



Broken Rejected Mate

(Badlands Wolves #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A cruel Alpha rejected me. Then I found out I was carrying his secret baby girl

I was an Omega outcast, far below his standing, so he rejected me like I was nothing.

I left, but when my baby girl has her first premonition, we become prey.

That's when he kidnaps us for protection...back to my small town. Back at his mercy.

The way he broke me still hurts, but I survived for my baby girl and myself.

Now he steps back into my life and acts like he owns me.

I remember exactly how he claimed my heart and tore it in two.

But when he takes us into his home to protect us, I have no choice but to follow.

I'm at the mercy of the pain he caused, of the heat that I know is coming.

I fight him and use my psychic abilities, but I'm no match for a strong, powerful Alpha.

My resistance turns into a heated desperation that only he can soothe.

My body turns into a weak, squirming mess that only his knots can heal.

Will my Alpha mate reject me again?

The Wolves of the Badlands are cruel, tough, and possessive. You think you can escape them, but they drag you back everytime. Because they will heal you, protect you, and own you the way only a mate can.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

It's dark, and I am absolutely drowning in the scent of Emin Argent.

I know this nightmare—I've been here before.

Dread fills my throat, my chest tightening to a painful point. This is the nightmare that loops in my head, no matter how many times I try to tell myself I'm over this.

Here I am, my teenage body crouched in his closet, peering out into his bedroom, heart hammering in my chest. Emin's room is not what you'd expect from a teenage boy—it's tidy to a fault, clean, orderly. I know this is because of his parents—mostly his dad—and their expectations for him.

Kellen Argent's voice fills the room, "I just want to make sure you're doing homework. Like you said."

"Of course I am," Emin shoots back, voice casual, relaxed, like it's the strangest thing that his father is asking at all. It's easy for Emin to pretend I'm not here. We've never met at his house before—for obvious reasons.

It's a summer night, the sweet scent of the lilacs floating in through the open window and reaching me, even all the way in the closet, tucked behind Emin's crew necks and sweaters, swathed in his clothing and the scent of him.

When his father knocked on the door, Emin had practically shoved me inside, telling me to go as far back as I could. He thought that would be enough to hide my scent, but I'd started casting under my breath.

To this day, I'm shocked that my meager casting was enough to fully hide me. That, or Kellen Argent was willfully ignorant, pretending like his son would know better than to have something to do with me.

Because if Kellen Argent had found me in that closet, there's no doubt in my mind that he would have grabbed me by my hair, dragged me through the house, and thrown me out on the street with a warning not to come back.

It would be one thing for a teenage alpha to have an omega in his room, and a completely different thing for him to have me, Veva Marone, child of the town drunk—a nobody—tucked away in his closet.

There's the sound of Kellen walking away, then the closet door is opening, and Emin is peering down at me, his face red, flushed.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he hisses, reaching down and grabbing my wrist, pulling me up. He's not rough, but he's not gentle, either.

I know this is just a dream, but all the feelings come rushing back to me. The dread, the shame. The stupid, mindless hope.

"Emin," I clear my throat, bite my bottom lip. "I have something to tell you. Something important."

The inflection is clear, as is the way I glance down at my stomach. I'm late, need to talk to him. I'll need a test. For some reason, I'm stupidly thinking this might be the thing to break through the barrier for us. To show him that I'm not just something to climb.

I know Emin's father wants him to climb the ranks. To use his position as an alpha and friend to Dorian Fields to help the family improve its standing. I know that

Kellen would rather kill me than let Emin be seen with an omega like me, from a family like mine.

But for some reason, I naively think a baby might change that.

“There is nothing ,” Emin glances downward, in the direction of my stomach, “that could be important enough for you to come to my house. Do you get that?”

It would have been less painful if he’d slapped me across the face.

“But I thought—”

His hand is on my wrist again, though loosely, like he’s trying to avoid contact with my skin. “You need to get out of here, Veva. And listen— this is done between us, okay? It’s been a massive mistake.”

Now I’m climbing through the window, feeling the final push of his palm against my back, then the snap of it shutting behind me. I’m crying—partly because of what happened, and partly because I should have known better.

Why would Emin care about me being pregnant? It doesn’t change a single thing between us. In fact, it only makes it worse.

I’m stumbling through his front lawn, knowing I’ll have to leave. That there’s nobody here for me—no other choice.

But the street morphs below my feet, and instead of the familiar concrete in the Ambersky territory, it’s where we live now. The camp, the dusty ground, and Sarina standing right at the edge of it all.

