking myself over the last few days swirling around in my mind.

I’ve just been dropped here in this strange pack; I don’t know if they even need a florist like me on the island, if I’d be welcome, or if my new mate would even allow it.

I feel my heart racing as their eyes all turn to me.

Their expressions are friendly, but in my experience, you never know what people’s real intentions are.

“Perhaps,” I reply, “I’m just finding my feet. I’m not sure what Aiden would say.”

“Ha,” Cate scoffs. “You just have to tell that one what you want to do; he won’t mind.”

The others all laugh, and it feels good-natured, but something about the way she said it makes me think perhaps she knows Aiden quite well.

Maybe really well. I don't know why that makes me feel so strange inside, a sinking feeling that I can't explain.

Aiden is so attractive, and Cate is stunning.

Of course, they've probably been together, but they might still be together.

Whatever Aiden is doing with me is purely business between packs.

Everyone knows that, and if I let myself get caught up in imagining things are different, it will only lead to heartbreak and embarrassment.

I refuse to give these people any reason to ridicule and bully me the way my old pack did.

So I stuff down my feelings and laugh along.

As much as I feel awkward and want to find a reason to doubt them, the women seem really friendly, and we chat for the next hour as they fill me in on all the pack gossip and information about Malik's attacks that I hadn't heard on the mainland.

I didn't realize he'd been on the island so long or that he'd had a brother who had nearly destroyed him before he killed him instead.

He obviously wanted to rule the island himself.

However comforting it is to be welcomed here, Malik sounds just as terrifying as I imagined, and it does nothing to calm my nerves about being on the island. They've been through so much here.

If possible, I almost sense him before I see him.

Aiden steps into the garden, and the attraction I feel for him is immediate and almost overwhelming.

His eyes meet mine, and the easy-going smile on his face seems so at odds with how I feel here.

The women all stand and greet him as Sarah packs away the leftovers.

“We’ll get out of your way,” she smiles before adding, “There’s a market this weekend, you should come with us and check it out. ”

I know Aiden has heard, as he pauses, greeting the other women and looks at me encouragingly. “That sounds lovely,” I reply, even though the thought of being out with probably the whole pack makes me feel sick.

“Lovely,” Cate concurs. “You should come too, Aiden, it will be a great day.”

Cate seems genuinely friendly, and deep down, I know I shouldn’t let it bother me, but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something between her and Aiden. The women say goodbye, but I feel so tightly wound as Aiden closes the gate after them that as he turns, his face drops.

“What’s up?” he asks. “Did they upset you? I thought it was going well.”

I look down, searching for the right words, but all I feel is envy gnawing at my insides. “Are you and Cate...you know?”

He almost laughs, a quick huff of surprise, but he stops himself, reading my expression. “Cate? No. That was a long time ago.” He steps closer. “I’m no angel, but we’re just friends. That’s it.”

I want to believe him, but the jealousy feels like a separate entity, something writhing and alive that I can't pin down. "Okay," I say, but my voice is tight. I hate how exposed I feel.

Aiden watches me, his eyes narrowing, like he's trying to figure out what's really going on. "You're not convinced." It's not a question, and I'm not sure how to respond.

"It's fine," I say, but it's not, not really.

"Serena," he says softly, but there's a firmness to his tone. He tilts my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. "If I wanted Cate, I'd tell you. Right now, I'm wanting someone else."

He leans forward, his eyes locked onto mine, and my heart races.

All I can think is that he's going to kiss me.

No one has ever kissed me before, and I'm convinced this is just a sick joke; that any second now he'll pull away, laughing at how easily I believed him.

I feel like I might shatter. In a panic, I push him back with more force than I intended.

"Don't," I say, my voice sharp and uneven. I see the surprise on his face as I turn, fleeing toward the house. I don't look back, afraid of what I'll see, afraid of what I won't.

Inside, the air is cool, and I lean against the door, trying to catch my breath.

The quiet feels deafening, and I press my hands to my mouth, feeling the heat of embarrassment creeping up my neck and into my cheeks.

Why did I run? Why couldn't I just stand there and let him—why can't I just be normal?

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“So,” Tristen begins with his brows already raised. “How’s mated life treating you?”

I don’t even get a chance to answer because Jace lets out a dramatic low whistle from behind me. I roll my eyes.

“It’s fine,” I reply, hoping they’ll all just move on and get to discussing why we’re holding this alpha meeting: Malik.

“You sure about that?” Tristen presses, his voice amused and prodding. “The way I hear it, she didn’t leave the room for two days straight.”

I tense. “Who told you that?” I ask, but I already know because I’d asked Emily for advice. I should have known she’d blab.

“I don’t know what the issue is.” Jace reaches for a beer. “She’s hot. You should be proud.”

I grunt, trying to ignore the flicker of possessiveness. “The alliance is solid. That’s all that matters. It doesn’t matter how she is.”

“Wow,” Tristen replies, throwing his hands up. “Do not say that around Emily or Ava. They’ll have your balls.”

I groan, knowing I sound like a complete asshole, and that’s not how I want to come across.

The truth is, I’m just frustrated. She is hot.

Not in a traditional shifter way, but she's undeniably cute because she's shorter, and her face is angelic and makes me want to protect her with a force of passion I've never felt before, but her curves are anything but sweet.

They're deadly and are currently driving me insane every time I set eyes on her.

The rare times I hear her laugh, it speaks to my soul in a way nothing has before, and the way she has brought the garden to life with her magic intrigues the hell out of me. She intrigues the hell out of me.

And she doesn't feel the same in the slightest. In fact, she physically rejected me.

If it weren't so gutting, I'd probably feel more humiliated, but overall, I just feel disappointed.

Truth be told, I'm not used to women pushing me away.

I genuinely thought she was being jealous about Cate, and my wolf was celebrating, thinking we'd finally made a breakthrough...

but no. It was wrong. I shouldn't have kissed her or touched her.

I'm trying to give her space to warm up to me, not completely freak her out.

I busy myself grabbing another beer from the bar area while trying to ignore Jace and Tristen, who thankfully seem to have moved on, at least for now, and are greeting Callum and his beta, Griffen.

I can only hope they don't use it as an opportunity to bring them into the conversation about my love life—or lack thereof.

I'm still thinking about how badly things are going with Serena, my wolf's frustration only matching my own, as I head back through the bar to the meeting room at the back.

Originally, we'd planned to meet on one of the trails to light a fire and kick back, but with a storm rolling in, no one minded switching to the bar.

I haven't been in here since the night before the ceremony.

I spot some of the local witches sitting by the fire and nod in acknowledgment as they giggle.

For a moment, I pause. A nagging voice in the back of my mind says, why not just have some fun with another female? You don't need Serena to want you anyway.

It seems so obvious, and judging by the smile the brunette witch is giving me, it shouldn't be too hard, either. Hell, maybe she needs some fun, too.

"Aiden? You coming?" Callum calls through the door just as my wolf begins to nigger at me, clearly less on board with the plan, which surprises me.

I turn, raising my beer to him in acknowledgment and head back to the meeting.

I've been dreading this, but if I'm honest, it's just more of the same.

As everyone else begins to relax about Malik with no sightings, it just pisses me off.

Now would be the perfect time for him to make his move.

He'll wait until everyone's guard is down.

As expected, the meeting discussed the latest patrols and how trade has increased, but my brothers aren't keen to increase the numbers they put on their own borders.

They want to concentrate on their own packs and put the business with Malik behind them—which only works if Malik is actually gone.

My wolf is convinced he's still in the mountains.

His rogue army may have been defeated, but I can feel he's still out there somewhere, I'm sure of it.

I try pointing out that Ralph obviously failed to take him out after Emily's father weakened him.

Malik waited until our packs were in a state of transition after Ralph's death to make his move—what makes them think he's not just waiting for the right moment again?

My brothers listen, and I know they're not completely at ease either, but they want to refocus on their own packs and put this behind us.

They're clearly not going to listen to the youngest brother on this.

I try to stuff down my rising frustration and focus on the meeting, but it's getting harder and harder to ignore as my wolf feels like snapping every time Tristen or Callum try to change the subject.

Eventually, I sit back and try to gather my thoughts, almost zoning out in an attempt to keep my cool.

Suddenly, I hear someone mention Serena's name and see red. "Will you stop pushing me about Serena?" I growl.

All the faces at the table turn to me in surprise. “What are you going on about, Aiden?” Callum snaps. “I said Serena’s here.”

What the fuck?

I knew Sarah and some of the other women were meeting Serena for dinner earlier. I was relieved she agreed, as it would do her good. Even if she didn’t want to talk to me, she should integrate with the pack. But I didn’t know they’d bring her to the bar.

I turn, and there she is. Serena.

She stands out like a star in the dim light of the bar, impossibly small for a shifter, but with the kind of presence that demands attention.

Her hair falls in glossy waves, catching the light as she tosses it over her shoulder, and her curves, more pronounced than I remember, are accentuated by the figure-hugging jeans and pretty low-cut blouse she’s wearing.

I can’t tear my eyes away from her full breasts, the dip of her waist, the way she moves like she’s made of something ethereal and untouchable.

Her lips are a perfect pink, and her eyes, so bright and aware, scan the room and meet mine for the briefest second.

It’s enough to make my heart still in my chest. She smiles, but it’s uncertain, as if she doesn’t know if we’re supposed to even bother greeting each other.

“Looks like she’s doing just fine,” Tristen chuckles from his seat next to me.

Sarah and Cate flank Serena, their laughter loud above the music.

I watch as they make a beeline for a group of men standing by the bar.

Sarah heads toward a tall shifter with a beard that I recognize as her mate, but I barely notice because my eyes are glued to Serena.

She's smiling, and I can see the other men nearby noticing her, turning to take her in, one by one.

I can feel their eyes on her, and my wolf begins to seethe even more.

I realize I'm probably glaring when Serena looks away awkwardly and Cate says something to her, sparking more laughter. I hate this. I hate how I can feel her presence in the room like it's a tangible thing, a force pulling me toward her.

"Earth to Aiden," Callum waves a hand in front of me, laughing at my expense. "You're staring."

I grunt and force myself to look away, even though every cell in my body and wolf is protesting.

"Let's just finish this up," I mutter, and the guys exchange smirks, but for once, they let it go as we wrap up the meeting, and I head back toward the bar with Jace.

I'm relieved my brothers haven't followed us, because I need time to cool off.

By the time we reach the bar, Jace is already eyeing a redhead who's pouring drinks on the other side.

"Okay, spill. What's up with you?" he says, but I ignore him and flag down the barmaid.

She's pretty, with red hair spilling over her shoulders, and eyes that draw you in.

She's a regular here and never fails to make an impression.

She saunters over, leaning on the bar with a smile that's all invitation.

"What can I get for you, Alpha?" she asks, her voice low and playful.

"Two beers," I reply, trying to sound casual, but my wolf is distracted, still stuck on my brothers and Malik. But mostly Serena.

The barmaid pouts, her lips full and tempting. "Are you sure you don't want to try the witches' brew again? Just made a fresh batch." She leans in closer, her scent sweet and intoxicating. "I'll give you a taste."

Jace nudges me, grinning. "We'll take it," he says, and the barmaid's eyes light up.

"Coming right up," she winks, turning to pour the drinks. I roll my eyes at Jace, and he shrugs.

"I don't have a mate," he laughs, his eyes fixed on the barmaid.

He's right, obviously. Besides, I always told myself I could still have fun with or without a mate.

The thought lingers, tempting but almost uncomfortable as the barmaid places the drinks in front of us, her fingers lingering on the glasses.

They're filled with the witches' brew, a dark, swirling liquid that smells like spice and something more dangerous.

“On the house,” she says, focusing her attention on me.

“That so?” I smirk, feeling Jace’s satisfaction radiating off him.

“Think of it as a welcome back gift,” she replies, her voice teasing. “Haven’t seen you since the night before your...” she trails off, her eyes flicking to the table where my brothers are still sitting. “New arrangement.”

I glance at the drinks, then back at her. “I see,” I reply, suddenly wishing I hadn’t even accepted the drink.

“Enjoy.” She winks again, and Jace laughs, reaching for his glass.

“Bottoms up,” he says, and it’s as I’m about to down mine that I hear Sarah’s voice behind me.

“Aiden. Jace,” she says quietly. The barmaid seems to catch Sarah’s eye and disappear rapidly.

I turn, nearly choking on the drink, and see that Serena is with her, holding some drinks. I didn’t even notice them come over.

Serena’s eyes are wide, and her expression is unreadable.

Suddenly uncomfortable with how this might look, I reach over and make a point of kissing Serena’s cheek.

She bristles, and I hear Sarah scoff lightly.

I notice Serena’s hands are trembling, and she turns to Sarah.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she says. “Thank you for inviting me, but I’m going to head back now.

” She sets the drinks down and spins around to leave. I reach out a hand to stop her.

“Wait,” I say, “You don’t have to go.”

She freezes, and her eyes finally meet mine, a storm of confusion and sadness. “It’s fine,” she says, her tone lighter than her expression. “I don’t want to make things awkward for you. Or your friend.” Her voice quivers on the last word, and she glances back at the barmaid, who’s now with Jace.

“That’s not—” I start to say, but she’s already moving.

My wolf feels like it’s being shredded, which is ridiculous.

I move quickly and grab hold of her arm to stop her.

That’s when she spins around, and suddenly all the centerpiece flowers on the tables burst into life, growing rapidly and mutating with spiked leaves and sharp needles.

There are screams as shifters and witches alike leap out of their seats, and I notice Tristen and Aiden rush through into the main bar to see what is going on.

Serena gasps; she’s clearly shocked herself, and instinctively takes a step forward to avoid one of the spikes, so I pull her into my arms. She’s hesitant at first, but then allows me to maneuver her toward the door.

I catch Jace’s eye, and he nods, “Go. We’ll sort this out.”

I nod at my brothers, who look equally surprised and impressed all at once, before

pulling Serena through the bar doors and into the cool night air. Turning to look at her, I notice she's as white as a sheet. Something tells me that she wasn't expecting that to happen, either.

The storm has just started to break, the first few drops of rain spotting the pavement around us, and I have to resist the urge to pull her close. She's trembling, but I can't tell if it's from the shock of what just happened or something else.

"Serena," I start to say, but she cuts me off.

"Can we just get out of here?" she asks shakily, and I nod, leading her over to the truck.

It's only a short ride to the house, and we drive in silence as I try to think of the right thing to say.

I should have gone over as soon as she arrived.

She's my mate; I made us both look bad. I internally groan at how it must have looked when the barmaid was flirting... even if I wasn't going to do anything.

But the flowers...that's certainly different.

As we get out of the truck, the street is quiet, and I can tell she's feeling calmer. "Are you okay?" I ask, concern, and regret lacing my words.

She nods, but her eyes betray her, and I can tell she's shaken. Her lips tremble as she opens her mouth to speak.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice barely a whisper. "I didn't mean to—it just happened. I'm sorry."

“Serena,” I say, reaching out and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It’s softer than I imagined, and her eyes widen at the contact. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel—”

“Stupid?” she says, and the accusation cuts deep. I try to speak, but she cuts me off. “It’s okay. I am stupid for getting upset about it. You don’t owe me anything; this was a deal between our packs. I know it’s not a real mating, and I know you don’t want me.”

“Of course I want you,” I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop myself. Why would she think I wouldn’t want her?

Her eyes meet mine instantly, and for just a moment, I see a flicker of interest reflected back, but it’s gone in a flash as she instantly brushes it off. “You don’t have to say that; it just makes it worse. I don’t need you to make fun of me, okay?”

She turns, and I see her hand tremble as she opens the door, her shoulders tense and rigid. I don’t want her to go. Not like this.

Taking a deep breath, I follow her up the steps. “Serena, I’m not making fun of you. I’ve never...” I pause, trying to find the right words. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I know, ” she says, an attempt at a smile on her face. I want to say more, but I don’t know how to handle the situation.

Before I can do anything else, she slips inside and leaves me standing on the porch feeling completely out of my depth, my wolf pacing over the night's events like he could rip straight through me out of pure frustration.

How am I going to put this right or get through to her?

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“Two nights in a row?” Aiden snaps. “Tell me that’s a coincidence.”

He paces the kitchen with his brothers on speakerphone, and I’m not sure whether I should go and give him some privacy. I move to stand, but he motions for me to stay, so I slide back into my seat and pretend to make myself busy drinking my tea.

I hear Callum let out a long breath down the line, and I can tell he’s feeling the strain, too.

Only a week after the meeting at the bar where the other alphas decided to pull back from patrolling the mountain borders, they’re back due to magic-driven fires springing up in all three packs.

I can tell Aiden disagreed with that decision and probably wants to say I told you so, but I think he’s trying to hold back.

I don’t know his relationship with his brothers, but they all seem like strong alphas.

“I know what you’re thinking, Aiden,” Tristen’s voice comes over the line, sounding as weary. “But we don’t know it’s Malik, yet. Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

I see Aiden roll his eyes, and for a minute, I think he’s going to snap. Instead, he runs his hand through his hair in frustration and listens as Callum and Tristan go back and forth about the fires and whether there are any suspects other than Malik.

"All I know," Aiden finally cuts in, "is that if it is him, he’s testing us. And we’re just chasing our tails waiting for him to strike again."

Tristen sighs. “The witches have developed stronger defenses. If it is Malik, he’s fighting alone now, and we’ll finish him. But we don’t know it is him. Could be anyone just causing trouble. It’s only a few fires.”

The conversation rumbles on, but I can tell Aiden’s not happy with his brothers’ take on things.

He’s the youngest, and I’m not sure he feels they respect his opinion, which must grate when his pack obviously thinks he’s a great alpha, and he clearly suspects Malik is hiding in the mountains, which scares me senseless.

Maybe it’s easier for his brothers to hope these fires are not Malik when they’re not happening on their doorsteps.

I watch Aiden as he turns his back to me and looks out over the back yard and across to the mountains in the distance.

His shoulders are tight, and I can feel the tension coming off him in waves.

I want to do something to help, to say something that makes him feel better, but I don’t know what.

I’m not like him or his brothers or anyone else here.

I’m just Serena, stuck somewhere between being a shifter and being completely useless.

Ever since the bar last week, I’ve been keeping a low profile.

Aiden tried to talk about it, but I just can’t. I’m so mortified.

“Listen, we’ve got to—” Aiden starts, but Callum cuts him off.

“Chill, Aiden. We’re doing all we can.”

“Right,” he says, voice clipped. “Keep me posted.” He taps the phone, ending the call, and stands there staring out at the trees, shivering green in the wind.

I see his reflection in the glass, his jaw clenched.

Despite his cold stance, I can’t help but notice how handsome he looks.

I still feel embarrassingly attracted to him, and it kills me that everyone must know that after my reaction at the bar.

It was only made worse when he pretended to fancy me, too. While I appreciated that he would even attempt to make me feel better in the moment, lying to my face only made me feel worse in the long run.

He turns, catching me watching him, and I look away, pretending to be interested in the steam rising from my mug.

“Sorry,” he says, crossing the kitchen to sit beside me. “You shouldn’t have to listen to that. I just don’t understand why they can’t see that we need to act now before he escalates.”

“You really think it’s Malik?” I ask.

He looks at me, and the sincerity in his eyes is obvious as he nods. “I do. And I think he’s not as strong as he was.”

“How do you mean?” I ask, confused.

Aiden walks toward me and pushes one of the bar stools back to sit down next to me.

I'm not sure he's aware of how intimidating his size is as his knee brushes mine, causing my body to immediately tense with desire.

I try to concentrate as he begins explaining about Malik's last attack and how Emily's magic almost destroyed him.

He escaped, but they'd hoped he was mortally injured.

Emily's father nearly killed him too instead of allowing him to take over the island because he was in love with Emily's mother, but he recovered enough to build the army of rogues, and, who's but he recovered enough to build the army of rogues to say he won't do it again?

"She sounds incredible," I say, and he nods.

"She really is something. I should get her to visit, she could talk to you about the plants?"

I shake my head, blushing. "Oh no, she sounds like an absolute badass, she won't want to talk about me making flower decorations."

I try to laugh his suggestion away, but he looks serious. "What I saw in the bar wasn't just some pretty flowers—that's real power, Serena." At the mention of the bar, I blush even more, but he continues. "What about your wolf? Is there any difference there?"

I know I have to tell him. He deserved to know before now, but it's considered so shameful not to be able to shift in our communities. I take a deep breath and try to find the words.

“My wolf is different,” I begin slowly, and he looks up, surprised. “She’s silent. There, but silent. I-I can’t shift. It’s just not the same as it is for others.”

I wait, anticipating the familiar look of disgust entering his features, but instead, he tops up his coffee and nods. “Ava had something similar, Callum’s mate. She actually did shift when her daughter was in danger, but I don’t think she does much.”

He shrugs as he says it, which only makes me more confused. “And Callum doesn’t mind?”

“Of course not. I mean, it would be nice, I guess, if they could go on pack runs together. But it’s not like Emily can go with Tristan, because she’s a witch.” He laughs as if it’s the most obvious thing of all.

I look down at my now-empty drink. “It’s a bit different on the mainland,” I say quietly, and an awkward silence falls between us.

Suddenly, his large hand covers mine, and the shock of the contact makes me look up, his eyes boring into mine. “I always thought Nolan was a bit of an ass.” His tone is so completely deadpan that it makes me laugh, and he grins, too. “I really like that sound, you have a beautiful laugh.”

His voice, the way he looks at me, makes my heart start to beat faster.

I wonder if I should look away, but I can’t seem to make myself.

It feels like he’s pulling me in, and I wonder if he’s about to kiss me.

I can feel my skin tingling with something electric and impossible, like there’s nothing else in the world except him.

Then a loud knock on the door makes us both jump. We spring apart, and the heat between us vanishes into the air. My face is on fire, and I don't know whether I'm more relieved or disappointed.

"Jace," Aiden mutters, standing up with a sigh. He strides over to the door, and I hear him greet his friend.

"You ready to head out?" Jace's voice booms through the house. "Think we can find anything in daylight?"

I remember Aiden saying he and his betas were going to drive out to the site of the fire last night to see if they could find anything that would explain how they're starting.

Jace gives me a wave. "I saw Sarah earlier at the pack hall. She and some others are setting up a food and supply drive for the houses lost in the fires. She mentioned coming by to see if you wanted to help."

I haven't seen Sarah since the night at the bar, but I know I can't hide forever. Aiden gives me an encouraging nod, and I smile. "Of course, that sounds good."

"Why don't we drop you off at the hall?" Aiden suggests, leaving me no option but to nod back.

Aiden drives me to the hall, and I watch the trees blur by, my mind spinning with the morning's revelations, with Aiden's touch, with the way he looked at me.

I'm still doubting his sincerity, wondering if his kindness is just pity, but I can't deny the tug I feel towards him.

It's overwhelming and terrifying, and I don't know how to handle it.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say, fumbling with the door handle.

He reaches over, his hand brushing mine. “Serena,” he begins, and I wait, my heart pounding. “I’ll come by later, okay?”

“Sure,” I reply, my voice catching as I stumble out of the truck. I stand there, feeling oddly exposed, as he drives away.

The hall is bustling with women carrying boxes and voices overlapping in a chorus of urgency. I spot Sarah among them, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she waves me over with a smile that loosens the knot of anxiety in my chest.

“There you are!” she exclaims, handing me a roll of tape. “I was going to stop by, but I’m so glad you’ve come.”

Her greeting feels sincere, and I feel my shoulders drop with relief.

A few other women wave, and thankfully, no one mentions what happened at the bar.

I begin helping to unpack some donations and set up some sorting boxes in case more come in.

To be honest, I’m glad for the physical work as a distraction from everything that happened this morning.

Whenever I get a moment to think, my thoughts inevitably return to Aiden and the way his hand felt on mine.

If just his hand touching mine feels that good, I can only imagine what it would feel like to actually kiss him.

“Where should I put these?” a voice calls from behind me, snapping me back to reality. I turn to see the barmaid from the other night that I suspected Aiden was flirting with, struggling with a large box. I hurry over to help her.

“Just over there,” I say, taking one side of the box. She smiles at me, and I notice a smudge of dirt on her cheek that makes her look human and real and not stunningly perfect as I remembered.

“Thanks,” she says, sounding genuinely grateful. “It’s good to see you again. I’m glad you came. Sorry if we got off on the wrong foot the other night, I meant nothing by it.”

I nod, feeling slightly awkward, but also a bit braver. “I’m glad I came, too. And don’t worry about it, you did nothing at all.”

She nods, and I still feel incredibly awkward, but glad to have cleared the air. She asks about my plant magic, and I tell her all I know, which isn’t much. But it’s nice to talk about my store again, even if it makes me realize how much I miss it.

We find a rhythm working together, and she starts chatting about the fires and how devastating they’ve been for the families who lost their homes. There’s no mention of Aiden, no hint of tension, and I begin to relax.

“We’re planning a pack barbecue for tomorrow night to raise money,” she says, wiping her brow. “Do you cook?”

“I can make a salad,” I joke, and she laughs.

“Great. We’ll need all hands on deck.”

The more we talk, the more I realize how much I’ve been worrying about things that

don't seem to matter to anyone but me.

I've been so scared of this pack, but they all seem quite nice.

Far nicer than most in Nolan's pack. I almost wish Hannah could see how different it is here.

I feel lighter as the afternoon passes, and before I know it, Sarah's calling out to everyone.

"Okay, everyone," she shouts, waving a hand in the air. "The bakery dropped off some cakes for us. Let's take a break, we've earned it."

There's a cheer, and people begin gathering around the table she's set up.

I'm helping to pass around some plates when I hear the door open and see Aiden walking in.

His eyes sweep the room with purpose, searching, until they lock onto mine.

The intensity makes my heart jolt, and I feel the world narrowing down to just us, like there's a spotlight on this moment.

His presence is magnetic, drawing me in with a force I can't resist, and the power of his stare sends a shockwave through me.

My breath catches in my throat, and I'm frozen where I stand, completely caught in the electricity of his gaze.

It's like everyone else around us vanishes, the sounds and voices disappearing into the background, leaving only the two of us in a suspended, unbreakable space.

I couldn't look away even if I wanted to.

The connection feels unreal, and I'm overwhelmed by its strength, by how right it feels to be the sole focus of his attention.

I have never experienced anything like this before, and the intensity almost frightens me.

I feel like I'm falling, consumed by an impossible pull between us.

I think I must be dreaming until a familiar voice breaks the spell.

"I knew you'd show up for the food!" Sarah walks toward her mate and throws her arms around him in a display of affection that makes my heart clench with an unknown sense of longing.

That's when I glance up and see Aiden is still staring at me, and it's as if he can read my mind. For once, I find myself not wanting to look away, either.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

The air is still sharp with the bite of early morning as I shift back and begin the walk from the tree line, across my yard, and onto the back steps. I open the hamper and pull on a pair of shorts from the clean pile I always leave on the porch.

Movement from inside catches my attention, and I look through the glass to see Serena walking around the kitchen, seemingly setting the table for breakfast. It's such a simple act, but with the early morning sunlight filtering through into the room, she looks almost angelic.

Instead of going in, I find myself leaning against the solid wood frame and watching her.

She moves to the stove, stirring something in a pan, and the sight of her barefoot, her hair loosely tied, lost in the quiet focus of what she's doing pulls at something deep inside me.

Her face is soft and open, without the walls that creep in sometimes, no matter how hard I try to keep things light between us.

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

It's such a tiny movement, but it makes my chest tighten.

My wolf urges me to go to her, wrap my arms around her, and whisper that she's not alone.

But I don't. I stay where I am, letting the moment stretch out, savoring the calm

before the day forces its way in.

Today isn't just about me and Serena. My brothers will arrive soon, bringing their packs and their friends, and the house will be full of people.

I'm already dreading the conversations with my brothers about Malik.

It's time they listen to me and take the fight back into the mountains to finish him off.

Looking back at Serena, I push aside thoughts about potential disagreements with Callum and Tristen and focus on her.

I know she's nervous about seeing Emily and Ava, having only met them briefly, and I curse myself for not realizing sooner how overwhelming this all must be for her.

A new life, a new family, and now this meeting.

Her powers. No wolf. The more I discover about Nolan's pack, the more I realize my initial thoughts about him were spot on.

I watch as she sets plates on the table, her movements efficient but not hurried.

The scent of bacon drifts through the open door, and I breathe it in as my stomach rumbles.

I take a final look at the scene in front of me before I push open the door and break the spell.

The fact that she's made breakfast for me touches something deep inside me.

The way she's thought about me makes me realize I want more of that.

I never pretended to be perfect, but the more I get to know Serena, the more I don't see why we couldn't be happy together.

She's wrong—I do want her. I'm still not sure I'd be faithful forever; I'm Ralph's son, after all.

But it doesn't mean we couldn't have fun. I want more of this.

I just wish she could see that.

“Hey,” I say, stepping into the kitchen. Serena glances up, startled, her eyes lingering on my bare chest. Her gaze flits away too quickly, and I feel a smile tug at my lips.

“Hi,” she replies, her voice a little too bright. A blush creeping from her cheeks to her ears as she focuses intently on adjusting the plates she's already set out.

I move closer, casually, and reach past her to grab a mug from the counter. “Smells good,” I say, letting my arm brush against hers. Her breath hitches, and she takes a step back, her face even redder.

“It's just eggs and bacon,” she says, her words rushed, her fingers nervously fiddling. “I saw you head out for a run, but I didn't know what you'd want.”

“Anything you make will be perfect.” I lean back against the counter, enjoying the show. I see her looking anywhere but at me, tucking her hair behind her ear again, her hands slightly trembling. She's completely innocent, and it makes me want her even more.

“I, um, I thought I'd set up the tables outside after breakfast,” she says, obviously trying to make conversation. “Sarah mentioned the bakery is going to bring some food over, and I thought you might want to set up the grill.”

I can see how nervous the thought of everyone coming here makes her, and I reach out to take her hand. She freezes at the contact, and so do I. It's like a thousand tiny sparks dance along my fingertips, causing my heart to race.

"Serena," I say, my voice low. "We'll figure this out together. Okay?"

She swallows, her eyes darting to mine, then away again. I'm sure she can feel how much I want her. She pulls her hand back, and I let it slip away, watching her as her mouth opens and closes.

"Okay," she finally whispers, but it sounds more like a question than an answer.

"Good," I say, pushing off the counter and starting to plate up our breakfast. "Now, eat. And then I'll get to that grill, okay?"

She nods, and we sit in a relatively comfortable silence. I demolish the breakfast long before her and then realize I'm still sitting there with only a pair of shorts on. The little glances she keeps giving my bare chest tell me she's noticed that, too.

"I should probably put a shirt on if everyone's coming over," I say, ducking my head to get a better look at her expression. "Unless you prefer I leave it off?"

I'm only joking, of course, but her fork clatters onto her plate and she laughs nervously. "I-I don't think that's a good idea."

I should tell her I'm only joking, but she's already on her feet and taking her plate to the sink. I cringe slightly, but the way she blushes really turns me on, and I can't help wanting more of it.

"Let me wash up," I say, walking toward her, but she spins around and takes my plate.

“No, you need to get ready,” she says breezily, and I know she’s trying to get rid of me.

I bite back a grin and nod. “Okay, I’ll cook and wash up next time.”

I want to say more, but the moment seems lost, and when I come back downstairs, showered and dressed, she’s nowhere to be seen.

I step out onto the back porch and spot her by the side of the house tending to some flower displays.

What was once a bare patch of land is now a stunning oasis of flowers and plants, the petals larger than any I’ve ever seen and all reaching for the sky in a burst of color.

The fact that she doesn’t recognize how impressive her magic is blows my mind.

Even with the early hour, it’s already warming up, the sun soaking into the wood of the porch.

I’m about to call out to Serena when I hear the crunch of tires on gravel.

I take a breath, letting the anticipation settle around me, and head toward the front of the house just as the first car pulls up.

Callum steps out, a grin spreading across his face.

Ava follows, Harper bouncing at her heels, and cradled in Ava’s arms is their baby son, who’s growing more each day.

Tristen and Emily arrive right behind them, and I watch as they maneuver their baby boy out of his car seat.

A flood of voices and laughter fills the air, and I can't help but lean into an unfamiliar tug in my chest as I watch my brothers with their mates and children.

It's not something I ever cared for myself, but with Serena here and mornings like today, something is beginning to shift within me. I'm not sure if it's welcome or not.

Harper breaks free and runs forward for me to lift her into a hug.

She's a great kid, and with her powers emerging stronger than ever, she reminds me a lot of my brothers and myself when we were young.

I put her down and greet Ava and Emily as they come forward, clearly looking over my shoulder for Serena.

"She's in the yard finishing up," I laugh. "Go on back if you want, I'll help the guys bring through all the stuff."

"Do you realize how much baby stuff we've brought for one afternoon?" Emily laughs as they head up the steps.

I glance over at Callum and Tristen, who are unloading their trucks with strollers and bags, and wince. I had no idea babies required so much stuff.

"Are you guys moving in?" I laugh, and Ava hits me on the shoulder playfully.

"You wait; this will be you one day," she chuckles, following Emily.

I scoff, but as the morning wears on, the grill is lit, and others arrive with their pups, and soon the house is filled with laughter.

Suddenly, the idea of my own pups feels less and less ridiculous.

Still far-fetched, though, given Serena shows no signs of letting me near her.

Standing by the grill, I'm half-listening to Callum explaining his new marinating recipe for the meat, but my attention is firmly on the other side of the garden.

Serena is with Ava and Emily, and she's actually smiling.

A proper smile. She's come a long way from the girl who could barely look at any of us on the day of the mating ceremony.

I watch as she tucks that same stray piece of hair behind her ear, but this time it's with laughter, not as a nervous gesture.

She was shy at first, standing a little apart when they first arrived, but then something clicked.

I watch now as Ava says something, and Serena's laughter rings out, surprising and bright.

I have to look away for a moment. The sight of her fitting in so easily does strange things to my insides.

My brothers' mates have always had a way of making people feel at home.

Serena is no exception, and I feel a rush of gratitude toward them.

I might not always agree with how my brothers do things, but they're family.

The kids are running back and forth, Harper leading the charge with her usual energy.

Serena kneels down to talk to her, and I can see Harper's animated gestures as she

chatters away.

Harper is showing Serena something, and from here it appears to be a tiny bunch of wildflowers.

Serena nods and then holds out her palm.

I suspect what's coming as others gather around.

Even Callum and Tristen turn to watch as the tiny bunch of flowers multiplies and blooms in Harper's hand, and she squeals with delight.

The blossoms twist and turn until they form little bracelets of flowers that break off.

Harper holds some in her other hand, which she hands to the other children.

"Hell of a party trick," Callum says with genuine surprise in his voice. "Not sure I can beat that in Harper's eyes."

Tristen laughs, "No way can a bit of fire or wind beat flowers like that when it comes to kids."

"Or our mates," Callum replies, indicating how Ava and Emily are dancing around in surprise at the display. Then he asks, "What else can she do?"

I shrug slightly. "She doesn't think it's all that impressive. I'm hoping she'll talk to Emily about it. I think there's more there."

Tristen nods. "I agree. I'll see if Emily talks to her later."

I watch them all for a moment longer, then hear Callum clear his throat. "And the

other thing?" he asks, his voice low, and I know he's talking about Malik.

I sigh. I knew this conversation was coming; I was the one who wanted to have it, but I was enjoying the afternoon.

"We can't let him keep pushing us. I know it's him," I say. "He's growing stronger, and we're sitting on our hands waiting for what?"

Callum shakes his head. "Aiden, it's not like that. We're still not one hundred percent sure it is Malik, and our packs have been through enough. I don't want to scare anyone."

I snort and look at Tristen, who shrugs. "Don't look at me, I'm all for taking the fight to him."

"See?" I say, "Tristen gets it."

"I just think we need to be smart," Callum replies. "We can't rush into this."

"We can't afford to keep doing nothing," I say. "Not with these fires."

"I know," Callum replies, his face grim. "I just don't want to lose anyone else."

I hear the pain in his voice, and I know he's thinking of the friends we've already lost. I soften a little. "Neither do I," I say. "But we can't let this go on."

After a brief silence, Callum nods, and Tristen slaps him on the back. "I tell you what," he says, "I think Malik thought we were easy pickings after Ralph died and divided us. That we were too young and stubborn to lead our packs right, but he was wrong. Hell, Ralph was wrong. We've got this."

We all nod, and the afternoon fades into early evening, having gone much better than I anticipated. Tristen's words keep ringing in my head about Ralph being wrong. As I find myself increasingly drawn to Serena, I wonder what else Ralph might have been wrong about.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

I know I agreed to this, but now that I'm actually walking out of the house and toward the main row of small stores that make up Main Street, I feel sick to my stomach.

Last night, I spent nearly an hour on the phone with Hannah talking about the store and ways to make it work, desperately trying to remind myself that I am a businesswoman.

I have built a successful business that supplies across the mainland. I can do this.

The owner of the local bakery wants to talk about flower displays for the upcoming pack fair next month.

Sarah and Cate arranged the meeting; all I have to do is turn up.

While I appreciated all of Hannah's motivational words about building something here, I just feel so out of place.

I wish more than anything I were back in my store.

Talking to Hannah made me feel more homesick than ever for it.

What I don't miss, though, is Nolan and his betas.

I always knew they didn't treat me well, and I worked so hard to build something in an attempt to make them accept me.

To make them want me. And in the end, despite everything, they were happy to hand me off without a backward glance.

I walk past the small park in the center of the square, its benches dotted with people chatting and sipping from paper cups.

I know they all belong here, in this pack, in this life.

Most of them nod or smile at me as I pass, and I nod back, unsure if they know me, if they've heard about the new woman, the new luna, who doesn't quite fit.

I hate that I'm worried about what they think of me. I hate that I care this much.

I must admit, the town is like a postcard, the kind you'd send to make someone jealous of your vacation.

I didn't expect the island would be this pretty after everything I'd heard.

Small stores with striped awnings line the street.

A barber shop with a proper old-fashioned pole, a diner with a gleaming jukebox visible through the window, a boutique with the mannequins beautifully dressed, and a tempting bookshop line the street.

It's charming, it's perfect, it's everything I'm not.

I should be grateful to be here after everything, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm an outsider, a guest who's going to overstay her welcome or just not fit in.

The bakery is on the corner, its sign hanging above the door, swinging slightly in the breeze.

I see Cate's vibrant hair first, bobbing as she talks animatedly to Sarah, who stands with her arms folded, a small smile on her face.

They look so settled, so right here, it makes me want to turn around and run in the opposite direction.

I should be grateful. Sarah, Cate, and some of the other women have gone out of their way to make me feel welcome, but the doubts linger—has Aiden put them up to it?

Are they just doing it to be polite? Do they pity me or know I can't shift?

Nolan always said it was obvious I couldn't shift because of my size and weight, the inference being that if I could shift and run like them, I wouldn't be so curvy. Maybe he's right.

I feel rooted to the spot as I war with myself over whether to go in or turn and run. There are a few people out on the street, but no one who would notice if I just turned around and went back to the house to hide among the flowers in the yard.

I take a deep breath, inhaling a sense of calm from the sweet smell of baking bread and sugar that spills out from the bakery. I let it fill my lungs until I'm almost dizzy. Just go in. Just get it over with. I take a step forward and then another, feeling like I'm trying to walk through syrup.

Cate spots me first, waving with both arms like she's trying to land a plane. "Serena. Over here!"

I wave back, my stomach churning. My steps feel clumsy and loud, and I'm sure everyone is watching me, watching the luna who doesn't belong. I see a few people glance my way, their expressions curious but not unfriendly. I try to focus on that and try to remember I'm not with Nolan's pack anymore.

Sarah grins as I reach them, her smile wide and genuine. “You made it. We were just saying that you might have gotten lost or something.”

“No, not lost,” I say, hoping my voice doesn’t sound as shaky as I feel. “Just, uh, taking in the sights.”

“Isn’t the town adorable?” Cate says as she pulls out a chair. “I haven’t visited the mainland much. What’s your town like?”

Sitting down, I laugh. “Bigger and less personal,” I reply honestly before pausing. “My store was by the water, though, and that was lovely.”

“You must really miss it. The store?” Sarah says kindly as she pushes a coffee toward me.

I nod, not wanting to say more, afraid that I’ll choke up if I do. What if they think I’m weak? Shifters are never weak. I take a sip of the coffee, its warmth spreading through me like courage in a cup.

“I’m excited you’re going to be working on the pack fair. It’s always so much fun,” Cate says, eyes sparkling. “And having your flowers there will make it even better.”

“That’s if we can find them under all the sugar and carbs,” Sarah teases. “Tammy puts the bakery’s stamp on everything. It’s basically a sugar-fest.”

“That’s exactly what the pack needs after the last couple of years, though,” Cate says. “Tammy’s really looking forward to meeting you today. I spoke to her when I got the coffee, and she’s going to pop over when she’s finished putting some orders together.”

“I’m sure it’ll be great,” I say, trying to sound enthusiastic, trying to keep the doubts

from bleeding into my voice. “I’m looking forward to it.”

The lie seems to work as the women look genuinely excited about the meeting and are eager to hear me explain about previous displays I’ve done for events and companies.

As I begin showing them pictures of some of my favorites, I start to enjoy talking about my business, and my body thrums with fresh ideas.

As we chat and I start to build a mood board on my tablet, Sarah waves to someone through the glass, and I notice her mate, Edward, crossing the street toward the bakery.

“Excuse me one moment,” Sarah grins, “I promised to get him some cakes for the garage.”

She heads over to the counter as Cate and I continue looking at some pictures on the internet, and I’m starting to feel genuinely more excited about the meeting as we talk.

With Sarah still at the counter, Cate excuses herself to use the bathroom, and I’m left to try to arrange my notes to show Tammy.

I take a small bite of cake Sarah bought for us to share, the sugar melting on my tongue. The bakery is warm and smells like cinnamon and butter. I close my eyes for a second, letting myself enjoy it.

“Did you see the new luna come in?” a voice cuts through the hum of the bakery.

The voice is so quiet I have to strain to listen, but I can just about hear above the low chatter in the cafe.

I open my eyes and glance toward the window, where a group of older shifters sit, sipping coffee and eating pastries.

I recognize one of them. He's the man who nodded to me when I walked past the park.

"Yeah, heard she can't shift," another replies, eyebrows raised. "How's that gonna work when we have pack runs?"

"Is that even true?" the first one leans back, arms crossed. "Bit weird to have a shifter who can't shift. We sure she's really one of us?"

I feel like I'm shrinking, like I'm disappearing into the chair. I want to stop listening, but I can't.

"She doesn't look much like a shifter," comes a third voice, rough and low. "I prefer my women to be slimmer. Taller. It just doesn't look right."

I put the cake down. I can't swallow past the lump in my throat. I feel sick, and the warmth I'd felt just moments ago turns to lead in my stomach.

"Well, Tristen's mate is a witch, so she can't shift either," one says, and the others murmur in agreement.

"True. True. But she's a witch," another says, "she's not supposed to shift."

"And she's powerful," the first one points out. "A luna should be powerful."

They all nod in agreement, and I feel hollow inside. I look down at my notes for the event and try to fight back tears. It's been so long since anything anyone said to me has brought me to tears; I won't let it happen now.

I feel a shadow fall across me, and Cate sits back down, eyes wide. “Wow,” she whispers. “Are you okay? They are completely out of line, Serena.”

Her voice isn’t loud, but probably loud enough for others to hear, and I cringe. I swallow hard, my mouth dry. I force a smile, my voice barely above a whisper. “Yeah. Fine. I’m used to it.”

“Serena, you don’t have to be used to it,” she says, voice firm and protective. “You belong here. They’re just ignorant.”

Sarah is making her way back, a box of pastries in her hands. She catches sight of us, and her face clouds with concern. “Did I miss something?” She sets the box down, looking between us.

“Just some pack elders who should know better,” Cate says before I can stop her. “Talking about Serena and how she can’t shift.”

“Oh god,” Sarah says, her eyes wide with sympathy as she and Cate exchange a brief look. “I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head, trying to brush it off, but my voice betrays me, a small tremor in it. “They’re right. I can’t shift. It’s not a secret, not really.”

Sarah puts her hand on my shoulder. “It doesn’t matter whether you can shift or not. Our pack welcomes everyone, and we have lots of different people with different gifts living here.”

The sincerity in her voice is almost too much, and I have to look away, blinking hard. I’m not going to cry. I won’t. I’m stronger than this.

“They’re just old-fashioned,” Cate says. “Stuck in their ways. Things are changing,

and they can't handle it."

"Promise you won't let it get to you," Sarah says, her expression earnest. "We're so happy you're here."