I stare at my daughter—nearly ten years old now, and the brightest young woman

I've ever met.

Her knees are knobby in the way youth shapes them, her usually bright eyes flashing with fear.

She knows something is coming, but she doesn't know what.

She's always been small, from the first day she was born, a tiny little pink thing that nearly fit in my hand, to now, wrists and ankles with delicate bird bones.

Whatever is coming for her, she knows she can't take it.

And I'm much, much too far away from her.

This part of the nightmare is familiar, too. It always happens like this. From the closet in Emin's bedroom, trying to protect myself, to seeing Sarina, and being unable to protect her.

Like I always do, I open my mouth, trying to scream for her, trying to tell her to get out of the way. Above us, the sky darkens and grows heavy with black clouds. Dirt whips around her ankles, twirling like a tornado is about to form with her at its epicenter.

"Mom!" she calls, but her voice is swallowed, whipped away from the storm, so I'm only imagining the sound of it, twinkling and light, a sound that normally puts me at ease instantly. A sound I'm suddenly very sure I will never hear again.

" Mom !"

When I snap awake, Sarina's face is bent over mine, her eyes still sleepy and half-shut, it only takes me a few seconds to drink the details of our little hut—the camp

stove propped up on a table on the other side of the room, the wash basin, the jug of purified water.

Our clothes, folded neatly and stacked on a shelf.

Groggily, I watch as Sarina takes a few steps, then climbs back onto her own cot, still rubbing at her eyes.

“It’s just that same nightmare,” she says gently, using the same tone I’d use with her when she was a kid. “Go back to sleep, Mom.”

I blink again, scrub my hands over my face, and look at the door. Pale light is already seeping under the crack, dawn hinting at the horizon. There’s no way I’m going to sleep now, and besides—it’s market night. We need to get our things together.

When I step out of our hut, the entirety of the camp sprawls out before me. While to most people, the home that Sarina and I share might not look like much, it’s practically a mansion compared to most of the homes in the camp.

Carefully, I step through the dirt, watching the ground for scorpions as I make my way around tents and even some people directly on the ground.

Sounds of sleep breathe through the space, snores and exhalations, shifting and turning.

There are a few early risers, like me—another mother, already scrubbing at clothes in a wash bin.

A man is rolling up a sleeping bag, his face haggard, his beard scraggly.

Every time I wake up here, I’m reminded of what it was like the first night.

“Veva!”

I look up and see the very woman who took care of me the first night I was here—who knew I was pregnant even before I told her. When I’d started to cry, she took my head in her hands, looked me in the eye, and said, “You have options, dear.”

Willow—now wrinkled, gray eyes twinkling behind her glasses—wraps her arm around my shoulders, like she always does, and draws me in close, already pushing a hot cup of coffee into my hands.

“Good morning, it’s going to be a hot one,” Willow says, her voice more feeble than the last time I heard it. It seems like every day I blink and she ages right in front of me. It’s already been ten years since I met her—when Sarina turns ten, it will be nearly eleven.

I play along, raising my eyebrows. “When is it ever a hot one around here?”

She laughs and drops heavily down into her chair—a faded old thing she saved from the dump, cleaned up, and planted right outside her shed.

She’s sat in it every morning since. Two years ago, she found a companion for it, and it’s the chair I lower down into carefully, after checking to make sure there’s nothing on or around it that might pinch or bite me.

“Got some more gems for you,” Willow says, blowing on her coffee and glancing over at me. Despite the fact that we’re out here in the desert, it’s surprisingly chilly. This is nothing new to me—the weather was just like this at home, too. No moisture in the ground to hold the heat.

“That’s great,” I finally say, mind catching up to what Willow said. “I could use a few more to imbue before the market tonight.”

A beat passes, then Willow says, “You given any more thought to it?”

I know what she’s talking about. My gift—the one I inherited from my grandmother when she died. The gift I have no idea how to use. I blow on my coffee, shake my head.

Willow has a friend she thinks can help me learn to use it. I’m not sure it matters—casting is enough for me, and it feels a little too late to make anything of the clairsentience.

“Just let me know,” Willow says, snapping, “and she’ll come over like that.”

After that, we fall silent. If it weren’t for the market tonight, I’d see Willow for dinner. We don’t have much to talk about, because she already knows everything there is to know about me, Sarina, my plans for the future.