I nod, but my chest feels tight, and I can barely breathe.

I can't stand the kindness in their faces, the pity.

I'm about to say something, anything, to steer the conversation away from me when the door to the bakery swings open.

I see Aiden and Jace walk in, and Aiden's eyes find mine immediately.

His face shifts from surprise to concern as he obviously takes in our body language.

"Serena," he says, striding over to us, his presence a force of nature. Jace follows behind, more cautious, his expression unsure.

I want to disappear. I don't want him to see me like this, raw and exposed. I stand up too quickly, the chair scraping against the floor. "I-I think I'm going to go. We can reschedule with Tammy?"

"No, you shouldn't. Please stay," Cate says, her voice firm.

Aiden's hand brushes mine in an unexpectedly public gesture that nearly sends me reeling. "What happened?"

"It's nothing," I say, pulling away. "I'm fine. I just need some air."

He looks at me, his eyes searching. I notice his gaze turn to Sarah and Cate as they

look toward the group of older shifters by the window.

A muscle ticks in his jaw as the older men look increasingly uncomfortable. “Is there a problem here?” he asks, his voice quiet but steely.

One of the older men, the one who nodded at me, shifts in his seat. “No problem, Aiden.”

“Sure about that?” Aiden presses, his tone making it clear he won’t let it drop.

“We were just talking,” one of them says. “Didn’t mean any harm.”

“Well, you did,” Cate snaps, eyes blazing. “You should apologize.”

They exchange glances but don’t say anything. I can’t take it anymore. I can’t stand here with everyone looking at me. I turn sharply toward the door, head down, my vision blurring.

“Serena,” Aiden calls, but I’m already outside, the cool air hitting my face like a slap. I walk fast, then faster, past the square, past the people who watch me, the overweight short luna who will never belong anywhere.

I feel the tears threatening, hot and unwelcome, and I angrily wipe my eyes. I’m not going to cry. I’m not. But the weakness and shame crash over me like a wave, and I fear I will drown in it.

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I'm torn between the overpowering instinct to follow Serena and needing to know what the hell is going on.

I had only come in with Jace for a snack, and I was pleased to see her here with the women, but then I quickly realized it had all gone to hell.

My wolf paces restlessly, his concern for Serena only frustrating me more.

She's got to stop running away like this.

I spin around to face Sarah and Cate. "Will someone please enlighten me?"

Just as Sarah is about to open her mouth, one of the older shifters, Bren, comes over. "I fear this is our fault, Aiden," he says, looking genuinely remorseful. "We were just chatting...it is unusual for her not to be able to shift. I can see it's upset the girl."

"She's not just a girl, Bren," I snap, "She's your luna."

Bren dips his head, and I sigh. Then, raising my voice so everyone can hear, I add, "You will treat my luna with the respect she deserves." Looking around the bakery, I see heads nodding, and I glance back at Sarah and Cate. "Sara? Cate?"

"She was holding her own. She just got overwhelmed," Sarah says, smiling. "I don't think some people realize how difficult it is moving to a new pack."

She says the last part pointedly at Bren, who looks suitably sorry. I thank her and, ignoring everyone else, turn and head out of the bakery, my sole focus on Serena.

Jace doesn't follow, he knows better, and I don't bother even looking back as I follow her scent along Main Street toward the house.

I can see now that I was an idiot to think I'd accept a mate from Nolan's pack and she'd just move to the island and fit into my life, sleep in my bed, and not care who else I slept with.

I grimace as I think about how my father, Ralph, would have dealt with this situation.

Probably slapped her, told her to pull herself together, and then gone out and slept with one of his mistresses.

While I don't think I'm much different from Ralph in some respects, I sure as hell know how to treat people better than he did.

I never planned on being faithful, and yet that is exactly what I have been since she arrived—my walk slows as I realize I haven't even wanted to be with anyone else.

Sure, I've considered it, because that's my default, but I haven't actually wanted anyone.

Maybe it's because I do want her, and I keep thinking she'll let me in eventually. It will all be worth the chase. But I'm not even sure she realizes I'm chasing her. I flirt the same as I do with other women, but it has no effect. Sure, I can make her blush, but I want more.

I jog up the steps to the house. Her scent has permeated the whole building after weeks of her being here.

My wolf breathes it in her scent wafting through the wind, floral and fierce, and I follow it like a rope pulling me in.

The rooms are silent as I walk through the house, but then I see her, a small figure on the back steps with her back to me, knees tucked up under her chin.

She doesn't even look up when I approach.

I stop a few feet away and catch my breath, trying to sound calmer than I feel. "Serena."

She remains silent, her eyes fixed on some distant point, and waves of discontent rolling off her.

"I was standing up for you," I continue, frustration bleeding into my voice despite my best attempts to stay calm. "You didn't have to run off like that."

Still nothing. Just the soft sound of her breathing, even and measured, like she's counting each inhale, each exhale, to keep from exploding.

I step closer, my shadow stretching over her, and she finally raises her head. Her eyes are bright with unshed tears and overwhelming emotion.

"What?" I ask, throwing my hands up. "What did I do wrong?"

"You don't get it, do you?" Her voice is quiet, barely a whisper. "I'm not sad because they were mean to me, I'm sad because they're right."

I let out a breath and sat down next to her. "They're not."

"I can't shift, Aiden." She presses her palms to her eyes. "I'm supposed to be your luna, and I can't even do the one thing that defines us. I don't look like a shifter, I'm not strong or beautiful."

Her words hang in the air like a storm cloud, heavy and crackling. I'm not used to dealing with women's emotions, or even men's emotions. I feel completely adrift, but my wolf is demanding that I put this right.

"Emily's a witch, Ava can't really shift..." I begin, but she cuts me off.

"Emily is practically a witch high priestess who almost destroyed Malik single-handedly, and Ava can shift when it counts; she saved her daughter...and she's stunning," she says, seeming to have an answer for everything.

"You're stunning too, what's that got to do with anything?" I say, exasperated. She scoffs and goes to stand, but I grab her arm and hold her in place, growling, "No running away."

Suddenly, something in the air shifts between us, and I find myself staring at where my hand is making contact with her skin, the warmth under my touch spreading through my whole body.

"Y-you shouldn't make fun of me," she replies shakily.

I shake my head, "I'm not," I say, reaching out with my free hand to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear. She leans slightly into the touch, and her delicate breath dances across my hand, sending shockwaves straight to my cock. I don't want to remove my hand; I don't want to break the spell.

Her eyes flick up to mine, and I can see her warring with my words in her head. "You are beautiful, Serena," I tell her. "Your magic with the plants is powerful and beautiful. You're small for a shifter, but I like it. You make me want to protect you, your curves drive me crazy, I—"

She takes me by complete surprise when she suddenly bridges the space between us

and presses her lips to mine. My wolf is about to start celebrating when she pulls away, blushing furiously.

“Oh my goddess,” she mumbles, “I’m sorry, I can’t believe I just...I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t you dare say sorry,” I laugh, pulling her closer to me and looking down at her. “Tell me no, tell me to stop, and I will, but if not, I’m going to kiss you again. Okay?”

She looks at me, eyes wide and bewildered, and then she nods.

Her cheeks are flushed, and something in her expression finally clicks into place, like she’s accepting an answer she didn’t know she needed.

I don’t waste any more time. My mouth is on hers before she can second-guess herself or me.

My hands tangle in her hair, and the softness takes me by surprise.

It’s hard to believe someone can feel this good.

The longer I kiss her, the more I forget where I end and she begins.

She melts against me, the tension in her body seeming to dissolve, and is replaced by a hunger that almost matches my own.

My wolf is frantic, but I force myself to slow down, to savor this moment.

I ease her back onto the steps, hovering over her, my lips trailing from her mouth to her neck, feeling the pulse there, quick and insistent.

She shivers, her breath hitching, and her fingers dig into my arms, pulling me closer.

It's the closest I think I've ever felt to madness, wanting her like this, and when she moans my name, I swear I might lose my mind completely.

"Aiden," she gasps, and it sounds like a plea for something she doesn't understand.

"I've got you," I whisper, my hands sliding under her ass until I pull her against me, her legs wrapping around me as I carry her into the house.

My wolf doesn't care that I'm fumbling for the first time in my life, that my heart is pounding in a way that is entirely foreign to me.

It's like I've never been with a woman before, like I don't know how to do anything but want her.

I move through the house with her in my arms. Her hair is spilling around us, her body pressing against mine.

When I kick the bedroom door open, it hits the wall with a thud, shaking the whole house.

Her lips curl into a smile against my neck, and although I know I shouldn't be too rough with her, part of me thinks she likes it.

The thought drives me wild. I crash us down onto the bed, trying not to crush her, but I can feel her excitement, her eagerness. It matches my own.

I kiss her again, slower this time. Her hands are hesitant but tug at my shirt, and I pull back long enough to rip it off.

I don't miss the way her eyes go wide as she takes in my body and the redness that creeps across her cheeks.

I pull at the hem of her own top, sliding my fingers against the soft exposed skin, marveling at how her breathing has become quick and shallow.

"Are you sure?" I ask, my voice rough and hoarse.

Her hands fist the sheets, but she nods. "I want to...I want you." Her voice is so full of vulnerability, I feel it like a punch to the gut.

I pull her shirt over her head, my body tense and ready to explode.

I pause for a second, looking at her, bare and beautiful.

She's curvier than any woman I've been with, and it drives me absolutely wild in a way I didn't even expect.

I run my hands over her, savoring the feel of her soft skin and the way she shudders at my touch.

"Fuck, Serena," I breathe, "you have no idea how much I want this."

Her eyes meet mine, and I see a flicker of uncertainty.

"Don't," I tell her, my fingers tracing the edge of her bra.

"Don't doubt how much I want you." I unclasp it, sliding it off, and her large breasts spill free into my waiting hands, my cock growing painfully hard.

Her arms come up, almost hiding herself, but I'm already leaning down, kissing the

swell of her flesh and sucking her large nipple into my mouth, and she gasps, her body arching up to meet mine.

I work her jeans off, and she's trembling, her breath coming in short, desperate bursts.

She's wearing pink panties, and the sight of them nearly undoes me.

I strip them away and immediately dip my finger between her folds.

I'm so wound up, I almost miss how tight she is until I feel the resistance when I push deeper inside.

"Oh fuck," I manage, my brain catching up with the realization. "Serena, are you...?"

She looks away, blushing. "I didn't want to tell you," she says, her voice almost a whisper. "I thought you'd—"

"Stop?" I ask, incredulous. "Why the hell would I stop?" I press my finger deeper, feeling her gasp and shudder. I pull away, kissing a trail down her soft stomach, spreading her legs wide beneath me. "I want this, Serena. I want to be your first."

Her hands are in my hair as soon as my tongue flicks over her clit, her hips bucking wildly, and I have to grip her thighs to hold her in place.

She's wet, sweet, and more than anything I've ever had, and I groan against her, my mouth working her until she's panting, until her voice is breaking with small, breathless cries.

"Aiden!" She's trembling so hard I think she might break apart.

I slide two fingers inside her, curling them, feeling her tighten around me, and she cries out, her entire body clenching so hard, I know she's almost there.

Her whole body goes still for a moment, and then she's falling apart, shaking against my mouth, and I hold on tight, working her through it, letting her ride out wave after wave until she's limp, her breath ragged and broken.

It's the hottest thing I've ever witnessed, and I barely give her time to recover before I'm yanking off my jeans, my cock finally free and aching.

I press against her, letting her feel how desperate I am, how much I want her.

Her eyes are wide and glazed with pleasure, and I know she's ready when she pulls me closer, wrapping herself around me.

"Tell me to stop, Serena," I growl, positioning myself, the tip of me nudging at her entrance, feeling how wet and open she is. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

She shakes her head, and I see her bite her lip. "I don't want you to stop."

The words unleash something primal in me. I slide in slowly, feeling her stretch around me, impossibly tight and warm. She gasps, her nails digging into my back.

"Holy shit," I groan, forcing myself to go slow even though every instinct is screaming at me to take her hard. She's panting, writhing beneath me, and I can barely hold on. "You feel so fucking good."

I push deeper, and I feel something give. She moans, the sound caught between pleasure and pain, and I stop, the last shred of my self-control stretched thin. She's so tight, I can barely stand it, my body shaking with the effort not to lose myself.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice strangled.

She nods, and her hips shift, taking in more of me, and I almost explode. The movement sends me deeper, and I grit my teeth, trying to hold back.

“Don’t hold back,” she says, her voice breathy and urgent.

Her words set me on fire, and I pull almost all the way out and then thrust back in, hard. She cries out, and I do it again, and again, until I’m pounding into her, watching her face change from surprise to need, her body moving with mine, matching each hard thrust.

I’ve never felt anything like it, her nails raking down my back, her legs tight around me, her voice ringing in my ears, and I lose the last bit of control I have.

Everything is frantic, my hips slamming against hers, my body straining to hold on until she’s there with me.

Her eyes are wide, her mouth open in a silent scream, and I feel her shatter around me, her entire body pulsing and tightening with release.

I let myself go, my own climax hitting so hard I can’t breathe, can’t think. I’m vaguely aware of a crash, the sound of glass smashing, but I’m too lost in her to care.

Then I see it—magic, wild and alive. The vines that cover the back of the cabin burst through the window, the room exploding with flowers, and the smell of honeysuckle fills the air.

We both gasp, eyes wide in disbelief, and I have just enough time to register the shock and wonder on her face before her magic takes over completely.

It's everywhere. Vines and blossoms, along with the sweet, heady scent of flowers, wrap themselves around the headboard and cover the ceiling, a visual representation of everything that has just happened, of everything she is. It's beautiful but overwhelming.

I collapse on top of her, both of us breathing hard, and I can feel her trembling beneath me, not just from what we did, but from the power she just unleashed.

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I'm reluctant to open my eyes because the warmth of my dream is so inviting. So all-consuming. A dream or a memory? I'm not sure of anything but his strong hands on my body, the pleasure rising and peaking, the way his large body trembled with release.

I want it all again and again, but at the same time, I don't want to face the reality of what it means.

And when I do open my eyes, the reality is so much worse than I could have imagined.

In the cold light of day, I can really take in the damage done by the vines that crashed through the window.

Although the flowers are beautiful and still in full bloom, there are so many that the room feels suffocating, and the vines have caused such a mess.

And worst of all...the bed is empty and cold where Aiden should be.

I feel hollow inside as I lie here alone.

I touch the sheets where he should be, pressing my hand into them as if I could will him back, but they're icy.

He obviously slipped out hours ago. The room smells of sweet flowers and the earth, but there's a heaviness in the air that is undeniable.

It's the weight of uncertainty, of what happened last night and what it means—the fear it may mean nothing at all.

I wrap myself in the blanket and pull my knees to my chest, staring at the flowers.

They're so vivid, so alive. They mock me with their vibrancy, as if saying, look how we thrive while you wither.

I can't even stand to look at them anymore.

I get up and gather my discarded clothes, each movement sluggish and heavy, like I'm wading through a dream that's turned into a nightmare.

I glance around for any sign that he might come back, some note or message, but there's nothing.

He just left. I look back at the flowers, at the vines spiraling through the window, and I feel ashamed.

I couldn't control it. I couldn't control myself.

I leave it all behind and run back down the hall to my room, heading for the bathroom.

The tiles are cold against my feet as I step inside and close the door behind me.

I turn on the shower, letting the water heat up while I catch my reflection in the mirror for the first time.

My hair is wild, a tangled mess of curls, and my eyes look different.

Brighter, maybe. I touch my face, but it feels like a stranger's skin. I feel different all over.

The steam fills the small room, and I willingly step into it, letting it consume me.

The water is too hot and stings at first, but then it feels good, too good, and I have to brace myself against the wall.

I feel everything so intensely, every drop, every breath.

I try not to think about last night, about the way he touched me, the way I let myself come apart.

I try not to think about how much he obviously regrets being with me now.

I try not to let the shame envelop me completely.

The water finally runs cold, and my skin is pink and wrinkled when I step out, wrapping myself in a towel.

I dry off slowly, the heaviness still there, lingering in my bones like a bruise.

I dress, pulling on a comfortable pink sweater, and head downstairs.

The house is quiet, as if holding its breath.

I try to ignore the way the silence presses down on me as I head to the kitchen.

Maybe some food will help to fill the emptiness that has settled within me.

I open the fridge and stare at the contents, but nothing looks remotely appetizing. I

close it and lean against the counter, my hands gripping the edge until my knuckles turn white.

Then I hear the door open and close. Footsteps.

I brace myself, hoping it's him, and at the same time, fearing it.

Aiden appears, and my heart lurches. He's flushed, and at first, I think he's been running, but then I notice the tools in his hand, the bundle of wood under his arm.

He's going to fix the window. The one I broke with my magic.

He stops when he sees me, and for a moment, we just stand there, the awkwardness feeling like a living, breathing thing between us. "Do you need help?" I finally ask, my voice sounding small even to me.

He shakes his head and looks around the kitchen. "You should eat," he says finally, "You look a bit pale."

With that, he turns and just walks away, and I'm left standing in the kitchen feeling like the biggest idiot ever.

I knew he didn't want me, but why did I fall for it?

Now I feel even worse. I hear the sound of the vines being torn down upstairs, and I can't bear it any longer.

I head toward the back door and step out into the fresh air, breathing it in and trying to ignore the world around me.

Looking toward the trees, I feel pulled to the forest in a way I usually don't.

Shifters always talk about how much their wolves want to run and be free, but having no wolf, I've just never felt that pull...

until now. Maybe it's just the need to be far away from Aiden, the consequences of my magic, and our actions.

Whatever it is, I follow it through the tree line and onto the trails that crisscross the forest on the edge of town.

The forest is cool and quiet. I walk faster, the leaves crunching under my feet in a comforting rhythm.

The further I go, the lighter I feel, like I'm shedding the weight of everything that happened.

My pulse quickens with a heady rush of energy.

It tingles beneath my skin, and for the first time since I woke up this morning, I don't feel like I'm drowning.

For a little while, I almost forget how broken I feel by everything.

Suddenly, a thin stem curls upward, tickling my ankle, and a burst of daisies unfurls at my feet.

I laugh out loud, a sound that feels foreign but good, and keep moving.

The colors are dazzling, more vivid than anything I've ever created before.

I brush past a tree, and it blooms with clusters of wisteria, the perfume heavy and sweet.

It's as if the whole forest is coming alive in my wake, a riot of petals and leaves almost chasing me along the trail.

I run now, exhilarated, watching the world transform around me.

My magic feels so powerful, more so than I've ever felt it.

I'm not even trying, not even reaching for it, and yet the ground is now carpeted with flowers.

I spin, arms outstretched, and a whirlwind of blossoms swirls around me. It's beautiful and intoxicating.

Then, just as quickly as it started, it starts to feel like too much.

The vines grow faster, the flowers bloom brighter, wilder.

I stop, trying to catch my breath, and I realize I'm not in control.

The forest is pulsing with my energy, but it's not listening to me.

Just like last night, when I felt everything so intensely, and the vines crashed through Aiden's window.

I feel my emotions spinning out of control, and as I look around, I realize the forest is simply mirroring the turmoil I feel inside.

I stand still, willing myself to calm down, to breathe, to focus. I try to pull it back, to pull myself back. I close my eyes against the chaos, trying to quiet everything, to make it stop. I can do this. I have to do this.

I take a deep, shaking breath and try to remember what I did last night, what I felt before it all spiraled.

I focus on the warmth, the good feelings, the way his touch made me feel safe, wanted, even if just for a moment.

I focus on the way he made my body sing instead of scream—another breath.

I reach for that feeling again, the peace, the control, and I can feel the smallest shift.

The vines slow, the flowers still, the colors become less blinding. I keep my eyes closed, keep breathing, and slowly, everything starts to settle. I keep reaching, keep holding on, until the world around me is calm and quiet.

When I finally open my eyes, the forest is beautiful.

Soft and serene. The vines sway gently in the breeze, and the flowers are bright but not overwhelming.

The ground is a lush carpet of greens and purples and reds, and I can hardly believe it.

I did this. I actually did all this. I stare in wonder at the scene in front of me, and for the first time in a long time, I feel a flicker of pride again.

It reminds me of when my store started to really become successful—it quiets the voice in my head that says I'm not enough.

I move through the forest again, slower now, taking it all in.

It's beautiful, yes, but it's also more than that.

It's a reminder of everything I can be, of everything I've been afraid to be.

I'm not sure how long I've been out here, but the sun is higher in the sky, and a cool breeze picks up, rustling the leaves.

I'm suddenly aware of how deep in the forest I've come. How far I've wandered.

I stop and look around, trying to find the trail, but nothing looks familiar.

The trees and vines are so thick now that I can barely see the path anymore.

I turn in circles, panic starting to rise again.

The mountains loom above the treetops, and I realize I've gone much deeper than I intended.

I don't know which way to go. I don't know how to get back.

The wind whistles through the branches, a low, eerie sound that sends a shiver down my spine.

The air shifts, and although beautiful, the forest suddenly feels less inviting.

I have the strangest sense that I'm not alone, that I'm being watched.

I spin, searching for something, someone, but there's only the thick wall of trees and the unsettling silence.

I start to run, the panic making my movements seem more clumsy than usual. The bloom-laden branches whip at my face and arms, catching in my hair, snagging at my clothes. I don't know where I'm going, but I know I need to move. I need to get out

of here.

The wind picks up out of nowhere, and it almost sounds like it's laughing at me, a high-pitched whistle that echoes through the trees. I stop again, chest heaving, and the sense of being watched is overwhelming now. It creeps along my skin like a thousand tiny insects.

Something shifts in the shadows beyond the trail, and I whirl to face it, heart pounding so loud I can barely hear anything else.

There's a flash of movement, too quick for me to see clearly, but it's enough to send me running again.

I don't even try to control my magic this time.

The vines erupt around me, wild and frantic, as if they're trying to protect me, to hide me from whatever is out there.

I wish I could shift. If I weren't so useless, I'd shift, and my wolf would know what to do. I'd be strong, I could fight.

A voice cuts through the chaos, deep and unexpected. "Serena."

I stumble to a halt as Aiden and his patrol come crashing through the trees, the sudden sight of them stealing my breath.

They're all wide-eyed, staring at me, the flowers, and the chaos. I must look like a wild thing, hair tangled with leaves, eyes bright with fear. The betas exchange glances, mouths open in shock. Aiden's face is a mix of anger and something else, something raw and fierce.