When we finish our coffee, I bring the mugs into Willow’s hut—slightly nicer than ours, with more insulation and, somehow, a set of rain-collecting plumbing—and scrub them out, setting them up to dry on the rack by her sink.

Willow’s little hut is full of trinkets, odds and ends. Back when her knees were good, she’d spend a lot of time out at the dump, picking out perfectly good pieces, hauling them back here, and giving them to the folks who needed them.

Sarina and I were often the recipients of those items, and that’s part of the reason why I managed to procure a tent before she was born.

By her fifth birthday, we’d already started piecing together the little home we have now, with the real wooden floors, insulated walls, and separate cots for the two of us.

“Did Willow have anything good?”

When I duck back into our shed, Sarina is already awake, face scrubbed pink, her fingers working her hair into French braids as she sits on the edge of her cot, a book propped open on her pillow.

“Just coffee,” I say, crossing through the room and dropping a kiss on her forehead. She does something between a sigh and a laugh, and doubles back to fix the braid where it slipped.

“No eggs?” Sarina practically whines. I pop open our cooler and peer inside, knowing she’s not going to want the cold oatmeal I’ve been prepping in glass jars.

Ten minutes later, we’re standing outside the large black grill in the center of camp, gratefully receiving a scoop of scrambled eggs cooked in bacon grease, and a surprise slab of breakfast ham.

“Wow,” Sarina says, eyes wide as she looks down at her plate. Meat like that is rare around here. And when it comes around, Herold usually throws it into a chili.

Herald, the large man standing behind the grill with an old spatula in his hand, gives her a gummy smile and waves the spatula at us. “You’re my best customers. Plus, Rina, you’re the one who’s gonna get out of here, make something of yourself.”

Sarina dips her head the way she always does when someone around here says that. Like she’s not accepting the compliment, but is accepting the responsibility of it. As if she genuinely owes it to Herald to make something of herself each time he slips her a little more food.

Before we leave, I hand him a stone, imbued with magic that should ease his aching back.

“Thanks, Vev,” he says, winking at me. “Keep ‘em coming.”

We head to a picnic table and slide in beside a few other women and kids. While the other kids laugh and play, chatting, Sarina pulls out her book and cracks it open, propping it up on a rock in front of her plate.

“Always reading,” one of the women says, shaking her head and giving me a knowing smile, as though this isn’t exactly what I want for Sarina. “She’ll grow out of it, someday.”

I smile at the woman, but put my hand on Sarina’s knee under the table. She knows how some of the people around here see her constant reading. But it’s going to get her out of here, get her a scholarship to one of the omega-only colleges in the Llewelyn territory.

In our shack, magicked into near non-existence and trapped beyond belief, is the bundle of bills and tin of change, containing all the money I’ve been saving for Sarina since the day I found out she was growing in my stomach.

It was too late for me—I was already rejected, alone, having run off from the only home I ever knew. But the possibility for her, the new life growing inside me, it gave me hope. Sarina has always been the most beautiful thing in my life.

Even if her red-gold hair makes my stomach twist sometimes, when I catch it in the light. Even if she sometimes gets a wrinkle between her eyes I know didn’t come from me. Even if I see him always in the tiny turns of her speech, how she tilts her head.

I love Sarina, even if half her DNA came from the man who shattered my entire world.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

I find Dorian where he always is in the mornings before a council meeting—hunched over the communal coffee pot, pilfering the first potent drops, weakening it for the rest of us.

“There goes the world’s greediest alpha leader,” I joke, surprised when he actually jumps, turning around and glaring at me, then taking a sip of what must be still-scalding coffee.

Dorian is a big dude—his beard a little unkempt, his hair not as neat as usual. Bags hang under his eyes, which are shadowed and bloodshot.

“Everything all good, man?” I ask, stepping forward to replace the coffee pot, to keep the coffee from scalding on the hot plate. He blinks at me, as though taking a moment to process what I’ve said.

“Oh,” he finally says, the word coming out half as a cough. “Yeah. Everything is fine. Hoping they have good news for us today And...the twins. Still not sleeping through the night.”

The twins, Noah and Oliver—my sister’s brand new babies with two heads of dark hair that perfectly match Dorian’s. Colicky, apparently, and two complete handfuls. At first, I loved being around them, holding one in each arm and thinking about what it would be like to teach them everything I knew.

To take them swimming, show them how to build anything they wanted.

Except Noah and Oliver aren’t mine—not really. Not in the way that I want.

Now, I try to infuse the situation with some amusement. “That’s rough. You look like shit, man.”

Dorian laughs, shakes his head, and shuffles out of the room. I follow him to the big meeting room, which smells like old carpet and, faintly, Janice’s perfume.

“Good morning, boys,” she chirps, grinning and gesturing to the table. “Got some bagels for the big meeting today!”

“Sweet, thanks,” I give her a kiss on the cheek, which makes her blush.

Janice is pushing back through the door as I drop into one of the empty chairs, grabbing an everything bagel and slathering it with a thick layer of cream cheese. Dorian lowers into the chair next to me and stares straight ahead, going completely comatose while drinking his coffee.

The first person to arrive is my father, who looks tired and chastened.

Without meaning to, I feel the slightest bit sorry for him, especially after everything that happened to him last year.

His wife—my mother—turning out to be behind a major theft.

Her betraying the pack and family. Kidnapping my sister, Kira, and trying to sell her to the Grayhide alpha leader, a man notorious for his poor treatment of omegas and everyone else.

“Good morning,” my father mumbles, taking his seat and immersing himself in his notes. Months went by during which he was banned from continuing his role on the council. Dorian waited for Leta to conduct a thorough investigation into him.

The result was conclusive. Kellen Argent had no idea his wife was secretly betraying him for years. I thought that would be pretty clear to anybody who took one look at his face.

My father—who for years had been driven, focused on nothing but getting ahead and sucking up—is now quiet. Turned inward, like he has something to pay penance for.

Maybe he does.

The next person to walk through the door is Aidan Grayhide. He raises a hand to Dorian, who raises his eyebrows in return.

“Relax, boss,” Aidan jokes, grabbing the back of a chair and leaning on it.

He’s the kind of kid that’s just bursting with life.

His hair—which is unusually gray for his age—stands on end, tousled in different directions because he can’t stop running his hands through it.

His eyes are bright, something determined in them.

He showed up in Ambersky territory, telling Dorian he was the true heir to the Grayhide pack, and would be getting his revenge by killing the current alpha.

Although Dorian let him into the territory, gave him space to train and prepare to take down the Grayhide alpha leader, that doesn’t mean Aidan has a seat at the council table, where we discuss sensitive information, make plans for what to do next.

Dorian isn’t suspicious of Aidan, but he also doesn’t trust him. Ironically, Aidan exists in a gray zone.

“I’m just here to get the details about that—”

“Oh,” Dorian sits up straighter, grabs a pad from the table and scribbles something out, and slides it back over to Aidan, who takes it, nods at him, folds the paper and sticks it in the little pocket on his shirt.

Although he spends most of his time training—weightlifting, running, sparring—Aidan also spends a significant amount of time completing side quests for Dorian. Taking care of a couple of lone wolves that rolled into town, fixing the hole in an old woman’s porch, running messages.

It’s resulted in two things—one, Dorian is starting to like him more and more. And two, people in the town are warming to him, getting to know him by name.

Even if he is a Grayhide.

Aidan leaves, and the others arrive. Leta, the shifter in charge of intelligence.

Claire, a caster who imbues our stones with shifting magic.

I raise my hand and palm the necklace that holds the stone hanging around my neck—a gift from my mother—and think about that first shift I had to do without it.

The worst kind of growing pains, bone against bone, a slow, stretching torture.

Once was enough. With the Amanzite, the pain of shifting is gone. It also allows me to communicate with other wolves while in that form. Magic takes care of all the details.

“Good morning, everyone,” Claire says, once everyone is seated and listening.

“As I’m sure you are all aware, today marks one full year since we first discovered the severe and sudden decline in our stores of Amanzite, so we wanted to review some of the consequences and our plans to avoid it in the future. ”

Leta stands, her voice no-nonsense, her hands clasped in front of her.

“Our investigation revealed a theft of the Amanzite. The store room was accessed through Kellen Argent’s access card, then re-programmed to hide initial evidence of the access time.

Since then, my team has re-configured the room so any shifter wishing to access it must also have the Alpha leader present. ”

“That should help us protect Amanzite in the future,” Claire says, pointing up their presentation.

It shows a list of consequences for the lack of Amanzite.

Turning back to us, Claire says, “Obviously, you’re all aware of the immediate threats we’ll face without the gems, but there are several other, more minor effects, as well. ”

Leta stands straight and tall, her eyes darting to the Alpha leader’s when she says, “The obvious threat to our security at the border, but also an increased stress on mental health in the pack, due to shifters completing their transitions without the stone.

“There are threats to casters, too,” Claire glances at a woman beside her, whom I assume is another caster.