“Serena,” he yells again, his voice cutting through the stillness. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

I can’t speak. I can’t even breathe. The relief of seeing them, of seeing him, is overwhelming, but it’s tangled with shame and confusion. I just stand there, frozen.

He strides toward me, and the other shifters hang back, unsure. They’re all looking at the flowers, at the way the forest seems to pulse around me.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?” Aiden grabs my arm, his grip tight but not painful. “Malik is out here, Serena. He could have—” His voice breaks off, and the fear in his tone is unmistakable.

“I-I...” I trail off, not knowing how to explain any of this.

His eyes soften slightly, but only slightly, and he reaches for me, pulling me closer. “Let’s just get you home, okay?”

I nod, determined not to let his betas see how wrecked I feel inside, despite how evident my turmoil is reflected in the forest around me. Something about the word ‘home’ settles me enough to let Aiden walk me back down one of the trails toward the town.

Home. I can pretend, at least.

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“And you’ve basically locked her in the house?” Callum asks, reiterating down the phone what I’ve just said.

“She’s not physically locked in,” I snap. “She just knows not to leave, and I’ve got someone watching the place when I have to go out.”

“Oh boy,” Tristen mocks with a low whistle. “Wait until Em hears about this, or Ava.”

I want to say, I don’t give a fuck. And truthfully, I don’t. But I do love my brother’s mates, and more importantly, so do they, and if I said that, all hell would break loose on this call.

“It’s for her own good, you just don’t get it,” I grind out.

“Pissing off your mate just to try and protect them?” Tristen laughs, “Oh, I get it alright, I just know it doesn’t end well.”

“Yeah, well,” Callum says, “we’re just saying, you might want to try a different approach, Aiden. Give her some space.”

“She’s got space,” I insist, my wolf beginning to seethe. “She’s got the whole damn house.”

Callum sighs, and I can picture him pinching the bridge of his nose, sharing a look with Tristen like they always do when talking down to me. “How’s the search going?” he asks, seemingly trying to change the subject. “You want us to come help?”

We can get a team up there, search the whole mountain.”

“I’ve got it covered. Don’t you think I’ve already searched my own damn mountain?”
My voice comes out sharper than I intend, but I don’t care.

“We’re just offering—” Tristen starts.

“And I’m saying, I can handle it. You concentrate on your own borders; Malik has struck your sides, too,” I remind them pointedly.

It’s silent on the line, the kind of silence that makes my skin itch, makes me feel like I’m fourteen again, tagging along, trying to prove I belong, which is ridiculous considering I’m the alpha of my own pack now.

“All right,” Tristen says finally, a note of resignation in his tone that only pisses me off even more. “But Em would really like to come visit. Talk to Serena about her magic. Could be helpful.”

I almost say no, just because I hate the way they’re ganging up on me, but if Serena’s magic is as confusing as it seems, maybe Em could help.

“Fine,” I say. “Send her.”

“Great,” Callum says, and I know he’s smiling, that placating smile that makes me want to throw my phone out the window, even when he’s not here to see my reaction.

“Talk soon,” Tristen adds, and I hang up before I lose my mind.

My wolf paces beneath my skin, a low growl simmering, clawing up my throat.

They never think I can handle anything. The mountain, the pack, Serena.

Always with the advice, the suggestions, the patronizing sighs.

My wolf is furious, but beneath that, curled like a fist, is the feeling that no matter what I do, it's not enough.

I breathe, trying to let the anger out with each exhale, but it sits heavy, like a stone.

My brothers think they know everything and think they can tell me how to handle my own mate and my own pack. Nothing I do is ever good enough for them. It's always been like this, ever since we were kids, ever since Dad ran the pack.

“Why can't you be more like your brothers?

” Ralph used to say, and no matter how hard I worked, how much I tried, the expectation always hung like a noose.

When he died, and the packs were split, Ralph made his final judgment, and it was the same story.

Callum and Tristen got the vital ports and trade, and I got the mountains.

The isolation. He clearly didn't trust me with anything more important than the forests.

And maybe, he was right. I can't even find Malik or keep Serena safe without them breathing down my neck, offering to send in their teams, their mates.

Anything, it seems, to stop me inevitably fucking up.

I shove the phone in my pocket and storm out of the office, ignoring the curious glances from a few pack members I pass on the way.

I don't owe them an explanation if they heard my raised voice on the call, and they know better than to ask for one.

A couple of older wolves are talking by the main doors, but they step aside as soon as they see the look on my face.

I'm grateful that I'm still in my gym gear when I hit the street, because I'm ready to explode out of my skin.

The run is easy from here. The town gives way to forest right on the edge of the square, and I take the trail that follows the stream that runs straight through town, letting the scent of pine and wet earth fill my lungs.

My wolf is restless, a raw energy pulsing through me, and I push my legs harder, feeling my heart pound in time with my feet.

I could shift and let my wolf run free, it would be easier.

But for some reason, I want to feel the burn in my human form, the extra effort and grueling sweat of pushing through.

The trail winds down toward the valley, and the noise of the stream gets louder, rushing over rocks, drowning out everything else.

I think of Serena, of the way she looked at me that night I took her virginity, her eyes wide and wanting.

I was gentle with her, almost too gentle, even though my wolf was demanding I take her hard and fast. She was so tight around me, so hot and soft, and every inch of me had to fight not just my instincts but my own fears.

If I let myself go, if I gave in to what my wolf wanted, I might lose my mind.

I might lose her. I never wanted anyone like that.

Even now, I want her more than I can stand.

The thought of losing her, the thought of her getting hurt, makes me crazy.

She's barely even mine, and I'm acting insane, my wolf driving me more than ever.

Making me do things like keep her in the house, act like an asshole to my brothers, and run out here like a man possessed.

To punish myself? For what? Being right? Looking after her?

The trail gets steeper, and I push myself harder, feeling the heat rise through my muscles.

I wanted to trust her, to let her have space, but the memory of finding her in out the forest, the feeling of something dark and vicious watching us, tightens like a noose around my neck.

I know it was Malik. We all felt the evil in the air, like poison.

What was he waiting for? Why didn't he attack?

Even with Serena's beautiful wildflowers blooming all around us, the sense of danger was all-consuming, and for once, I was actually terrified. Like I had something tangible to lose.

I can't let her out and risk her going back out to the forest, not until I know for sure

she's safe. Not until I know for sure I can protect her. Even if she hates me for it.

The stream is a roar beside me now, a white noise that drowns out everything but the pounding in my head, the fury in my chest, the fury in my veins, the need to prove myself.

To everyone. I'm the alpha, and I'm not going to let them undermine me.

I'm not going to let them tell me how to run my pack, my life.

I'm not going to let them be right.

I stop by the water, crouching low to let it run over my hands.

It's cold, biting, exactly what I need. I splash my face, shocking the heat from my skin, and drink until my throat is numb.

The water's pure here, untouched and wild, the cleanest on the island.

Maybe even the world. I begrudge the way Ralph chose my territory, but I do love these mountains.

I love their fierceness, their solitude.

I look up at the sheer cliffs, imagining Malik gone for good, wiped from my mountains, his threat a distant memory.

Then Serena would be free to settle in here more and see the beauty of this pack, the way I do.

I pull my phone out to check for messages.

Nothing. She's ignored both of the texts I sent her.

The pit of anxiety in my stomach only grows, and I shove the phone back in my pocket, trying to breathe. Trying to think.

I'm not wrong, I tell myself. I'm not. I just have to hold out until Malik makes his next move. Until I can stop him. Then she'll see. My brothers will see. Then everyone will see.

I let the stream rush over my fingers, icy and insistent. My brothers might have the ports and the people, but they don't have this. And I'll be damned if Malik will take any of it from me.

A voice whispers in my head, and it's not my wolf. It feels more like my damned conscience asking, what about Serena?

Do I have Serena? I have her in theory—our packs made a deal—but do I even want to keep her? Wasn't life simpler before I started wanting her like this?

I shake my head, splashing water on my face one last time. I'm not going to do this to myself. Not tonight. I shove my phone back in my pocket and start running again, this time toward the gym. My wolf is still restless, but I know what I need now. I know what will take the edge off.

The thought pops into my head and I make the decision fast, firing off a text to Jace as soon as I get back to the gym, my fingers still damp, leaving spots on the screen.

Meet me at the bar? I type, and his response is as fast as always—a thumbs up on the screen. I smile. When has Jace ever let me down when I've needed to get out of my own head?

I shower and change, letting the heat of the water wash the last of the run from my burning muscles.

I should eat, but I don't bother, my mind fixed on getting to the bar and being as distracted as possible.

If Serena doesn't want to talk to me, if she's going to ignore me, then screw it.

I'll go out drinking and have fun instead.

I pull on a clean shirt and jeans, and although it takes me longer than I thought to get ready, I already feel lighter as I walk toward the bar, the promise of a night out with Jace soothing my frustration.

My beta's already there, leaning against the bar like he owns the place, two drinks in front of him and a third in his hand.

He's holding court with a small group of young witches, all of them pretty, but I recognize one of them in particular, and she clearly recognizes me, her eyes widening as I approach.

"Aiden," she says, and there's a hint of challenge in her voice, the same challenge she had the night I took her back to my place a few months ago.

"Cora," I reply, nodding, and she smiles, slow and teasing. Her hair is the color of fire, and the way she looks at me makes me think she'd like to burn me all over again.

Jace shoots me a grin, a knowing look in his eyes. "Glad you made it," he says, handing me a drink. "Thought maybe your mate had you on a short leash."

I take the drink, ignoring the twist in my gut as I feel a strange mix of frustration and

guilt at the thought of Serena. “Not tonight,” I say, and Cora laughs, a high, musical sound that blends with the hum of the bar.

The other witches giggle and whisper to each other, and Jace winks at them, his attention dividing easily between the three.

Cora slides closer, a warmth against my side.

“I’ve got just the thing to help you unwind,” she says, her lips brushing my ear like a whisper of flame.

“They have a new brew that the coven has been working on. You’ll love it. ”

I drink the liquid, sweet and potent, and it hits my veins like wildfire. “Strong stuff,” I say, and she laughs again, leaning into me, her presence both inviting and dangerous. My wolf stirs, interested.

“Plenty more where that came from,” she promises, and I down another, feeling the edges of the world soften, the weight of my anger and doubt lifting.

Another hour or two passes, and Jace walks around the bar and claps me on the back. “See? This is what you needed, man.”

“Yeah,” I say, and it feels almost true.

The witches finish dancing and saunter toward us, laughing conspiratorially. I let Cora refill my glass again, watching as her fingers linger on mine. “You should come back to mine,” she says, her eyes dark and knowing. “I’ll show you the full collection.”

I hesitate, the word yes resting on my tongue, but I drain my drink instead. “You’re

trouble,” I tell her, and her smile is wicked.

“Only if you want me to be.”

This is it, the moment I could grasp and really have some fun. But instead of feeling excited about the potential night ahead, I feel empty.

“Maybe another time,” I say, and it feels like a lie, even as the words leave my mouth.

Cora’s face shifts, surprise flickering over her eyes. “Really?” she asks, and I know she’s used to getting exactly what she wants.

“Really,” I say, and even through the haze of the brew and the noise of the bar, I can feel the sharp edge of certainty cutting through me. “But thanks for the drinks.”

She laughs like it doesn’t matter, but there’s a hint of irritation in the set of her shoulders. “Suit yourself,” she says, and turns away, her hair a blaze of fire.

Jace raises an eyebrow, watching me like I’m insane. “You sure, man? Leaving me with all these beautiful witches?”

“Yeah, I think you’ll cope,” I say, knowingly, and he laughs. “I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

I step outside, the cold air hitting me with clarity, and I walk away from the bar before I change my mind.

I cross the square, feeling the weight of what I’m doing and not doing, and the ghost of Cora’s heat still on my skin pisses me off more and more.

The house is silent when I get there, and I stand in the dark hallway, listening, but there's nothing.

No sound. No movement. No Serena. She's not waiting up for me. She's not calling. She's not texting.

I head upstairs, my feet heavy, the familiar guilt pushing its way back in as the brew wears off. I'm barely through the door of my room before I'm pulling my shirt over my head, my jeans following. I don't bother with the lights. I don't want to get into my empty bed. I just want her.

I take a breath and turn toward her room, the floor cold under my feet. Maybe she'll tell me to go to hell. Perhaps she won't even let me in. I turn the handle, and it's unlocked. It's dark, and she's in bed, her form barely visible beneath the covers, but I can hear her breathing, soft and steady.

She shifts slightly as I slip into bed beside her, pulling her warm, soft frame against my hard, cold body.

She tenses slightly, and I know she's awake.

Moments pass, and she says nothing, not rejecting me, but not exactly welcoming me, either.

Eventually, she softens slightly, and that's how we remain all night, wrapped together in uncertainty.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

Aiden's stare prickles the back of my neck, and I find it increasingly difficult to concentrate. Marian follows my gaze toward the window, her lips curling into a wry smile.

“I think he's trying to make sure I don't break you,” she says, her eyes glittering with amusement. Emily snorts, flicking a loose tendril of hair from her eyes, and I can't help but grin. Aiden's shadow tenses in the window, and I must admit it is amusing how intimidated he is by Marian.

Who wouldn't be, though? The old witch arrived with Emily early this morning, breezing through the house as if levitating, her long white-blond hair blazing around her. It didn't take long to realize that Aiden would rather face a hundred Maliks than one Marian, and he retreated to his office.

I think I quite like her.

Marian turns back to me, her expression softening ever so slightly.

“So, Serena, tell me again what happens when you're working with the flowers?”

Tell me exactly.” Her voice is surprisingly gentle, unwinding the tight coil of anxiety I've been carrying.

I look past her to the garden, where riotous blooms swell and sway, and try to explain.

“Sometimes it feels like...like I breathe with them. I know it sounds stupid, but it's

like they grow into me, and I grow into them.

” I pause, searching for the right words.

“But it’s more intense now. Uncontrolled.

” The last word hangs heavy in the air, admitting more than I’d meant to. Emily touches my arm, a warm anchor.

“Maybe it’s just grown faster than you expected,” she suggests. Her empathy is tangible, soothing. “Like a snowball effect. Once it starts...”

Marian nods thoughtfully. “And you’ve never felt anything similar to this level of power before? No hint of this as a child?”

I shake my head. “Nothing like this. I was just good with plants, you know. It was always magical, but it was gentle. People just thought I had a green thumb.”

“Some green thumb,” Emily says, gesturing to the garden. Her eyes dance with a mix of envy and admiration. “I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve been around a while.”

“But I don’t even know what it is,” I confess, the frustration creeping back in. “And I don’t know what it means for...if it means anything at all. I just need to be able to control it. I think.” I glance up at the window, but Aiden’s gone.

“Can I see it again?” Marian asks. She’s like a curious crow, her attention sharp and consuming despite her soothing tone.

I close my eyes, trying to ignore the nervous flutter in my stomach, and reach toward the small potted plant in front of me, my fingers dancing lightly over the tiny, wilted

leaves.

At first, it feels like nothing, just the familiar hum of connection beginning to thrum, and I'm sure the plant will bloom, but then something new and unspoken seems to amplify it, and I feel the energy swell, rushing toward me like a tidal wave.

I pull back, not wanting it to get out of hand, and when I open my eyes, I swear I see a look of triumph spark in Marian's eyes.

"Remarkable," she says, grinning widely.

"I've wondered if she could be part witch, but it doesn't feel clear," Emily says, her voice tinged with excitement.

Marian's eyes narrow, sizing me up. "It's possible, though I doubt either of your parents were witches," she muses, more to herself than to me. "Feels older. More latent than obvious."

My heart stutters, a mix of hope and disbelief. "But I do have a wolf? I can't shift, but my parents were shifters, but my mother had no wolf, but my father did, so I must have one," I say, almost defensively.

Marian nods, not missing a beat. "You do. But the magic is stronger. Your mother's side then...but not a witch."

Stronger. The word echoes, full of promise and hope, but equally a strange sort of dread.

I think of Aiden, of how important it is for a shifter to fit into their pack.

How much I've always wanted that. "Could I have my wolf instead?" I blurt out, my

voice betraying my longing.

“Couldn’t this be...I don’t know, suppressed? ”

Emily frowns as if the thought is foreign to her. However, Marian just laughs. It’s a strangely warm sound, but a cackle at the same time.

“Why would you want to?” she asks, her eyes crinkling with amusement. “Your gifts are rare. Appreciate them. Our world is full of wolves. Too many, really. Wouldn’t you say, Emily dear?”

Marian giggles slightly, and I catch Emily rolling her eyes, knowing she’s mates with Tristen. I assume Marian likes to push her buttons, judging by the dynamic between them. I lower my gaze, unsure how to respond. The world is full of wolves.

Emily squeezes my hand reassuringly. “I think what Marian is trying to say,” she says kindly, “is that your gift is clearly very special and you should be proud of it.”

“Special,” Marian agrees, her eyes still watching me, too perceptive. “Not every day we see something like this. Truly.”

I nod, still uncertain. I know they mean well, but they don’t understand. They don’t know how it feels to want something so desperately, and to have it turn out to be something else entirely. Something that you never even imagined.

“Thank you,” I say, not sure if I mean it, not sure if I don’t.

“Serena,” Emily says, her voice gentle, like she knows exactly what I’m thinking. “It’s a lot to take in. I know. But...”

Marian stretches, a cat-like motion, and I can see the edge of exhaustion in the lines

of her wise but somehow still youthful face.

“I think we need some more coffee,” I say, not wanting Emily to continue when I can feel the emotion threatening to overwhelm me. “Shall I put a fresh pot on?”

Emily nods, and I stand, brushing imaginary dirt from my skirt. “Let’s have a break. I’ll be right back.”

I can feel them watching me as I walk back into the house. I fight the urge to keep on going, to escape my own thoughts and the heaviness of the day. But I know I’ll stay; I don’t want to be rude to Emily, and I definitely don’t want to be rude to Marian. I don’t want to seem ungrateful.

I just need a moment to breathe. I fill the kettle, hearing the faint murmur of their voices through the window, and I stand at the counter, letting the sound of the coffee pot settle me.

The suffocating quiet of the large house presses in around me, and I think about what Marian said.

Stronger. Special. It should feel like a gift, but instead, it feels like a burden I didn’t ask for.

I liked working with the flowers, creating displays, and making people happy with my pretty blooms. It did feel like a gift then, or at least a consolation for not having a wolf.

But this—this is different. It’s wild, uncontrollable.

And to think that perhaps my wolf would be present if it weren’t for the magic just feels cruel.

I should be able to choose, shouldn't I?

All my life, I would have given anything to be like the other shifters.

If I didn't have my magic, would my wolf make me more accepted?

I'd still look like this, short and curvy.

I'd still be me, wouldn't I?

I can't help but think of the way Aiden slipped into my bed last night, his touch gentle, his breath warm against my neck.

I'd expected him to stay out longer, maybe all night, after the way we left things between us.

I pushed him away because I was angry, but most of all because I felt lost and afraid.

Instead, he came home, the smell of alcohol on his breath, and slipped into my room like he couldn't stay away.

I didn't know what he wanted, didn't know if he'd try to sleep with me or want to talk about it, but instead he took me by surprise and just held me.

The thought of it now is enough to make my pulse quicken and make the hope I've tried so hard to suppress come rushing back to the surface.

It felt real. It felt more dangerous than the night he took my virginity, more dangerous because it felt like more than just sex.

More dangerous because I think I want it too much.

The pot clicks off, and I pour three mugs, the warmth soothing my hands. As I'm about to head back out, the door opens, and Aiden is there, filling the space, his sudden presence making my heart jump.

"Hey," he says, his voice more tentative than usual. He looks at me, searching for something in my face. "How's it going out there?"

"Overwhelming," I admit, before I can stop myself. I tighten my grip on the mugs, steadying my voice. "Marian's intense. You really don't want to join us?"

He laughs, a dark sound. "I'm not afraid of her," he says, but there's a flicker of something in his eyes, a shadow, and I can't help but smile. "Okay, maybe a little," he concedes. "But only because she's unpredictable."

"And terrifying?" I prompt, and he smirks.

"Fine," he laughs, "and terrifying."

There's a pause, and I can tell he wants to say something. His eyes catch mine, and I feel the heat rise in my cheeks. "You're not mad about last night?" he finally asks, and there's an edge to his voice, a vulnerability I've never seen before.

"No," I say, too quickly, and then I hesitate. "I mean, I didn't mind."

His expression softens, a slow smile that sends my heart racing. "Okay," he says, "I'm glad."

I nod, feeling the precarious balance between us. "Me too," I admit, and suddenly the air feels charged, full of things neither of us knows how to say. I shift the mugs in my hands, breaking the tension. "I should get these out to them."

He nods, stepping back, and I can feel the reluctance in his movement. "I'll be in my office," he says, turning to walk away.

"Okay," I say, the word feeling too small for the moment, and he turns, leaving me with my heart pounding in my chest. I watch him go, the space he leaves behind almost tangible.

I steady myself, taking a breath, and walk back to the garden.

Emily and Marian look up as I approach, questions written all over their faces.

"Refill," I announce casually, setting the mugs down.

Emily smirks. "And how's the big bad alpha?"

"Terrified," I say, and Marian cackles in delight.

"Smart wolf," she says, sipping her coffee.

Emily nudges my knee with hers. "And how are you doing with him?" Her voice is soft, but there's a knowing edge.

I hesitate, wrapping my hands around my mug, feeling the warmth seep into my skin. "I don't know," I admit, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "I don't know if I can be what he wants. What any of them want. I'm not exactly a typical shifter."

Emily frowns, a look of concern crossing her face. "What do you mean?"

I swallow, the words catching in my throat. "I mean, look at me," I say, gesturing to myself. "I'm not thin or tall or...a wolf." I try to laugh it off, but even I can hear the

pain in my voice. I swallow it down with more coffee, but it tastes bitter.

Emily sighs, “You’ve got it all wrong,” she says. “Aiden can’t take his eyes off you. You’re exactly what he wants. And more importantly, what he needs.”

I feel my face flush, thinking of the way he looked at me in the kitchen, the way he slipped into my bed last night. “I don’t know,” I say again, unsure if I believe her, unsure if I dare to.

“Trust me,” Emily insists, “he wouldn’t be acting so crazy if he didn’t want you. You should have seen Tristen before we were properly together. He was a nightmare.”