“Without Amanzite, our casters can’t continue practicing imbuing.

Our casting is like a muscle—when we don't use it, it will atrophy.

Which will cause a longer slowdown of production when we finally do recover the stones. ”

They run through the rest of the list, which makes my stomach feel tight—the consequences range from minor physical pain to the overall downfall of the pack.

When I glance over at Dorian, he looks even more exhausted than before. Of course, he's probably already thought about all this, but it can't help to have it written out and color coded in front of him.

“As of right now,” Claire says, clearing her throat and turning to face the table. “Our stores are back to a reasonable level.”

“Do you have projections for how long it will last us?” Dorian asks, leaning forward.

Claire nods, and Leta clicks to a new slide, showing a graph that trends definitively down.

“At our old consumption rates? At least year. But with the rate of shifting rising—with there being more patrols along the borders—we're looking at more like two months, maybe three, without replenishment. .”

I grab another bagel as Dorian asks, “And what are we looking at for replenishment?”

”We've been attempting a synthetic generation of the gem,” Claire says, her chin dipping. “But so far, we have not had any viable results.”

Synthetic generation? I glance at Dorian—he hadn't told me about that. They're trying to make Amanzite with magic ? I've never heard of something like that, and

want to ask about it, but before I can speak, Leta jumps in, tapping on her tablet.

“But there’s good news from my end,” she says. “We have a contact from the Llewelyn pack that’s willing to meet at the market tonight. They want the pranxath powder, and have Amanzite to trade for it.”

“That is good news,” Dorian says, sounding surprised, almost as though he’d forgotten that it’s possible for things to go our way, every once in a while. Then, he stifles a yawn so discreetly, nobody else would notice it. “Send me the details, and I’ll prep to leave—”

“Dorian,” I set my hand down on the table in front of him, catching his eye.

I don’t talk much in these meetings, but this is finally my opportunity to say something.

There’s no way in hell he should go tonight.

First, because the dark market is in Grayhide territory, and dangerous enough as it is.

And second, because he’s clearly exhausted.

He won’t be on his game. Clearing my throat, I say, “You know I’ve been wanting to go on a mission.

More active role. Maybe you could let me take this one? ”

He holds my gaze for a moment, the tired quirk of his brow saying he knows exactly what I’m doing. Then, his expression softens, telling me that he appreciates the out.

“You know what? Since you’re begging for it,” Dorian laughs, waving his hand.

“Leta, please send the information to both of us. Emin, I’ll debrief you on what I experienced last time I was there.”

“Sounds good,” I say; then, to be cheeky, I add Aidan’s, “ boss .”

Dorian rolls his eyes. “Don’t call me that.”

Then, turning his attention to the rest of the room, he asks, “Is there anything else?”

Claire clears her throat uncomfortably, her face turning the lightest shade of green as she says, “Actually, yes. There is something.”

Dorian blinks, refocuses on her. I wonder if he was already shifting his mind to back home, thinking about the babies waiting for him there. With the air of a man who’s thinking I need to get back to my wife , Dorian crosses his arms, leans back, and raises an eyebrow at her.

“And what would that be?”

She frowns, grimaces, then with a great deal of effort, heaves a hulking garbage bag up onto the table. It rocks it for a second, and the wet splunk sound would be enough to turn anyone’s stomach.

The entire table is riveted as she steels herself, reaches for the top of the bag, and peels it down to reveal the pale, slightly rotted head of Aidan Grayhide.

My father sucks in a quick breath of air through his teeth, disgust visible in his expression.

“Holy shit,” Dorian breaths, glancing toward the door Aidan just walked through less than an hour before. “ That is realistic.”

“Smells dead, too,” I say, frowning and pinching my nose so the words come out muffled and nasally.

But nobody laughs. Instead, Leta Knight turns to the side, only just barely grabbing a small trash can in time to vomit inside.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

The dark market takes place on the new moon, every month, without fail. You might think the organizers of an event would wait for the full moon—for that bright, shining light to help people make their way easily through the crowd, to weave through the stalls.

But it's not that kind of market. If it was, it would be held during the day.

Any other pack would come and shut the whole thing down, not wanting to draw in the types of people—the types of supernaturals—who come around.

The Grayhides are another story. After coming under the leadership of the Blacklock family, anything goes. It's part of the reason why I was able to find refuge in the camp on the outskirts of Badlands—and also part of the reason why the turnover in this area is startlingly high.