Marian cackles again. “Was he, now?”

Emily rolls her eyes at her fellow witch.

“You know what I mean,” she says, looking back at me, seriousness creeping into her eyes.

“I’m not a shifter at all, and we’re fine.

You don’t need to fit into a picture-perfect vision of what your old pack thought you should be.

You are free to be yourself. You’re beautiful, and probably more powerful than any of them. ”

I study her for a moment, trying to work out whether she’s just teasing me, but I see nothing but honesty reflected back.

Suddenly, I get a tingle of awareness creeping across my neck, accompanied by a

gentle feeling of warmth from behind me.

I turn slightly, the sun catching my eye as I look up at the house and see Aiden's silhouette in his office window, the sun shifts, and my gaze finds his.

I feel the color rise in my cheeks, and the thought of him watching me sends a thrill of something dangerously close to happiness through my chest.

"See what I mean?" Emily says, a laugh in her voice.

I nod, holding onto her words like a lifeline, hoping they're true. Hoping I can believe her.

"Come on," Marian says, setting her mug down. "Let's have another look at this magic. Let's see what you can do."

I take a breath, letting it fill my lungs and calm my mind.

They watch me as I reach toward the plant again, the same nervous twist in my stomach, but this time, I don't pull back.

I close my eyes and let the energy rush over me, into me, the warmth and the light, and I feel it bloom, wild and beautiful, and this time, I don't stop it.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

Callum's southern beach is a riot of color and movement, and for a second, I think about turning around and leaving.

Callum's pack has set up a hell of a training area, the sand divided into sections, flags marking spaces for combat drills, and the air echoes with the sound of shouting and laughter.

I can see some of Tristen's pack sparring with Callum's, their bodies a blur of speed and strength.

Some of the younger wolves are already paired off, rolling in the sand, and I feel a sharp pang of nostalgia for the days when I didn't have to organize these things myself.

The good old days—before the pressure of being an alpha and the threat of Malik.

Jace elbows me, a mock grin plastered across his face. "Looks like they're having fun without us."

"Not for long," I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

We head down the beach, a few of my other betas trailing behind, and I catch sight of Callum near the water's edge, talking to a group of his pack members, clearly organizing the day.

Being the oldest, he just loves to take charge of any situation.

He looks up, sees me, and raises a hand. "Aiden!" he calls, his voice easygoing, like nothing's changed.

I nod, raising a hand in return, but there's an awkwardness to the motion, a hesitance I can't quite shake.

I see Tristen a little further down the beach, and he looks up at the same time, seemingly catching Callum's eye as they nod at each other.

I groan. The last thing I need is either of my big brothers going in on me today. I'm in no mood for their bullshit.

Jace claps me on the shoulder, and I think he can sense my reluctance. "Want me to run interference?" he asks, his voice suddenly more sincere, and I remember he's known me long enough to know the score.

"Nah," I say, but the thought is tempting. "Let's just get this over with."

Jace heads toward a group of Callum's betas, and I make my way to the water's edge, where my brothers are waiting together, a united front that's hard to miss.

The sand is warm underfoot, and I can smell the salt and sweat in the air, the mix of it reminding me how different things are down here, away from my mountains.

"Aiden," Callum says again, grinning like I haven't spent the last week trying to ignore him. "You made it."

"Yeah," I say. "Figured I'd better show up before you think I can't handle a simple training day."

Tristen laughs, a short burst of sound. "We never said that, little brother."

“Sure,” I reply, letting the sarcasm bleed through.

Callum scratches his head, a gesture that’s almost sheepish. “Look, I know we’ve been on your case lately,” he says. “We’re just worried about you. You’ve had a lot on your plate.”

“Yeah,” Tristen adds, his expression more serious. “We’re sorry if it seemed like we were trying to run your pack or take over the search for Malik on your land. We know you can handle it.”

I look at them, trying to gauge their sincerity, trying to swallow the irritation that’s been clawing at me since I got here. “All right,” I say, the words like pebbles in my mouth. “Apology accepted.”

Callum’s grin is relieved, and Tristen claps me on the shoulder. “We just want to help, Aiden. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” I shift my weight, uncomfortable with the sudden change in tone. “Thanks.”

Their sincerity makes me more uncomfortable than their advice ever did. I’m not used to them backing down like this. “How’s it all going?” I ask, trying to change the subject and escape the sudden closeness. “Looks like you’ve got quite the setup sorted here.”

“Yeah,” Callum says, glancing over the beach. “We’ve got combat drills, endurance runs, and some strategy sessions in the afternoon. Trying to keep the focus, you know?”

“Good luck with that,” I say, watching as a couple of the younger shifters break away and start sprinting toward the water.

Tristen smirks. "I'll keep an eye on them. Make sure they don't get too distracted."

I nod, unsure what else to say, unsure how to bridge the gap that seems to have grown between us. "And Serena?" Callum asks, his tone more careful. "How's that going?"

"Fine," I say quickly, but I can tell they're not buying it. I can tell they've already sensed the doubt that literally clings to me whenever I consider the situation with Serena.

"Just fine?" Tristen presses, and there's a knowing edge to his voice after Emily has been at the house.

I shrug, the gesture more defensive than I intend. "She's still getting used to the pack. And adjusting to everything."

"You're still getting used to it, too," Callum says, his voice low enough that the others don't hear. "We get it."

I want to snap, to tell them they don't get it, but I know they do. I know they've been there, and that's the most annoying thing of all. "I'm figuring it out," I say, and it's the closest thing to an honest admission I've made in weeks.

Callum nods, accepting it for what it is. "If you need anything," he starts, but I cut him off.

"I'll let you know," I say, and there's a hint of a smile on my lips.

Tristen shakes his head, a grin on his face. "Stubborn as ever," he says.

"Just like you," I reply, and watch as his grin widens.

Callum looks between us, and I can see him trying to decide if he should push further or leave it alone. “We’re glad you’re here,” he says, finally. “It’s important.”

And just like that, I feel the shift back to today’s real purpose.

With all that happened with Malik, training the younger betas fell by the wayside.

Now, even with the threat of his return lingering with the recent fires, it feels like the right time to begin training the younger shifters again.

Nothing worse than a younger shifter who’s untrained but whose wolf is driven to combat.

If anyone should know that, it’s my brothers and me.

Our wolves have always required purpose and direction to function effectively.

Looking out over the beach at the young shifters, I suspect these young men and women are no different.

“Then let’s get started,” I say, and we walk back up the beach together. Although they don’t say any more about our recent disagreements, their presence continues to feel like an itch I can’t quite reach as the day wears on.

Callum’s pack is already forming groups, and I notice Jace organizing some of my younger wolves, his voice clear and loud above the din. I join him, and we begin directing the drills, the air buzzing with focus and energy—a welcome reprieve from thinking about everything else.

The sun climbs higher, and the beach becomes a blur of movement, the packs merging into a sea of young shifters pushing their limits.

I throw myself into it, shouting commands, demonstrating moves, letting the raw physicality drown out everything else.

The sand becomes hotter underfoot as the afternoon progresses, and I feel a fierce satisfaction as I see the younger wolves respond, their bodies quick and fluid, their wolves eager for the challenge.

Tristen leads a group through combat exercises, and I catch Callum's eye as he sets up strategy games further down the beach.

He nods at me, a silent understanding passing between us, and I feel the tension ease, just slightly.

Working with my brothers like this for the first time in a while reminds me of how things were when we were younger.

We always had each other's backs when it came to Ralph, and it shouldn't be any different now with Malik as our common enemy.

It seems strange to think of Ralph in the same sort of terms, but that's just who he was. He could be an evil bastard at times.

It's late afternoon when I find myself against Tristen in the sparring circle, the others forming a wide ring around us. His eyes are sharp with challenge, and I know he's been waiting for this, waiting for me.

"Think you can handle me?" I ask, my voice low and taunting.

He grins, a flash of teeth. "Always could," he replies, and the crowd around us cheers as we circle each other, the sand shifting beneath our feet.

“Let’s see,” I say, and I lunge, my body moving before the words are out.

He’s fast, but I’m faster, my wolf lending me speed as I come at him hard. I feel the force of his block up my arm, but I push through, using the momentum to spin and strike again. The crowd shouts, the noise blending with the rush of blood in my ears.

We grapple, our bodies twisting, and I let my frustration fuel me, give me a focus I’ve been lacking. I can see the effort in his eyes as he tries to match me, the surprise as I push him back, relentless, my wolf demanding the upper hand.

The beach is a cacophony of howls and cheers, but all I hear is the sound of our growls, the clash of our bodies, the primal intensity of two wolves fighting for dominance. My wolf is wild, relentless, the frustration of everything—Serena, Malik, my brothers—fueling every bite and lunge.

We’re evenly matched, a blur of fur and teeth, and I feel the edge of my anger begin to tip into something dangerous—my fire beginning to brim under the surface. But just as it feels like I’m about to snap, Tristen pulls back, breaking the momentum.

I pause, breathing hard, feeling the heat of the fight in my chest, and I know he’s right to stop.

We shift back, the transition leaving us both panting, and I see the question in his eyes, the unspoken challenge.

My wolf is still raging, but I force it down, the need to prove myself warring with the sharp sting of reality.

Tristen’s breathing is heavy, his body tense, but there’s a wary respect in his gaze. “You been holding out on me?” he says, his voice edged with surprise.

I shrug, trying to play it off, but I know he can see through me. “Maybe I wanted to see if you were up to it.”

He laughs, a short bark of sound. “Looks like someone’s got a lot of pent-up energy.”

Isn’t that the truth, I think. I reach out my hand and pull him up as the crowd cheers and moves on to the next fight. The energy in my muscles still thrums, but I force it down, knowing better than to take it out on the wrong person. My brothers may annoy me, but we’re family.

But he’s right, I do have a lot of pent-up energy, and there’s only one person my wolf is thinking about right now.

Excusing myself, I say brief goodbyes and get a few knowing looks from my brothers and Jace as I leave them to the evening bonfire and head back to my truck.

Driving back toward town, I feel some of the tension in my body ease as I hit the mountain roads.

The house is quiet when I walk in, and my footsteps echo in the stillness.

I follow the soft sound of running water toward the kitchen, my pulse racing.

Serena stands at the sink, her back to me, and I can’t stop myself.

I walk up behind her, the need to have her overwhelming, and she turns just as my hands find her waist.

“You’re home,” she says, a statement rather than a question.

I don’t even reply, I just kiss her, hard and hungry. Her lips part, and she leans into

me, her body soft and warm against mine. My wolf howls with satisfaction, and I feel the last of the day's tension melt from my skin. She's breathless when I finally pull back, her eyes wide and searching.

"What are you doing?" she whispers, and there's a tremor in her voice that drives me wild.

I sink to my knees, pulling her skirt up around her full hips. "What I've wanted to do all fucking day."

She gasps as I grip her thighs, pulling her closer. Her scent surrounds me, intoxicating, and I bury my face between her legs. She's getting wetter by the second, and I groan as she moans and clutches the counter for balance.

Her hips buck as my tongue flicks against her, and I can feel the tremors in her legs as I continue to flick her sensitive clit, relentless and hungry.

She tangles her fingers in my hair, pulling me closer, and I hear the breath hitch in her throat.

The small, desperate noises she makes only drive me more insane.

I feel her tense, her body tightening, and I move faster, feeling her pulse under my tongue as I slide one finger into her tight channel before adding another.

"Please," she cries, and it's a plea, a command, everything I want to hear. Her whole body shudders, and she screams, a raw, beautiful sound that echoes through the kitchen.

Her body goes limp, but I hold her through it, freeing my cock and standing in one fluid motion.

I lift her onto the counter, her eyes wild and wanting as I slide into her, hard and fast. She gasps, her legs wrapping around me, pulling me deeper.

The heat of her is overwhelming, and I thrust into her, my wolf howling with the raw, primal need to claim her, possess her.

“Fuck,” I groan, feeling her squeeze around me, hot and slick and perfect. She lifts her face, meeting my gaze, and I see the same wild need reflected back at me.

“Aiden,” she says, her voice breaking, and I know she’s going to come again. I can feel it, feel her body tightening around me, pulling me over the edge with her.

“Serena,” I growl, and I explode, my release crashing into hers, raw and consuming. My wolf howls, fierce and triumphant, and I bury my face in her neck, feeling every pulse and shudder of her body as we ride it out together.

Our breaths are ragged, and I hold her against me, feeling the last of my tension melt away, the heat of her skin, and the wild beat of her heart.

My wolf whispers, she’s mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

The garden is alive, wild, and breathing, and I can't believe it's mine. I can't help but smile. I did this. Despite the chaos, despite everything, I made this happen.

It may not earn money like my store did, or win any awards. But it feels tangible and somehow better.

I stand in the middle of it all holding my morning coffee, the early sunlight casting a soft glow over the riot of colors, and I remember how bare it was when I first arrived.

Now, the yard looks like something out of a dream, a cottage garden bursting with life.

Foxgloves and hollyhocks tower over beds of lupines and daisies, their blooms swaying gently in the breeze.

Sweet peas climb up makeshift trellises, their tendrils curling around anything they can reach, and the scent of lavender and roses fills the air, intoxicating and sweet.

I walk along the gravel path that Aiden laid, the crunch underfoot grounding me, and I reach out to touch the petals as I pass, feeling their delicate softness under my fingers.

It's like I'm in my own little world here, a world I've created, and despite everything else, it feels good. It feels right.

I think of Aiden, of how he looked at me last night, his eyes dark and wanting.

My cheeks flush at the memory of his hands on me, his mouth on me, the way he took me like he couldn't get enough.

There's a wildness to him, a passion that I didn't expect.

Or at least, a passion I never thought would be directed at someone like me.

I've always known the way other shifters look at me, the way they see my lack of wolf and curves, and dismiss me as less-than.

I'd grown accustomed to it and was even expecting it with Aiden at first. But the way he wants me, the way he acts like he can't get enough, makes me believe that maybe I'm wrong—that maybe Emily was right, and he does really want me.

I push a loose strand of hair behind my ear, trying to calm the rush of hope that I know is dangerous.

Aiden is everything I didn't even know I wanted, and that's what scares me the most. I'm terrified that it's not real, that I'll let myself believe it and end up losing him.

What if he's just sleeping with me because I'm here—I'm his official mate, after all—and I'm convenient?

But that won't stop him from wanting other women, too, will it?

I think of the way he looks when he's with his pack. He's so sure of himself, so fiercely in control. A true alpha. I worry that I'm just a novelty that'll wear off when he realizes I'm not like the others and never will be. I can't run with him, can't shift, and be part of that world.

I'm not sure I'll ever really belong here, not without a wolf. Not looking the way I do.

The thought is a bitter seed, one that I can't seem to stop from growing. I look around the garden, at the wild beauty of it, and I wish I could feel at home beyond the boundary of this creation. However lovely it is.

I take a sip of my coffee, the warmth spreading through me, but there's a strange sensation that follows, a rush of nausea and dizziness beneath the heat.

I pause, trying to shake it off, but the feeling lingers, and I reach out to steady myself against the tall stalk of a delphinium.

As soon as my fingers brush the leaves, the world around me seems to explode.

The flowers seem to surge to life in an uncontrollable rush of color and movement.

I watch, stunned, as the garden transforms before my eyes, overflowing with magic.

Vines twist and stretch, climbing the fence, tangling together in a frenzy of growth, and the blooms swell beyond anything natural, vibrant, and wild.

It's like the entire garden has been electrified, the plants growing at an impossible rate, and I didn't even mean to use my magic.

I step back, my heart racing, and try to catch my breath.

The flowers are out of control, spilling over the path and creeping up the sides of the house.

My coffee slips from my hand, and I reach for it, but the cup is already buried beneath a layer of sweet peas and ivy.

I stand there, frozen, as the chaos unfolds, swallowing the beauty I'd found so

comforting only moments ago.

“Hello?” Emily’s voice calls from the gate, and I spin around, startled. She and Marian are standing a few feet away at the entrance, wearing matching expressions of confusion and amusement.

“Are we interrupting, dear?” Marian chuckles. “You’ve got a head start today, it seems.”

The distraction seems to do the trick, and the growth of the flowers slows. Looking around, though, the damage is done. The garden is a mess. I cringe as the women walk toward me, carefully climbing over some of the larger roots that have all but burst from the ground.

“Impressive,” Emily says. There’s laughter in her voice, but I can’t tell if she’s impressed or concerned.

“I didn’t mean to,” I say, my voice shaky. “I wasn’t even trying this time.”

Marian’s eyes are bright as she surveys the tangled mess. “You should see the look on your face,” she says, her laughter warm. “It’s quite entertaining.”

I try to smile, but it feels brittle. “It’s too much,” I confess, the defeat thick in my voice. “I can’t control it.”

She waves a hand, dismissing my worry. “Nonsense. It’s just a matter of practice. You’ll learn.”

Emily steps forward, touching my arm. “Let’s tidy up a bit, and then we can practice. We can help.”

I nod, but the thought of another outburst like this makes my stomach clench. We get to work tidying up some of the mess, and as the morning wears on, I put another pot of coffee on but decide not to have any myself, not after what happened last time I took a sip of my favorite blend.

Back outside, I kneel near a cluster of daisies, my hands trembling as I reach toward them. “Okay,” I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. “Here goes.”

I close my eyes, feeling the familiar hum of magic, but this time it feels different, an uneven surge that’s hard to hold onto.

My heart pounds, and I try to steady my breath, but the energy slips from my fingers and the daisies all but explode.

They don’t even grow or bloom prettily. The petals simply start popping.

“Oh my,” Marian says, peering closer. “That’s not ideal.”

I look at her, fighting the wave of frustration. “Tell me about it.” The words come out sharper than I intend, and I feel a pang of guilt. “Sorry,” I add quickly, “I just don’t know what’s going on.”

“Let’s try again,” Emily says, her tone encouraging. “We’ll figure it out.”

I nod, trying to believe her. “Okay,” I agree, but the exhaustion in my voice betrays me.

I reach toward the plant again, determined, but the energy inside me feels wild, like a live wire.

It slips from my grasp, and this time, the daisies wilt under my touch, their petals

drooping and falling in a lifeless heap. Better than exploding, I guess.

“I just don’t understand,” I say, my voice a mix of confusion and defeat. “It’s never been like this. I don’t even know what this is.”

“Don’t worry,” Marian says, though her eyes are more curious than concerned. “It’s unusual, but not unheard of.”

“Unheard of for what?” I ask, desperate for answers.

She pauses, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “Are you tired? Dizzy?”

I nod, remembering the nausea and the strange rush I experienced this morning. “Sort of, but only this morning,” I say, explaining what happened just before they arrived. “It was the coffee, I think.”

Marian tips her head back and cackles, “It was most definitely not the coffee that did this to you.”

I catch a flash of confusion, and then a knowing look appears on Emily’s face, as if she’s just caught on to what Marian is saying, and I’m the only one left confused.

“Could it be...” Emily starts, but Marian interrupts her.

“Pregnancy,” she announces, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Pregnant?” I echo, my voice high and strangled. “But...how?”

Emily raises an eyebrow, a slight smirk on her lips. “I can explain the mechanics if you’d like.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, and my mind races. Could it be true? My hands creep to my stomach, the thought so huge, so unexpected, that I can barely breathe.

“Pregnant,” I say again, trying to process the word, the reality of it. “I can’t be.”

Marian’s laughter dances through the air. “You most certainly can be.”

“But what if Aiden doesn’t want...” I start, the panic settling in like a stone.

The two women watch me with sympathy written all over their faces, and I feel my emotions threatening to spill over, all my fears racing to the surface.

“Do you want me to confirm it?” Marian suggests, more gently. “I can perform a fertility spell, then you’ll know for sure.”

I freeze for a moment, but then nod, even though I’m terrified. I need to know. Marian looks at Emily, a quick flick of her eyes, and Emily steps closer to me, reassuring and warm.

“It’s going to be okay, Serena,” she says, but I can barely hear her over the roar in my head.

I watch as Marian lowers herself to the ground beside me, her presence demanding and impossibly magical with the backdrop of my wild garden. Everything seems to still around us, and I sense the shift in the air, a gathering of energy that’s both familiar and foreign.

Marian’s hands hover over my stomach, her expression one of intense concentration, and I hold my breath, waiting for her to say something, anything, to break this unbearable suspense.

The moment stretches on forever until finally, she sits back, a satisfied grin spreading across her face. “Not just pregnant,” she declares, her voice rich with amusement. “Twins.”

My heart stops, then starts again in a frantic rhythm. Twins. The word is too big, too impossible, and I feel the world spin around me, a dizzying, overwhelming rush.

“Oh,” I say, the sound small and lost.

Emily’s eyes are wide with excitement. “That’s amazing, Serena,” she says, her words tumbling over each other.

“Is it?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. I feel the panic rise, a wave threatening to pull me under. “What if Aiden doesn’t want pups? What if...what if he doesn’t want me?”

Marian shakes her head, a knowing smile on her lips. “Oh, he wants you, dear.”

Emily squeezes my hand, but I can’t shake the feeling of terror that’s clawing its way through me.

“What if...what if I get fat?” I blurt the words in a tumbling rush of desperation. “I’m already too fat. What if I get bigger and he doesn’t want me anymore?”

The silence that follows is heavy and unbearable. I see the look of sympathy on Emily’s face, the surprise in Marian’s eyes, and it’s too much. The world spins, and I struggle to breathe, to think, to hold onto anything.

My magic flares again, wild and untamed, and I watch in horror as the flowers surge around us, the blooms swelling and popping in a shower of petals. I can’t control it. I can’t control anything.

“Serena,” Emily says, trying to calm me. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

I know they’re just trying to help, but I can’t see how anything is going to be okay.

“You just need some time to process all this,” Marian suggests soothingly. “Let’s spend some time today calming your magic so you don’t have to deal with that as well. I can use a gentle spell to, er, put a lid on it, so to speak.”

I hesitate; the thought of suppressing my magic like this is both a relief and a strange kind of defeat. But the chaos of the garden, the chaos inside me, makes the decision for me. “Okay,” I say, nodding. “Do it.”

Marian moves closer, her hands hovering over me with an assuredness that I envy.

I close my eyes, bracing myself, and feel a gentle warmth spreading from her fingertips, a soft pulse that seems to settle into my skin, my bones.

It feels like a sigh, like a release, and I relax, the tension easing from my body.

“There,” Marian says, her voice like a satisfied purr. “That should make things more manageable for a while. A few days, at least.”

I open my eyes, and the world around me seems quieter, the wild buzz of magic no longer threatening to spill over. “It’s...different,” I say, surprised at the calm.

Emily watches me, her expression one of concern and hope. “Better?”

I nod, a strange mix of gratitude and uncertainty filling me. “Thank you,” I say.

“The chaos in your magic is linked to your fears,” Marian says, her hand resting on mine. “When they settle, we’ll be able to resume training your magic.”

I wish I could believe her. I wish I could believe any of it. “Thank you,” I say again, and this time I mean it.

“I went through something similar with my own magic,” Emily says quietly, “I had no idea mine has the same source as Malik’s and it was too much for my mother’s body to handle. So I know what it’s like to feel out of control. You will be ok.”

She smiles reassuringly, but her words take me aback, “I’m so sorry, I had no idea.” I say as she reaches out to touch my hand reassuringly. “You’re so brave. Figuring out how to control it all and nearly destroying Malik. Despite worrying...”

“It was only possible because of Tristen and all that we have here,” She smiles.

“It’s easier to be brave when you’re doing it for the people you love.

Besides, I may not have known my parents, but in a way, I was doing it for them.

I don’t know what kind of man my father was before he met my mother, but he loved her, and he tried to stop Malik from taking over the island.

It seems fitting that I should be the one to ruin his plans with the rogues. ”

Emily’s usually calm facade cracks slightly as I see the strength of her resolve beneath the surface, and I nod in understanding. I can only wonder if I’ll be able to find a fraction of the inner strength she has shown.

Eventually, the afternoon sun begins to dip lower, casting long shadows across the garden, and the two witches begin to gather their things. Emily turns and gives me a hug at the gate. “You’ll be fine. We’ll come back in a few days, see how you’re doing.”

I nod, trying to take it all in. “I can’t tell Aiden until I get my own head around it,” I say, looking between them. “Promise you won’t say anything.”

“Of course,” Emily says, her tone reassuring. “It’s your news to share. We’ll keep quiet.”

Marian turns to me, the late afternoon sun illuminating her ethereal hair. “You’ve got a lot to think about. A lot to look forward to.” Her eyes are bright, and I can see she’s genuinely excited about this turn of events.

I nod, trying to mirror at least a fraction of her certainty as I watch them walk back to Emily’s truck. Turning back to the garden, I wonder how I’m going to explain the absolute carnage here to Aiden when he gets back.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

It looks like a goddamn bomb went off out here.

I survey the garden, the absolute chaos of it, and my wolf growls low in my chest. Serena says everything went fine with Emily and Marian, but the state of this place tells a very different story.

The flowers are either half-exploded or wilting; the whole yard is a tangled mess of blooms, vines, and giant roots that have pulled up the path. I have no idea what's going on.

She's barely spoken to me the last two days, spending hours out here sitting amongst the chaos, but not even attempting to use her magic.

I can feel her pulling away, the distance between us growing like the thick creeping ivy that's all but smothered the garage.

It was supposed to be getting better. She was supposed to be settling in.

But just as I thought we were starting to build something, everything seems to be unraveling.

I shove my hands into my pockets, trying to ignore the tightness in my chest. It's not just her magic that's gone haywire.

It's everything about her. The way she smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

The way she still touches me, but her gestures are now so tentative, almost reluctant,

or afraid, despite all the passion we've shared.

It's like she's already thinking of letting go.

I don't know how to fix it, and it's driving me fucking insane.

My brothers managed to make their mates feel accepted, despite the difficult situations they both found themselves in initially. Where am I going wrong? I never had a problem keeping women happy before. They always seemed happy enough in my bed.

I kick at a tangle of roots, trying to shove the frustration away.

Trying to shove my growing feeling of inadequacy away.

Serena's upstairs, locked in her room—she's even avoiding my bed now—and I don't know if I should go to her or give her the space she seems to want.

The space that might just push her further away.

I bend down to try to pull a snarled vine from the gravel, and the sharp scent of roses fills the air, reminding me of her, of the way she smells when she's wrapped around me.

My wolf is wild, restless, and I can barely keep it together.

I grip the vine, yanking it free, and the release is both satisfying and not enough.

This can't go on.

I have to do something.

If only to get away from all this chaos that is only reflecting my own mind.

The fires continue along the mountain border, destructive and deliberate.

They seem to spring up out of nowhere, only to cause maximum damage before extinguishing by themselves just as we arrive, and then spring up somewhere else.

My patrols often spend hours zigzagging the border, seeing nothing, and getting nowhere.

I know I'm missing something. He's taunting me. I can practically hear his laughter in the smoke and the ash, feel his presence in the air. He knows how desperate I am to find him, knows I'm running out of time.

I stare up at the house as I yank another vine, this one more stubborn, and I feel the tension in my shoulders, my gut, my chest, refusing to release.

I can't focus on Malik if I'm constantly worried about her, but I can't focus on her if I don't know when he's going to strike.

It's like I'm caught in a trap, and every time I think I'm getting free, it snaps tighter.

The pressure feels too much, like a weight that's slowly crushing me, but I know I can't let anyone see how much this is affecting me.

I need to be the alpha my pack needs. The alpha Serena needs.

Glancing around the garden, I sigh. The destruction out here is going to take more than pulling a few vines to sort out, and right now, it feels like too much. I need to get out of here, we both do.

“Serena,” I shout, my voice sharp as I walk inside. “You ready to go?”

I hear movements upstairs, and a moment later, she’s on the landing, looking down at me with surprise.

“Go where?” she asks, her voice tentative.

“Out,” I say, making my way up to her. “Get your things. I’ll be in the truck.”

She hesitates, and I can see the questions in her eyes, the uncertainty, but I turn and head out before she can say anything more. A few moments later, she’s climbing into the truck wordlessly.

“Where are we going?” she asks, but I just start the engine, the roar of it filling the silence.

She sighs, and I catch the faintest hint of a smile on her lips, like she’s amused despite herself. “Fine, keep your secrets.”

We drive through the town, the roads familiar and winding, and I stop at the bakery, pulling up to the curb. “Wait here,” I say, and I’m out of the truck before she can protest.

Inside, the smell of fresh bread and sugar is overwhelming, and I grab a range of pastries, sandwiches, and drinks. The thought of where I intend to go is already lessening some of the tension that has been threatening to consume me all morning.

I pay quickly and head back, the bag warm in my hands. Serena’s waiting, her eyes curious as I hand her a coffee and toss the bag on the seat between us.

We drive out of town, the scenery changing as the road dips and curves. The

mountains give way to a series of lakes in the valley, the water glinting under the sun, and I glance at her, gauging her reaction. She's looking out the window, her expression softening, and I feel a flicker of hope.

"I haven't seen this part of the island," she says, almost to herself.

"It's different," I reply, keeping my voice casual.

We turn onto a narrow dirt road, barely visible and framed by tall pines. The truck bumps along, and I can tell she's curious, a quiet anticipation building. We pull up to a small clearing, and I cut the engine, the sudden quiet wrapping around us like a blanket.

"Here?" she asks, her eyes wide as she takes in the secluded spot.

"Yeah," I say, getting out and grabbing the bag of food. "Come on."

The path winds down toward the water, hidden from view, and her footsteps are cautious behind me.

As we reach the shore, the lake opens up before us.

Utterly still and so perfect, it looks like glass, reflecting the blue of the sky and the green of the mountains.

A small crescent beach curves around the shore, smooth white pebbles and sand, and the trees crowd close, like they're trying to keep the whole place a secret.

"Wow," Serena breathes, her eyes wide with amazement.

I feel something inside me loosen, the tension unwinding just a little. "Thought you'd

like it,” I say, and I can’t keep the smile from my face.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. She walks on ahead of me, and I follow, watching as she makes her way toward the water. The sunlight catches her hair, and she looks back at me, a lightness in her face that I haven’t seen in days. “How did you find this place?”

I settle down on the sand, opening the bag and spreading the food out between us. “My brothers and I used to come here when we were kids,” I say, trying to keep my voice even. “When we didn’t want to be found.”

“By whom?” Her voice is soft, careful.

“Ralph, our dad.” I look out at the water, the memory of Ralph as sharp as ever. “He could be a real piece of work.”

She sits beside me. “Just to put it lightly,” I add, and there’s a harshness in my voice I didn’t mean to let slip.

She watches me, waiting, and I know she’s thinking about how to ask, how to make me talk. The openness in her face, the way she looks at me without judgment, makes it easier to continue.

“He was a bastard, Serena. Didn’t give a shit about anyone but himself.

Tough for a pack, but even tougher for a family.

” I pause, the memories a tangle of anger and bitterness.

“He was especially hard on my brothers; I was more of a general disappointment. Nothing I ever did was good enough. Callum and Tristen got the bulk of his attention, but when he did notice me, it wasn’t exactly pleasant. ”

Her eyes are wide, the concern in them raw and palpable. “I’m sorry, Aiden,” she says, and her voice is filled with sincerity. “I didn’t know.”

“Not the sort of thing you advertise,” I say, trying to shrug it off, but she’s still watching me, and I know I can’t. “We’d come out here to escape. Make sure he couldn’t find us, couldn’t pit us against each other.” I look back at the lake, the memories coming thick and fast.

“It’s peaceful here,” she says, and I hear the question in her voice, the unspoken why didn’t you tell me this before .

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice quieter. “The only place we felt safe sometimes as pups.”

I feel her hand on mine, tentative at first, then firmer, like she’s trying to anchor me to this moment rather than the memories. “I can’t imagine,” she says. “That must’ve been awful.”

I look at her, the openness in her eyes, and I feel a rush of gratitude. “It was. But we had each other.”

She nods, her expression thoughtful. “It’s nice that you’re still close with your brothers.”

“Yeah,” I say, scoffing lightly. “It’s not always easy, we butt heads. But we’re family, and we’ve made the packs work better than I think Ralph ever intended.” I pause, feeling the weight of the past lift slightly. “I’m not sure he ever really saw me as part of the island’s future.”

She looks down, her voice barely a whisper. “I know how that feels.”

I watch her, seeing the sadness in her eyes. “Nolan’s pack?” I ask, knowing there’s

more to her story than I've let myself consider.

She nods, staring at the water. "They never accepted me. I mean, we all know why," she says quietly.

"I was different, short and curvy. No wolf. No real use. They didn't know what to do with me.

" Her voice is bitter, and it cuts through me.

"I tried to fit in, tried to make it work, but I was always the outsider. Even after my store took off and..."

She trails off for a moment, gathering her thoughts, and I want to pull her close, to tell her that she's none of those things, but I let her speak; the words start tumbling out like they've been trapped for too long.

"They'd laugh behind my back," she continues, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Or worse, to my face. And when they weren't laughing, they were ignoring me. Like I wasn't even there."

I feel a growl rising in my chest, a primal anger at the thought of her being treated that way, but I hold it back, knowing she needs to get this out.

"The only reason Nolan didn't reject me completely was because of a promise he made to my family, and then the money coming into town from my store, and all the shipments.

Even then, I was still treated like a burden more than anything else.

I never belonged there. They were quick enough to get rid of me when they saw the

opportunity. ”

“You can belong here,” I say, my voice fierce with certainty. “You belong with this pack. I don’t care if you don’t have a wolf, Serena. I don’t care about any of that.”

Her gaze flicks to mine, and for a moment, time stands still, neither of us saying anything, but the look that passes between us seems filled with so much that should be said, but neither of us does.

Her eyes are wide, her lips slightly parted, and I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know how to make either of us feel better, so I do the only thing I can think of. I kiss her.

Her mouth is soft and warm, and she leans into me, her hands finding my shoulders, pulling me closer. My wolf howls with satisfaction, and I feel the familiar heat rise, the need to have her, to make her mine. Her body melts against me, and I feel the last of her hesitation slip away.

I push her down onto the soft sand, my body urgent and demanding. Her hands are in my hair, and I can feel the wild beat of her heart against my chest. The lake is a mirror of the sky, and the trees whisper around us, but all I can see, all I can feel, is her.

“Aiden,” she breathes, spurring me on.

I kiss her deeper, my hands sliding under her shirt, feeling the heat of her skin. Her breath catches, and I feel her arch against me, wanting, needing. I groan, my own need consuming me.

“Wait,” she says, and there’s a sudden shift in her voice. “Aiden, wait.”

I freeze, and she pushes gently against my shoulders, her eyes wide and uncertain. “Someone might see us,” she says, but the words feel hollow, like an excuse.

I pull back, breathing hard, trying to understand the change. “There’s no one for miles,” I tell her, feeling the sting of confusion. “It’s just us.”

She sits up, smoothing her clothes and avoiding my gaze. “I just...I don’t know,” she says, the distance already growing, the invisible wall back between us.

“Serena,” I say, reaching for her, but she stands, the barriers as real as if they were made of stone.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and I can hear the tremor in her voice, like she’s already pulling away.

I watch her carefully, knowing there’s more she isn’t saying, but we’ve made progress today, and I don’t want to push her. “It’s fine,” I say, helping her to her feet. “Let’s walk around the lake, and I’ll show you the view from the other side.”

She nods, visibly relieved that I haven’t pushed her. I’m not a complete bastard. The rest of the afternoon is a dance between enjoying each other’s company and avoiding the truth that sits awkwardly between us, the lingering tension of everything that’s not being said.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

“Have you spoken to the clinic yet?” Emily asks gently over the phone, and I find myself shaking my head even though she can’t see me.

I get up, crossing the room to close the door and lowering my voice. “Not yet, I-I just need a bit more time,” I whisper, my hand drifting to the soft skin of my stomach. “I’ll know when the time is right to tell him. I will.”

I say the words with conviction, as if I can will them to be true.

In reality, I have no idea when the perfect time will be to risk the tentative peace Aiden and I have started to build over the last few days.

Ever since the day at the lake, we’ve gradually opened up more and more to each other, and rather than the sexy young alpha I couldn’t see taking an interest in me, I’m starting to feel a genuine connection with Aiden.

Starting to believe he might actually like me, for me.

“I understand, Serena,” Emily soothes. “Remember, though, that with twins, your body may tell people before you’re ready. If there’s anything I can do, just say. Okay?”

I turn slightly to the mirror as she speaks and almost drop the phone, startled by what I see. My breasts have always been large, but now they’re positively enormous. Full and spilling out of my dress.

“Serena?” Emily’s voice is uncertain.

“Yes,” I say, my voice shaking. “Thank you, Em. I will.”

We talk for a few more minutes before I hang up, but I’m lost, staring at my reflection, the reality of my changing body hitting me like a tidal wave.

I know she’s right. I know I’ll run out of time.

I can’t hide this from him much longer, but the thought of saying the words when I don’t know how he’ll react fills me with a fear I don’t know how to deal with.

I open the closet, searching for something to hide my changing figure.

I feel ridiculous as I rifle through things I can already tell won’t work, wanting to laugh and cry at the same time.

What if Aiden notices? What if he doesn’t?

What if he thinks I’m just getting fatter, and he doesn’t even want to bother trying to sleep with me anymore?

What if I ruin something good before it’s even really started?

I pull out an oversized sweater, but it only makes me look rounder, and I throw it back in frustration.

I settle for a loose blouse that hangs just right, and exhale, a shaky breath that does nothing to calm my nerves.

I can’t be so obvious. I can’t let him see how scared I am.

I know he already suspects I’m not happy about something, but he seems pretty

clueless.

He even brought me flowers yesterday, which is amusing given how many are still covering the garden after my magic went haywire.

The last thing this place needs is more flowers, but the thought touched me.

No one has ever thought of doing something simply to cheer me up before.

Maybe I should have told him then. But as soon as the thought appeared, I quashed it.

I glance back at my reflection and cringe at my side profile.

Twins. I'm going to be huge. As someone who has battled with my curves all my life, constantly being reminded that I don't fit into the stereotype of the athletic and strong female shifter, the thought of getting even bigger fills me with dread.

I can barely believe he wants me as it is; it's almost completely impossible to imagine he'd find me even remotely desirable if I get even bigger.

Knowing that Aiden will still be out with the first patrol, I head downstairs for something to eat, but even the mere thought of food turns my stomach.

I'm not sure if it's morning sickness or my brain's way of preventing me from gaining weight, but I haven't been able to eat properly in days.

Every time I go to eat something, I feel panicky, sick, and dizzy.

I think back to what Emily said about going to the clinic.

I know I should, but I just can't bring myself to go.

Instead of making any breakfast, I pour a glass of water and make my way to the garden, the chaos of it all still mirroring the chaos inside me.

The magic suppression spell Marian cast is still in effect, and I wonder if that's what's causing me to lose my appetite, but I don't want to ask her because I know she'll tell me to go to the clinic, too.

I sit on one of the benches that Aiden made to go with the new garden, which is now looking positively wild, looking out over the mass of towering flowers, and trying to imagine what life with twins would be like.

Two little pups. I never even pictured myself as a mother.

I've never been able to, not when I didn't grow up with that kind of family.

I don't even remember my own parents. I grew up in a house that was anything but loving, and the thought of bringing pups into a world where they might feel as alone as I did makes my heart clench.

Can I give them a better start than I had?

Can I give them a family? The questions whirl around inside me, and I feel the tears start to fall, hot and heavy.

I wipe them away, but they keep coming, and I don't know how to stop them.

What if I don't know how to love them enough?

What if Aiden doesn't want them, and I have to raise them by myself, here on the island?

I picture them like him, strong and wild, running through the garden paths of flowers, and the image is so vivid and so terrifying that it takes my breath away.

I close my eyes, trying to calm the storm inside me, but instead, I see their faces, little versions of Aiden, and the fear twists into something else. A desperate kind of hope that I wish I didn't even have. Because when you hope, that's when you get hurt.

The image of our pups running wild in the garden is still in my mind when I hear Aiden's footsteps approaching, crunching on the gravel path.

I quickly wipe my eyes and steady my breath, trying to look composed.

He appears around the corner, shirtless, his skin gleaming with a light sheen of sweat, and I momentarily forget to breathe.

His body is all hard lines and muscle, and the way he moves is both powerful and graceful, like he owns every inch of space around him.

"Hey," he says, his voice low and warm. "You're up early."

"Hey," I reply, my voice a little too bright. "How was the patrol?"

"Quiet," he says, coming closer, his presence filling the air. "Too quiet." His eyes search mine, and I wonder if he can see the turmoil I'm trying so hard to hide. "I'm starving," he adds, a hint of frustration in his voice. "Gonna make us a big breakfast. We can eat out here."

I feel a flutter of panic at the thought, but I force a smile. "Okay," I say, trying to sound enthusiastic. "I'll help."

"Nah, you stay here, I've got this," he replies, and then hesitates, like he's about to

say something more, perhaps that he's noticed I haven't been eating, but instead, he gives me a quick kiss and takes the porch steps two at a time toward the kitchen.

I watch him through the open doors, my heart twisting as he moves around the kitchen.

He opens the fridge and pulls out eggs, bacon, and a ton of other ingredients, setting them on the counter with a determined look on his face.

The clang of pans and the crack of eggs fill the air, and I realize he's serious about making a big meal.

The thought both touches and terrifies me.

What if he really has noticed how little I've been eating? What if he guesses why?

The smell of bacon starts to waft through the air, and my stomach clenches in protest. I try to breathe through the nausea, focusing on the flowers, the sky, anything but the food, but it's no use.

The dizziness hits me in a wave, and I grip the edge of the bench, willing myself not to faint.

I can't let him see me like this. Not now.

Not when I'm barely managing to hold it together.

The scent grows stronger, all the flavors mingling together, and I feel my body starting to seriously revolt.

I know I should be honest. However, the fear is too great, too overwhelming.

I stand, my legs shaky, and force myself to walk to the small table by the porch, determined to at least set the places.

The sickness is difficult, but it's the dizziness that's crippling. Suddenly, the whole world starts to spin out of control. I try to grip the chair to steady myself, but it's too late.

I feel myself falling, the ground rushing up to meet me, and then nothing.

When I come to, I'm on the grass, and Aiden's voice is frantic above me. "Serena!" His hands are on me, strong and urgent, and I try to focus, to find words, but everything is spinning.

"I'm okay," I manage, but my voice is weak, barely a whisper. The world tilts again, and I hear the raw edge of panic in his tone.

"Like hell you are." His arms slide under me, and he lifts me effortlessly, cradling me against his chest. "We're going to the clinic."

"No," I protest, trying to push against him, but my strength is gone, my limbs heavy and useless. "It's just...I just need a minute."

He doesn't listen, doesn't even pause, his grip on me firm and unyielding. I feel the steady beat of his heart against my cheek, and I know there's no arguing with him. "Aiden, please," I try again, but my voice is fading, and so is everything else.

He carries me to the truck like I weigh nothing, and I feel the cool air hit my skin as he lays me gently in the seat. "I know you're scared, but I've got you."

The engine roars to life, and I see the tension in his jaw, the determination in every line of his body, and the fear. I can't even speak, so I close my eyes, and the world

slips away again.

When I wake, the truck is still, and Aiden's voice is a low, urgent rumble as he talks to someone outside. I blink, the bright sunlight making me squint, and then he's there, his eyes fierce with a mix of anger and worry.

"Serena," he says, his voice tight. "We're here. Can you walk?"

"I think so," I mumble, not even sure I believe it. He helps me out, his arm around my waist, supporting me as we head toward the clinic doors.

My legs feel like jelly, and I lean into him, feeling the strength in his body, the heat of his skin. The nurse at the front desk looks up, surprise turning to concern as she sees us.

"We need a doctor," Aiden says, his voice commanding, leaving no room for argument.

A flurry of movement, and suddenly we're being led down a hallway, toward a small private room. The more I regain consciousness, the more my panic grows. Any doctor or nurse is going to discover I'm pregnant pretty quickly.

As the nurse runs to get something, Aiden helps me onto the bed and brushes the hair from my face. "How are you doing now?" he asks gently. "Gave me quite the scare."

His voice is so surprisingly tender, I'm lost for words. "I'll be okay," I lie, and he narrows his eyes as if he can see right through me.

The nurse returns before I can say anything else, and suddenly the room feels impossibly small. She begins by checking my blood pressure, asking all the questions I've been dreading. "When did the dizziness start? Have you been eating? Could you

be pregnant?”

I freeze, and I feel Aiden’s gaze snap to me, his whole body going still. The air is heavy, charged with the silence that goes on far too long.

“Well?” His voice is low, dangerous, and I know I can’t avoid it any longer.

“Aiden,” I say, my voice trembling, “I was going to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” His eyes are fierce, searching my face.

The words stick in my throat, but I force them out. “I’m pregnant.”

The silence stretches, unbearable, and I see the flicker of disbelief, then anger, then something else—something unrecognizable—flash across his face.

“How long have you known?” His voice is tight, controlled.

“A while,” I admit, feeling the shame burn in my cheeks. “Marian did a spell, and...”

“And you didn’t tell me?” The hurt in his voice cuts deeper than I expected, and it’s my turn to go silent.

“It was just a lot to take in,” I try to explain as the nurse excuses herself. “Marian said it’s twins, and...”

He cuts me off, his voice raw. “I can’t believe you kept this from me.”

I reach for him, a desperation I didn’t even expect suddenly clawing at my chest. “Please, Aiden, I was going to—”

His eyes are dark, a storm of emotions. “Don’t,” he says, pulling away. “I need to think.”

He turns and leaves, the door slamming behind him, and the sound is like a physical blow. I sit there, frozen, my heart pounding in my ears. He’s gone. He’s really gone.

The nurse rushes back in, her face a mix of concern and sympathy. “Are you okay?”

Her kindness is too much, and the tears come in a torrent I can’t control. “He left,” I sob, the words choked and broken. “He just left.”

She’s at my side, her arms around me, holding me together as I fall apart. “It’s going to be okay,” she says, her voice soothing. “Just breathe. Let it out.”

But I can’t breathe. I can’t do anything but cry, the weight of everything crashing down on me. I’ve ruined it. I’ve ruined everything.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

Twins. Twins.

The word goes round and round in my head in a perpetual loop of pure panic.

The door slams behind me, and I'm dimly aware of the shock it causes in the small clinic, as the nervous glances and whispers follow me as I storm out of the building. The sunshine hits me in the face as I walk back to the truck, feeling like I'm going to heave.

First, it was the pure panic that struck me when I stepped out onto the porch, holding two plates, and saw Serena collapsing to the ground.

It takes a lot for a shifter to faint; in fact, we don't, really.

Seeing her drop to the ground like that did something to my wolf; the fear was tangible.

But it is nothing compared to the overwhelming fear that gripped me the moment she said she was pregnant.

I drive away from the clinic, hoping the roar of the engine will drown out the noise in my head, but the word 'twins' beats along with it, pounding like a drum, a rhythm of pure fucking terror.

How long have you known?

My voice echoes, accusing and raw, and I grit my teeth against the memory of

Serena's face, the look of shock and hurt as I walked out.

I'm not stupid, I know we weren't being careful, but I can't be a father. Can I? Not yet, not now.

The drive back to the house is a blur, the roads twisting and turning as I navigate the panic inside my own head.

It's too much. Serena. The twins. Malik.

The pack. I can't breathe, the pressure building until I feel like I'm going to explode.

I slam the steering wheel in frustration, and at the last minute, I veer away from town, taking the old trail that leads into the forest. I need to run.

I need to get out of my own head before it crushes me.

The truck skids to a halt, and I'm out before the engine dies, my body already shifting before I hit the tree line.

The world blurs, my wolf taking over, and I give in, letting him run, letting the raw energy burn through me.

My paws hit the ground hard, and I push faster, feeling the wind cut through my fur, feeling the release of movement, of escape.

The forest is dense, wild, and I weave through the trees, the familiar scents of pine and earth grounding me.

It's the only place I've ever felt free, the only place that's truly mine.

I run until my legs burn, until my lungs are raw, and I don't stop until I reach the mountain trails that lead to the lookout posts along the ridge.

I stand at the edge, the valley spreading out below, the mountains stretching as far as I can see.

The wind is cold here, biting, and I let it whip through me, trying to clear my head, trying to figure out what the fuck I'm going to do.

I shift back, the transition leaving me breathless, and I sink to the ground, my back leaning against a jagged rock.

Twins.

The word is relentless, looping through my mind, and I can't escape it. I never thought this far ahead, never let myself imagine what it would mean. A family. Pups. The reality of it is like a punch to the gut, and I feel the panic clawing at me again.

What if I'm like Ralph?

The thought hits me harder than I expect, and I clench my fists, trying to shove it away.

I'm not going to be like him. I'm not going to let that happen.

But the doubt is there, insidious and creeping, and I can't shake it.

What if I screw this up? What if I screw Serena up?

The way Ralph screwed up my mom until she just faded away? The way he screwed up me?

The sky is darkening, and I watch the shadows stretch across the valley, the mountains looming.

I stand, heading over to the small outpost where we keep a stash of clothes.

I pull on some shorts and grab some water from the barrel, then return to the ridge and study the mountain caves dotted along the peaks.

Despite the turmoil in my mind, I still can't resist looking for Malik, wondering if he's even here at all.

If I can't even find Malik, how the hell am I going to do this?

I think of Serena, of the way she looked at me in the clinic, her face pale and her eyes wide with fear and something else, something like hope, and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

I left her there. I fucking left her. My wolf growls, restless, but I don't know how to face her.

I don't know how to be what she needs right now.

The sky grows darker, the valley sinking into shadow behind the clouds, and I stand there, feeling the chill seep into my skin, feeling the weight of everything press down on me. I can't do this. I can't do any of this.

"Aiden?" The voice is sudden, cutting through the cold air, and I whip around, startled.

Jace stands there, his expression a mix of surprise and concern. "You know, you're not actually that hard to find," he chuckles, coming closer. "I thought you might be

up here.”

I sigh; news travels fast in the pack. I shouldn't be surprised, really. One of Jace's sisters is a nurse at the clinic; I can only imagine how quickly she got onto the phone to him.

"Word gets around," Jace says, confirming what I've already suspected.

"Seems like it does," I reply, my voice steady.

He settles down beside me, his gaze unwavering, as if he's trying to look right into my soul. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asks, his tone surprisingly gentle considering we don't talk about our feelings very often.

I lean back against the rock, feeling the words knotting up in my throat, refusing to come out easily. "Not much to say," I finally manage to get out, each word feeling like it's clawing its way up. "I'm fucked."

He raises an eyebrow, remaining silent, just waiting for me to continue, offering no judgment, only patience.

"I didn't sign up for this," I blurt out, the admission raw and unfiltered. "I don't know how to handle it."

"And Serena?" he asks, his tone cautious, like he's carefully navigating a minefield.

I grit my teeth, the memory of leaving her slicing through me like a knife twisting deeper with every thought. "I don't know how to handle that either," I admit, the words heavy with regret and confusion, as if speaking them aloud makes the situation more real and impossible to ignore.

"I thought I'd have time to figure this out," I say, my voice raw and exposed. "Time to get used to everything before it got...serious."

Jace nods, and there's a knowing look in his eyes, a look I wasn't expecting. "That's life, right?" he says. "Never waitin' for you to be ready."

I stare at the valley below, at the endless stretch of mountains, and I feel the words bubbling up, needing to be said. "What if I can't do it, Jace?" I blurt out, the fear sharp and real. "What if I'm just like Ralph? What if I ruin everything?"

He looks at me, and I see something shift in his expression, a rare sincerity. "You're not him, Aiden," he says, his voice steady. "And you never will be."

"But what if I don't want this yet?" I say, the doubt creeping in. "What if I'm not ready to settle down? To be what she needs?"

"It's not that I don't want her," I admit, my voice rough with frustration and need. "I just don't know if I can be a father, be better than Ralph, the pack, the threat of Malik. I don't know if I can do it. Any of it."

Jace laughs softly, shaking his head. "You surprise me, man."

"What do you mean?" I ask, thrown by the glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

"I thought you, of all people, would be excited," he says, leaning back. "You have the respect of your pack, your mate, and pups on the way. What more could you want?"

I stare at him, the words not quite registering. "You're the last person I would have thought would find that exciting," I say, confused. "Thought you were happy sleeping around, playing the field."

He shrugs, a hint of longing in his voice. "I'd love to find my mate."

"You serious?" I ask, stunned.

"Yeah," he replies, grinning. "Thought that was obvious."

I'm floored. I always thought he had it all sorted, that he was living the life I'd miss out on if I stayed with Serena. "I didn't know," I say, trying to process this new version of Jace.

He laughs again, nudging my shoulder. "Guess you're not the only one who can hide how they're feeling."

We fall into silence for a moment and my wolf niggles at the recesses of my mind, reminding me that we already have what Jace says he wants.

A mate. We knew it that night in the forest when we caught her sneaking out.

We knew it during the ceremony when I didn't feel a hint of fear over taking her as my mate.

I told myself it was because it didn't mean anything, but the reality is that it meant everything. It just felt easy because it was right.

It's always been her. It's always been Serena. I'm just too young and stupid to see our relationship for what it is: fucking perfect.

"What the hell am I doing, Jace? I've been acting like an idiot."

He grins, wide and infectious. "Pretty much."

The sky brightens again, the sun emerging, and I feel a rush of urgency building inside me, a desperate need to make this right before it's too late. I stand, the determination burning in my chest.

"I've gotta go," I say, the words a rush of clarity.

Jace nods, a knowing gleam in his eyes. "You do."

I turn, my heart pounding with the need to get to Serena, to tell her everything I should have said before. The wind howls around me, but I barely feel it, my mind fixed on one thing, one person.

"I'll catch you later," I call over my shoulder, already moving, already running.

"Go get her, and I'd start by apologizing," he shouts, his voice lost to the distance as I sprint back toward the trail.

I shift as soon as I hit the trees, my wolf taking over, the drive to get to Serena more urgent than ever.

The forest blurs past me, and I reach the truck in record time.

I shift back, my body shaking with the need to get to her, to explain.

I pull on the clothes I left by the truck, my hands fumbling in my urgency.

I'm an idiot. A fucking idiot. I give myself one last mental slap, and I'm in the truck, the roar of the engine matching the pounding of my heart.

I drive like I'm possessed, the tires kicking up dust and gravel, the landscape a blur as I race toward town. The words echo in my head, a mantra of desperation, of hope.

I'm coming, Serena. I'm coming. I hope to the goddess she's going to forgive me for leaving like that.

The truck skids to a stop outside the clinic, and I barely remember to cut the engine before I'm out, sprinting toward the doors.

The nurse at the front desk looks up, surprise flickering across her face as she sees me, but I don't stop, heading straight to the room where I left Serena, flinging open the door and bracing myself for her response.

But I'm met with silence. The room is empty.

I stare at the bed, the sheet rumpled, the smell of her still in the air, and my heart lurches.

"Serena?" Her name is a whisper, a plea, and I turn, desperate, my pulse pounding in my ears.

The nurse appears in the doorway, a look of surprise on her face. "She was here a few minutes ago," she says quickly, seeing the rising panic in my eyes. "She was supposed to stay for some more tests. She still felt dizzy."

My wolf howls, the sound a raw, visceral panic, and I struggle to keep control. "Where is she?" I demand, my voice rough.

The nurse shakes her head, a mix of confusion and concern. "I don't know. She was just here. She can't have gone far."

I push past her, my mind a storm, the fear choking me. What if she's collapsed again? What if she's hurt?

I think back to the night we met in the forest, when she was trying to run away. What if she's leaving me?

No one would even blame her after how I reacted.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

He's really gone.

The tears start as a trickle, hot and unwelcome, but they quickly turn into a torrent, a flood of everything I've been holding back.

I can't breathe, can't think, can't do anything but cry.

It feels like all my worst fears have been confirmed, and witnessing the reality of it cuts deeper than I ever thought possible.

He didn't even give me a chance to explain, to tell him why I was so scared to say anything. I've made a mess of everything.

The door swings open, and the nurse rushes back in, her face a mix of concern and sympathy. "Oh, honey," she says, coming to my side. "It's okay. Just take a deep breath."

I try to stop the tears, but they keep coming, and I feel like I'm going to drown in them. "He left," I manage to choke out. "He just left."

She wraps an arm around me, her presence warm and comforting. "It's going to be okay," she says, her voice soothing. "He'll come around. I've known him for a long time. He just needs to clear his head."

I look at her through my tears, surprised by her certainty. "How can you be sure?"

She smiles and strokes my back. "I'm Charlotte, Jace's sister," she says. "I've known

Aiden nearly all my life. He's hot-headed, a real alpha. But he's also a great guy and the best leader. He's not going to walk away from anything."

"He just did," I point out, fresh tears falling.

She shakes her head. "Sadly, he's not the first man I've seen do the wrong thing. You don't have to put up with that, but please wait until he gets back before getting upset anymore, okay? We still need to run some tests to find out why you're feeling dizzy."

I nod, knowing she's trying to be kind, but I still don't believe her.

My mind is spinning, and all I can think of is the way Aiden looked at me before he left.

The raw emotion in his eyes, the way he pulled back like I'd burned him.

The tears start again, and I feel the dizziness return, a heavy fog settling over me.

Charlotte glances at the door, like she's unsure whether to stay or go. "I need to go arrange those tests," she says gently, her voice full of understanding. "But I'll be just outside if you need anything. I won't be long."

She slips out, and I'm alone with the chaos in my head. I reach for my phone, my hands trembling, and text Emily.

He found out. I think I've ruined everything.

The message hangs there, it stays unread, and I'm not sure what else to do.

The silence in the room stretches, oppressive and thick.

I think about calling Hannah, but the thought of saying the words out loud is just too much.

I feel so alone, so unbearably alone, and I don't know how to make it stop.

The walls close in, the small room suffocating, and I hear voices from the hallway.

"Poor girl," Charlotte says, her tone soft and kind. "I've never seen him like that. He'll come to his senses, but she's a mess. You have to do something."

I don't hear a voice answer her, so I assume she must be on the phone. Her words are kind, but I feel so ashamed that everyone is going to know about this. His rejection is so public, I can barely breathe.

I need to get out.

The thought hits me hard, and I know I have to leave before I break down completely.

Before I hear any more whispers, before I see the pitying looks that feel like daggers.

I can't stay here. I can't do this. Not with everyone watching.

I stand, my legs shaky, and glance at the door.

The urge to run is overwhelming, and I don't even hesitate.

The hallway is empty, and I move quickly, the urgency in my chest pushing me forward.

I catch a glimpse of Charlotte at the front desk, her back turned as she talks on the phone, and I seize the moment, darting out the side entrance.

The cool air hits me, cool and bracing, and I have to force myself to keep moving.

The clinic sits on the edge of the town center, and I weave through the streets, my pulse a frantic rhythm in my ears.

I don't know where I'm going, don't care, as long as it's away.

The buildings blur past, and I find myself at one of the parks, where the trees are tall and inviting.

I take the path that leads toward the forest. The world spins, and I feel the dizzying rush of tears and panic.

My vision blurs, and I grip the rough bark of a tree, the dizziness threatening to pull me under.

The nausea comes in rolling waves, but I push through it, my feet pounding the trail.

The trees blur around me, and I wonder if I'm going to collapse again.

The dizziness sharpens, a sudden piercing clarity, and then it's gone.

My breath catches, and I feel the pulse of magic, wild and untamed.

It fills the air, electric, and I know the suppression spell has broken.

The sensation is overwhelming because my magic never felt like this before, and I watch as the forest responds dramatically.

Vines twist and curl, and flowers bloom vibrant and lush, as though they're trying to cheer me up.

It should be comforting, but instead, it feels like a reminder of everything I can't control.

I run faster, the path winding through the trees.

The thrum of magic becomes ever more relentless, the colors and scents a riot around me, and I can't escape it.

I don't know how long I run or how far, but suddenly it's too much, the weight of it all crashing down.

I stop, doubling over, my breath ragged.

The tears come again, and I sink to the ground, letting them fall, letting the forest swallow my sobs.

The flowers bloom wildly, an explosion of color and life, but all I can think about is Aiden and his rejection, not just of me, but of the twins growing inside me.

Twins.

The word echoes in my mind, a mix of terror and longing. I look down at my body, the slight curve of my stomach, the fullness in my breasts, and the reality of it hits me in a way it hasn't before. They're real. They're inside me. They're already part of me.

The fear is immediate, a sharp, familiar sting.

What if I get huge? What if I'm so big and different from the other shifters' pregnancies that no one will want me around?

What if they laugh at me? I know the changes are happening fast, and I can already

see them.

I try to breathe, to push the panic down, but it's there, insistent.

But beneath the fear, a new feeling blooms, unexpected and fierce.

I touch my stomach, imagining the tiny lives growing inside, and a surge of protectiveness fills me.

A determination that no matter what happens with Aiden, I won't let them feel unwanted.

I won't let them feel loss and hurt the way I have.

The tears slow, and I wipe them away, my resolve hardening. I'll be enough for them. I have to be. I picture their faces again, little versions of Aiden, and this time the image doesn't terrify me. It fills me with something dangerously close to joy. I want these babies.

I stand and look around at the forest, the magic calms slightly as I take a breath. The flowers litter the forest floor like a beautiful carpet of blue and white, and a new feeling stirs. For the first time, I look at this wild magic, and I see it for what it is: beautiful.

The vines, the blooms, the life surrounding me.

This is mine. It's not a burden, not something to hide or fear.

It's a gift, beautiful and unique, and I can learn to embrace it.

To control it. I think of Aiden, of how I've been so afraid that I wasn't enough for

him, but maybe it's time to stop letting that fear rule me.

The world is full of wolves, like Marian said, but maybe it's time I stop caring. I'm stronger than this.

I think of the babies again and the way my body is changing, but this time I feel the fear start to loosen its grip, the panic ebbing away.

So what if I get big? So what if I look different from the other shifters?

I'm not like them, and that's okay. I'm not going to let anyone make me feel less than I am. Not anymore.

The forest sways gently, as though it's agreeing with me, and I feel a calm settle over my heart, a quiet certainty. I touch my stomach, feeling the warmth, the life inside, and I know that whatever happens, we'll have each other. If Aiden doesn't want us...that will be his loss.

Suddenly, a sharp cry cuts through the air, piercing through my revelation. I freeze, listening, and it comes again, a small, desperate wail. My heart lurches, the most primal of instincts flaring to life, and I move toward the sound, my feet quick on the path.

It's a child. Alone in the forest?

The cry continues, urgent and insistent, and I push through the trees, the foliage thick around me. I picture a lost pup, alone and scared, and the thought makes my pulse race.

"I'm coming. Are you alright?" I call out, hoping for a reply, but only the sound of crying returns.

The path narrows, winding through a dense tangle of vines and blooms, and I follow the sound, my breath quick and shallow.

I reach a small clearing, and the sight makes me pause.

A narrow and fast-moving river cuts through the forest, and the water looks dark and cold in contrast to the beautiful, soft light of the forest. On the other side, a small figure stands, its outline blurred by the mist.

The child?

I take a step closer, and the figure shifts, its form rippling and changing. A sharp laugh echoes across the water, and I feel the blood drain from my face. It's not a child.

I turn to run, but it's too late.

The figure moves quickly and fluidly, and I watch, frozen in fear, as it shifts again, stretching into a blurred shape.

It's across the water before I can blink, before I can even scream.

A man stands in front of me now, laughing, his voice sharp and cruel.

My heart stops, then races with a fear so deep I can taste it.

Malik. It has to be Malik.

He stands there, his eyes burning with a cruel, mocking light.

His face is unnaturally old and haggard, deep lines carved into his skin, and his body

is thin and disfigured, the left side hunched and twisted.

I can see the toll the battle took on him, the way it's ravaged him, leaving him a shadow of what he once was.

But he's still terrifying, still dangerous, and the look in his eyes tells me he's enjoying this far too much.

"Not what you expected?" he sneers, his voice a rasping taunt.

I try to back away, but my legs won't move. The fear is paralytic, cold, and consuming.

"I've been waiting for you," he says, stepping closer, his presence suffocating. "But I didn't think you'd come running to me so easily."

"What do you want?" I manage to choke out, my voice trembling.

"What do I want?" he laughs again, a harsh, grating sound. "I want you. I need some magic to...recover. And yours is perfect."

"W-why?" I stammer, feeling stupid for even asking.

Malik tips his head to the side, assessing me. "Look at the forest," he says, and then glances at my stomach, making my nausea lurch. "You carry life everywhere you go. It's perfect for my needs."

The panic tightens, sharper than ever, and I instinctively wrap my arms around my stomach. "You're not taking anything from me," I say, my voice trying to sound brave, but coming out as a whisper.

Malik laughs, the sound utterly humorless as his gaze flickers to mine. “Oh, I’m going to take everything.”

His words are a knife, cutting through the last of my bravery, and I know I have to get out of here.

I see him move, a blur of speed and malice, and I break into a run, the path a wild blur beneath my feet, my breathing coming in panicked gasps.

I hear him behind me, closer, and the fear is so overwhelming it feels like I’m drowning in it.

“Aiden,” I scream, the name tearing from my throat as Malik lunges for me.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

The blood rushes in my head, creating a noise so loud that I can barely think as I rush around the house, checking every room before accepting she's not here.

Where is she?

Where the hell is she?

The questions pound through me, a relentless rhythm of fear and desperation.

I check the driveway, the garage, anywhere, everywhere, but she's gone.

I push back into the house, my breaths coming in ragged gasps, and I feel the raw edge of panic clawing at me.

What if she's collapsed? What if she's hurt? What if she's trying to run away?

"Fuck." The word tears from my throat as I grab my phone, my hands shaking. I call her for the millionth time, but it goes straight to voicemail again, and the sound of her recorded voice is like a punch to the gut.

I sink to the floor, my back against the wall, and the world tilts around me.

I can't lose her. I can't lose her. The words loop around in my mind, and I feel something shift, something inside me that I can't explain, but my wolf feels acutely.

It's a strange awareness, a pull, a tether that wasn't there before.

It feels like a strange warmth, a flicker of hope, and I slowly realize that I'm feeling Serena.

I can feel how scared she is.

A new kind of panic grips me, urgent and raw, and I dial Callum's number, my fingers desperate on the screen. He answers on the third ring, his voice sharp with concern.

"She's gone," I say, the words tumbling out before he even speaks, frantic and broken. "I can't find her. I think she's leaving me, but she's in danger."

"Aiden?" Callum's voice is confused. "Calm down. Let's get Tristen on the line, too. Who's gone?"

I hear the line connecting to Tristen, he answers quickly, and Callum cuts in immediately telling him to listen.

"Serena." Her name tumbles from my mouth. "I left her at the clinic, and now she's gone."

There's a pause, and I hear Tristen's voice in the background, low and urgent as he tries to catch up. "What happened?" Callum asks. "Where are you?"

"At the house," I say, barely able to get the words out. "I think she's running. I need—"

"Did something happen between you?" Tristen's voice is clearer now, and both of them are listening intently.

"Yes," I admit, the truth bitter and burning. "I fucked up. She told me she's

pregnant.”

There’s a pause, and I hear them share a quick exchange, their voices too low to catch. “Aiden,” Callum says, his tone careful. “You need to slow down and think. Are you sure she’s running? Are you sure she’s in danger?”

“I can feel it,” I say, the words a rush of pure desperation.

“Shit,” I hear Tristen say in the background. “Is she okay?”

“That’s the thing,” I say, feeling the growing warmth, the strange connection. “I don’t know how, but I can feel her. She’s scared.” My voice breaks, the fear too much to contain. “I can feel how scared she is.”

There’s a pause, and I hear Callum and Tristen exchange a mental look. I can’t see their faces, but I know it all too well.

“You’re feeling the mate bond,” Callum says, his voice steady, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

I freeze, the words hitting me like a slap. I never considered that the mate bond would feel like this. So strong and direct. “Is it because her magic was suppressed? Does that mean I can sense her wolf more, or is it because of the twins?” I ramble until I hear my brother’s collective gasps.

“Twins,” Callum exclaims.

“Woah,” Tristen laughs, “you are in trouble. Congrats, man.”

Hearing their congratulations does something to me, and I feel even stupider. Of course, this is good news. Why wouldn’t I see that immediately? I’ve never felt like a

bigger fool than I do right now. How could I have walked out on her? And now she's out there, scared. Of what?

A thought hits me just as another wave of fear rolls through the bond. Malik. The name is so clear that I know it comes from her.

"Malik," I say down in the line, grabbing my keys and heading back out to the truck. "She's scared of Malik. He has her."

"You don't know that for sure," Tristen reasons, but I can hear the concern in his voice.

"I feel it. I-I need help," I tell him, and in the background, I hear them both shouting instructions to others before Callum comes back on the line.

"You've got it, we're on our way," he says, and I can hear his truck engine roaring to life. "Follow the mate bond, let your wolf take over. He'll take you to her, and we'll track you."

"Em is calling the witches," Tristen says, his voice full of urgency. "We're near the coven now, so close to the border anyway. We'll get to you."

I hang up, my mind on fire, my wolf clawing to get out. I reach the edge of the woods beyond the property, letting the bond guide me and the fear drive me. The urgency pulses through my veins, and I shift, the world blurring as my wolf fully takes over.

I run, my paws pounding the earth, the scent of her filling me, a beacon in the chaos.

She's close. She has to be. The bond tugs at me, leading me deeper into the forest, and I push harder, faster, feeling the raw, electric pull.

I can only hope that this new bond is real and true, and not leading me in the wrong direction.

The towering trees blur past, a riot of color and scents, and I know I'm getting closer. I know because the flowers are everywhere, blooming wildly, unnaturally, beautifully, and chaotically. The air is thick with their scent, and I feel the bond tighten, feeling the warmth, fear, and life.

Pure Serena.

I turn a sharp bend in the trail, and suddenly the air changes, a dark, ominous energy creeping in. My wolf senses it before I do, a wrongness that makes my fur stand on end, my wolf baring teeth. The scent of her is stronger now, and I follow it, my heart a wild, frantic beat.

I reach a clearing, and the sight in front of me stops me in my tracks.

My wolf howls, the sound raw and furious.

Serena lies in the center, unconscious, her body limp and surrounded by a circle of dark energy.

The ground around her is scorched, the grass withered, and my heart stops as I see the blood on her head; it looks so stark against her pale skin.

A figure shifts beside her, hunched and twisted, and I know it's him. Malik. His face is gaunt and hollow, aged and filled with desperation, carved into every line. His eyes are fixed on Serena, a mad kind of hunger on his face, and I see the sickly glow of dark magic enveloping them both.

The sight sends a jolt of rage through me, and I lunge forward, my wolf wild and

fierce, but an invisible force throws me back, the circle holding strong. Malik's head snaps up, and I see the shock in his eyes as he stumbles back, his grip on Serena faltering before he recovers slightly.

"No," he snarls, his voice a rasping hiss. "She's mine. Her magic is mine."

"Not a fucking chance," I growl, the sound ripping from my throat.

I shift as I approach the edge of the circle again, my body human now but seething with power.

I feel the fire brimming beneath my skin, and I summon it, letting it surge to the surface, allowing it to consume me.

The flames roar to life, and I release a volley at one of the magic circle markers.

"I'll finish you once I have her magic," Malik sneers. "Her gifts will rejuvenate me, and then I will have yours too, alpha. "

I ignore him. My only focus is on Serena as she stirs slightly.

Malik's powers are obvious, as weak as he is, and whatever he's trying to do isn't happening quickly.

I summon my fire again and repeatedly fire at the magic circle markers.

I can tell it's infuriating Malik, but he doesn't stop his spell, and the bond only urges me on as I feel Serena's body trying to resist.

I glance up, seeing the forest explode with light as Callum bursts through the trees.

His lightning immediately joins my fire as we focus on the circle.

I'm vaguely aware that he has brought his betas with him, and Ava too, who has shifted, something she rarely does, her wolf fierce and fixed on Malik.

Malik's face twists with rage, his body hunched and desperate. "No!" he screams, his voice a raw, furious snarl. "You won't take this from me."

We don't even speak, as no response is necessary, only brute force.

I barely register Tristen's arrival, but I feel the force of it. The air fills with his magic as a tornado whips through the trees and batters the magic field of the circle.

A moment later, Marian, Emily, and the witches appear, white light surrounding them as they charge toward us. The other women follow, their presence a wave of energy and power. Marian's magic joins with the alphas', and I feel the heat, the force of it, surrounding us and battling the circle.

Malik's face is a mask of fury, his eyes wild and burning as he tries to hold his ground. "I'll kill you all for this," he spits, but his voice is strained, his body shaking.

"Everyone focus," Marian commands, her voice sharp and insistent. "He's weaker than he looks."

Malik's face twists, and he falters again as the magic of all three alphas, the witches, and the pack finally begins to take its toll.

The circle flickers, and the air vibrates with a raw, electric tension.

I feel the bond surge, a desperate, urgent pulse, and I know Serena is fighting. I know she's beginning to wake up.

I step forward, shouting her name even as the chaos continues around me.

I see her trying to stand, weak and unsteady.

Serena lifts her head, her eyes meeting mine across the chaos and through the magical barrier.

I see her determination, fierce and unyielding, and I know she's not done yet. She's stronger than any of us.

"Serena!" I shout, my voice a raw, desperate plea. "I'm here. I'm so fucking sorry."

She looks at me, and I feel the bond tighten, feel the warmth, the life, the power.

I see the moment she decides, and she seems to know exactly what she has to do.

She stands, her body trembling as she faces Malik, and I see the dark magic falter; the circle sputters as she reaches within herself, letting her magic bloom.

The forest responds, an explosion of life and color, and I watch in awe as the ground beneath Malik surges, vines twisting and swelling, a massive tree erupting from the earth beneath his feet.

He stumbles back, his eyes wide with shock and terror as the tree envelops him before he can even raise his hands.

Thick branches curl around his struggling form, obscuring him from view.

I hear his scream, a furious, desperate sound that's quickly swallowed by the thick bark, and then he's gone, entombed within the tree itself.

The tree stands tall and impossibly ancient, considering it didn't exist only moments before, its presence dominating the clearing, and I feel the dark energy that lingers just out of reach.

The barrier dissolves to nothing in front of us, and I watch in horror as Serena collapses to the ground, the forest floor bursting into a carpet of flowers as if to soften her fall.

"No," I scream, rushing toward her. "Serena," I whisper, the name a plea, a prayer, as I press my forehead to hers. "I'm so sorry. I need you. Please."

The bond pulses, faint and flickering, and I feel the tears burn in my eyes, the terror of losing her more real than anything I've ever felt.

"Aiden," I hear Callum's voice, but it's distant, like it's coming from the end of a long tunnel. "Get her out of here. Get her to the clinic."

I'm dimly aware of everyone's movements, voices, and sounds, but I operate purely on autopilot as I begin the journey to the clinic, holding Serena's pale and unconscious body in my arms. I don't know exactly what she did, but it's clear that Malik is defeated, or at least contained.

But so help me, goddess, if Serena dies, I will free him, so that I can kill him myself.

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Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

I'm floating in a thick, heavy fog, and everything is distant and muted, like I'm underwater. I think I hear voices, and I think I recognize them, but they're muffled, and I can't tell if they're real or just in my head.

Aiden's voice. Sharp and urgent, but it fades before I can make sense of it. I try to reach for it, try to hold on, but it slips away, and I'm left with the echo of it, the longing.

The fear.

The darkness closes in, and I see Malik's face again, twisted and haggard, his eyes burning with a cruel, mocking light. He's laughing, a sharp, grating sound that fills the air, fills my mind.

"I'm going to take everything," he says, and I feel the terror wrap around me, cold and all-consuming.

I'm back in the forest, back in the clearing, and I see him standing over me, a mad hunger in his eyes. The dark magic is like a suffocating blanket, and I can't breathe, can't move, can't fight. I feel the life, the warmth, slipping away, and I know it's over. I know he's won.

The babies.

The thought is a knife, cutting through the fog, and I panic, trying to fight to the surface of my consciousness.

I want my babies, I want Aiden, I want my life.

The darkness pulls me under, deeper and deeper, and I can't find my way out.

I hear a woman's voice, warm and soothing, I think it sounds like Marian, but it fades all too quickly, replaced by Malik's laughter echoing through my mind.

I'm going to take everything.

The words are a noose, tightening around my throat, and I feel my panic rising, a desperate, clawing need to know if the babies are okay. The fear is suffocating, and I feel myself slipping, the world going in and out of focus, the fight leaving me.

Aiden's voice again, a distant rumble, and I reach for it, for him, but it's like grasping at smoke. I feel the warmth of him, the life, the strength, and I know he's near, but everything is blurred, spinning, and I can't hold on.

Did Malik win after all?

The terror feels like a real living thing, a weight on my chest, and I feel the darkness closing in, blotting out the light, the hope. Was the tree that entombed Malik just a dream? Was it all a dream?

I want to cry out, but the sound dies in my throat, and I'm falling again, the fog thick and relentless.

The babies.

I feel something reaching for me, and I reach back, a desperate, wild grasp. I feel the bond, a flicker of light in the darkness, and it feels like Aiden. Like life.

I hold on to the feeling, hold on to him, the feeling of warmth growing stronger and more insistent. I gradually feel the thick fog begin to lift, and the world sharpens and comes into focus around me.

“Aiden,” I whisper, the name a breath, a prayer, and I feel him move even closer, his presence wrapping around me, pulling me back into the real world.

The darkness finally fades, the terror loosening its grip, and I hear his voice, clear and urgent. I know he’s with me, and I feel him holding my body close.

The babies. The words are a desperate pulse, and I feel the bond answer, a rush of love, fierce and undeniable. I gasp, the air rushing back into my lungs, and for the first time, I know I’m okay. I know I really did survive.

I force my eyes open and see his face hovering above mine, his eyes wild with relief and fear. “Serena,” he says, his voice breaking, and he pulls me even closer, holding me so tight I can barely breathe.

“Oh god,” I sob, the tears spilling over. “The babies—are they—?”

“Marian’s here, she’s monitoring them with the doctor,” he says, as I feel others moving closer and see Marian’s face appear. Gone is her usually cocky, mischievous demeanor; instead, she simply looks filled with concern.

“No fear, Serena,” she whispers. “The babies are strong, just like you. Rest. All will be well now.”

I feel the warmth of Aiden’s hands, his breath on my face, and I know she’s telling the truth. I know we’re safe. I close my eyes, the relief washing through me, and let the darkness take me, but this time, it’s the soft, sweet darkness of sleep.

I drift in and out of consciousness, the hours blurring together.

Occasionally, I hear voices and feel the gentle touch of hands pulling me back each time I slip under.

The clinic is quiet and soothing, but my mind is in a haze of dreams and memories.

Sometimes I think I see Aiden, his form sitting vigil at my bedside, his presence a constant, comforting weight.

Other times, I feel the warmth of Marian or the nurses caring for me in this soft cocoon.

It's dark outside the window when the fog finally lifts completely, and I wake to the familiar feeling of Aiden's hand wrapped around mine.

My body feels weak, my throat dry, and I blink against the light, trying to focus.

Aiden's face comes into view, his eyes fixed on me with an intensity that makes my heart clench.

"Hey," he says, his voice a rough whisper. "You're awake."

"Yeah," I croak, the word more breath than sound. "I think so." I try to sit up. Aiden leans forward to help me, and I let his masculine scent wash over me, sending shockwaves straight to my core. As he leans me back on the pillows, I can feel my cheeks reddening at the contact.

"I'm so damn sorry, Serena," he blurts out, taking me by surprise. "I ran out of there like a childish pup. Not a man, not an alpha. Not someone you deserve."

I'm momentarily lost for words and realize I'm gripping his hand. "I'm the one who should be saying sorry," I say, my voice still hoarse and weak. "I should have told you before. About the twins."

He shakes his head. "No, I should have stayed. I should have listened instead of running. I was just..."

"Scared?" I suggest, and he flinches slightly.

"Yeah," he admits, his voice raw. "I've never been so scared. I didn't think I could do it, Serena. Be a father. I'm worried I'll be like Ralph. He was a bastard, and I'm terrified I'll fuck it up like he did."

I look at the vulnerability in his eyes, and my heart aches. "Aiden," I say, squeezing his hand. "You could never be like that. You're not him. You're a good man, a good alpha. You're everything he wasn't."

He closes his eyes, and I see the tension in his shoulders ease slightly. "I want to believe that," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "I want to believe I can do this. That I can be what you and the babies need."

"You can," I say with certainty, feeling the truth of it in every fiber of my being. "You already are. I was scared, too. Scared I'd never be enough, that I didn't belong."

Aiden moves to sit next to me on the bed and takes my hand. "You belong here, with me. I love you so much, Serena." He places his other hand on my stomach, and I feel the warmth radiate through my body. "I look at you and I see everything I want in life. You are the life I want."

Tears spring to my eyes as he leans forward and kisses me tenderly. We break apart, and I let the tears fall. "I love you, Aiden."

“Thank the goddess, because I love you too,” he laughs, kissing me again, deeper this time, and filled with promise.

The days pass in a blur of tests and reassurances. The doctors at the clinic finally clear me, and I can’t believe it’s only been two days since Malik took me. Since Aiden found me.

We drive back to the house, cutting across the town, and I feel a stirring in my chest, a tentative kind of belonging. I glance at Aiden, his profile strong and sure, and I know we’re going to be okay. I know the babies will be okay.

As we pull into the driveway, the sight that greets me is overwhelming.

The garden is still a wild tangle, but now it’s filled with people.

All of them. Callum, Ava, and their kids, Tristen and Emily, Marian and the witches, and Aiden’s betas, including Jace and his sister.

They’re laughing, talking, and the sudden realization that they’re here for us, for me, makes my heart swell.

“We weren’t sure you’d be up for this,” Emily says, her voice warm as she crosses the drive to hug me. “But we wanted to celebrate you and these babies.”

Aiden’s arm wraps around my waist, pulling me close, and I feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat against my side. “I hope you don’t mind, I said it would be okay.”

Fresh tears spring to my eyes as I shake my head, catching sight of the banner hanging from the porch. Welcome Home, Serena. And that’s what this feels like—a homecoming.

The afternoon is a blur of celebration, laughter, friendly voices, hugs, and the overwhelming realization that I'm not alone. Not anymore. I feel the warmth of it, the life, the belonging, and it fills me in a way I never dreamed possible.

Aiden is by my side, his presence a constant reassurance, and we move through the crowd together, the people around us a beautiful whirl of color and noise.

I catch sight of Callum with his pups, and Ava is chasing after them, her face glowing with happiness.

Tristen and Emily hold each other close in a tender embrace, their baby nestled between them.

I'm glad I never met Ralph, but I wonder what he'd make of all this.

That despite his abuse, his sons have built happy families and united the island instead of allowing it to fracture.

Marian's voice carries above the crowd, and she approaches, her smile wide and approving. "Quite the turnout, Serena," she says, her eyes twinkling. "How are you feeling, dear?"

"Better," I say, and I mean it. "I can't believe you're all here."

"Why wouldn't we be?" she asks, her voice warm, knowing. "You did something remarkable. You deserve to be celebrated."

I feel the color rise in my cheeks. "I didn't really know what I was doing," I admit. "I think everyone did it, together."

"Mmm," Marian hums, her eyes bright with approval. "You trapped him. That tree,

your magic—it's holding him. The forest itself is keeping him contained. You did that."

Source Creation Date: August 2, 2025, 3:10 pm

Her words sink in, a weight and a lightness at the same time, and I look at her, a mix of disbelief and wonder. “Because of me?”

She nods, her expression soft. “Because of you.”

The realization is huge, and I feel Aiden’s grip on my waist tighten, grounding me. “You’re amazing,” he whispers, his breath warm against my ear, and I lean into him, feeling the truth of it. My cheeks burn under the weight of it, but I don’t fight it anymore.

The warmth of the afternoon stretches on, and I can’t stop smiling. I watch as the crowd begins to thin, the hugs and goodbyes lingering, the air full of laughter and promises to see each other soon.

“Get some rest,” Emily says, giving me one last squeeze. “We’ll be back in a few days. I want to see that bump grow.”

I laugh, the sound light and easy. “I’m sure it will,” I say, and I catch Aiden’s gaze, the warmth in his eyes clear to see.

Eventually, it’s just us, the house quiet and still. The garden is still a riot of flowers, its wild magic a perfect reflection of how I feel inside. Alive.

“Come on,” Aiden says, his voice tender as he pulls me toward the house. “You should rest.”

I shake my head, the thought of being away from him more than I can bear. “I’m not

tired,” I protest, but he lifts me into his arms, cradling me against his chest.

“Let me take care of you,” he says, and there’s a gentle insistence in his tone that I can’t ignore.

He carries me upstairs, and I feel the heat of his skin, the strength in his arms, and the overwhelming, undeniable need for him. My body is more awake than I am, and I can feel the heat pooling low in my belly.

He pushes the door open with his foot, and I expect him to set me down on the bed, but he doesn’t. Instead, he sits, pulling me into his lap, holding me like I’m something precious and fragile. Like I’m everything.

I look at him, the intensity in his eyes, and I can’t hold back.

I kiss him, hard and hungry, my mouth desperate on his.

He groans, the sound low and deep, and my sense of need feels overwhelming.

My hands are in his hair, pulling him closer, and I feel the wild beat of my heart, the wild beat of his, and I know I need him. I need him now.

“Serena,” he breathes, pulling back slightly, his eyes dark with want and concern. “Are you sure you’re okay? I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to—”

I cut him off with another kiss, fierce and insistent, my body pressing against his. “I’m okay,” I say, honestly.

Suddenly, he flips me onto my back, his hands sliding under my shirt, and I can feel the heat of his touch and the urgency of his movements.

He kisses me again, hard, before moving down my body, his lips trailing fire across

my skin.

My breath catches as he pulls my pants down, his eyes locked on mine, dark and full of intent.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, his voice a low growl, and the words send a shiver down my spine, a warmth spreading from my core.

I gasp as his mouth finds my most sensitive skin, his tongue flicking against my clit, and the heat coils tighter, sharper.

I grip the sheets, my body arching off the bed, and I feel a dizzying rush of pleasure, overwhelming and consuming.

He holds my soft hips, pulling me closer, his mouth relentless and hungry, and I moan, the sound raw and desperate.

The world blurs, and I feel tension building in my core, radiating through my entire body.

A tight, insistent pressure that drives me wild, and I can’t think, can’t breathe, can’t do anything but feel.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, urging him closer, and he groans against me, the vibration sending a shockwave through my entire body.

“Aiden,” I cry, his name a plea as he pushes two fingers gently into my tight channel, pushing me over the edge.

“Fuck,” he groans as I squeeze his fingers, my juices coating his hand as he pumps them in and out of me, riding me through my orgasm.

He moves back up my body, his lips finding mine as he kisses me deeply, and I taste myself on him, the sweetness mingling with the heat of his mouth.

I'm breathless, my body trembling, but I want more. I want him.

I pull at his clothes, my hands frantic, and he lets me strip him, his skin hot against mine, and his hard length presses against me. I moan, a desperate, needy sound that only makes him harder.

He hesitates, his eyes searching mine, and I see the concern, the care. "I won't break," I whisper, wrapping my leg around his waist to pull him closer.

He groans, the sound ripped from his chest, and he pushes into me, slowly and carefully, filling me completely. I gasp, the sensation intense, and he stills, letting me adjust, his breath hot against my neck.

"Goddess, Serena," he says, his voice a husky growl. "You feel so fucking good."

"Move. Please," I beg, my body tightening around him, and he does, pulling out and thrusting back in, long and slow, every stroke deliberate, sending shockwaves through me.

I gasp, feeling every inch of him, and he thrusts again, harder this time, the movement sending my body arching off the bed. I moan, the sound filling the room, and he grips my hips, his fingers digging into my soft flesh as he moves inside me, faster, more urgent.

The pressure builds, a tight, coiling heat, and I can't hold back, can't do anything but feel him, all of him, stretching me, filling me.

His mouth finds mine, swallowing my cries, and I claw at his back, pulling him closer, deeper.

He groans, a raw, guttural sound, and his thrusts grow more frantic, the rhythm wild and all-consuming.

I feel the tension snap, the heat exploding through me, and I cry out, my body shaking with the force of it. “Aiden,” I scream, the name breaking from my lips with my release, and he follows, his body tensing, his moans mingling with mine as he spills into me, hot and fierce.

And then I see it.

The room is filled with flowers, vibrant and wild, pouring in through the open window and covering every surface.

The colors are bright, impossibly bright, and I gasp, feeling the pulse of magic, alive and untamed.

I can barely look at Aiden, wondering what he’ll say, but when I do, I see a wide smile stretching across his face.

He leans down and kisses me deeply. “You are beautiful. Everything you do is beautiful.”

“We’re going to have a beautiful life,” I say, tears springing to my eyes as he nods and then leans down to kiss my gently rounded stomach. Eventually, his kisses become more passionate, and I realize he’s going to take me again, and I know I’m finally exactly where I belong.

THE END