Every night, we see shifters—mostly omegas—leaving as quickly and quietly as they can.

Willow told me about the entire affair, the pack's fall from grace.

It started with a Blacklock killing the entire Grayhide family, even women and children, to get power.

Then, his son—Jerrod Blacklock—killed him, carrying on the family tradition.

Sarina grips my sleeve tightly, though she's been to more than one of these dark markets.

It's one thing to leave her in our shed unsupervised while I have coffee with Willow; it's another to come to the market and leave her at camp alone at night. It feels counterintuitive, but I'm certain she's safer with me at the dark market than alone at home.

While I don't pay for a stall here, there is a section I occupy—far west, nearly on the outskirts of the market. That's where my customers will look for me.

Sarina and I move through the crowd, heads down, to get to that spot. Though Sarina doesn't, necessarily, need to put her head down—I've casted over her extensively. Enough that to any other person at this market, I'm walking through the space alone.

Neither of us speak as we make our way past pixies and fairies, travelers high from the dust, already stumbling about.

Some of the patrons at this market come for minutes, get the thing they need, leave.

Others wander about, looking for every species' method of intoxication, getting more and more inebriated through the night. Each is dangerous in his own way.

"I believe you have something for me."

Just as Sarina and I reach our spot, I turn and come face-to-face with one of Jerrod Blacklock's men. I can tell from his scent—he's practically doused in that of the alpha—and from the fact that he looks corruptible. Mean.

He's tall and thick around the neck, with a buzz cut and the kind of mouth that seems not to have any lips at all—merely a line that opens when he speaks.

Behind him are three others, all smelling the same, all looking around meanly, their teeth bared, wolfish.

The one in the very back holds a stained burlap sack in both hands, his face slightly green.

I look away, trying to ignore the size, shape, and weight of the thing, trying to ignore my instincts.

Because my instincts are telling me there's a head in that bag, and I want nothing to do with that.

"Yes, sir," I bow my head under the weight of his stare—my body does so without my thinking, even with all the spells I've concocted to lessen the hierarchy's hold on me.

Alpha leaders compel all; alphas compel betas and omegas.

I've never met an omega who doesn't wish they were born as something different.

Quickly, I rifle through my bags, finding the stones they asked for. A sparkling green and red gem imbued with stifling magic. Nothing too complicated, even if it did take a significant amount of energy from me to make it as strong as they asked for.

Slowly, carefully, I pull the stone from the pouch and flash it to him so he can see it's what they asked for. Then, I drop it back into the velvety pouch and hand it to him.

When he reaches for it, he makes sure to slide his meaty palm against my hand. I keep my eyes fixed on his shoes, my face set. Sarina stands completely still beside me, her scent-blocking spell working overtime to cover the fear.

Other customers will come and go all night, and she'll relax, sitting down and reading by the light of the flickering torches around us. But now, with these men here, she seems as aware as I am that something could go wrong at any second.

“And here’s what we owe you.” When he speaks, his rank, moist breath fans out over my face, and I hold my breath to keep from grimacing.

He reaches out, unfurls my hand, tucks the coins inside, then wraps it up again.

Then, still holding my fist, he says, “If you’re looking for a bit more, I’ve got a different kind of job you can do. ”

“No, thank you.” I keep my voice level, flat, hope the myriad of spells floating around me will help to disinterest him.

I’m not stupid—I know that, objectively, I’m a beautiful woman.

Men have been “interested” in me for years.

But the spells help to dampen it, either changing their perception of me, or kicking in to change their minds.

Like always, it works—I watch him blink, his brow furrow, and he pulls his hand back from mine, shaking his head and glancing at his buddies, as though confused about why he even said that. His expression shifts to a goofy smile, as though he’s trying to convince them it was just a joke.

“Yeah, right,” he laughs, then turns on his heel to go.

I’ve barely let out a sigh of relief when the unthinkable happens.

Sarina, next to me, starts to speak.

The moment she opens her mouth, the moment her lips form the first vowel, my mind has already devolved into a panicked, loose nononono that I can barely think around.

I turn to her, to see what could possibly compel her to do something as stupid as speaking while at the dark market, and find that she's not looking at me at all. Her eyes are closed, her face tipped up to the clouds, her lips moving fast, like she's reading from one of her favorite books.

"...Adelphus pulls ahead, despite all the odds, taking the race by fifteen full seconds!"

"Adelphus?" the meaty man says, turning and looking in Sarina's direction, and when his eyes widen, I know her protective spells have broken. He can see her.

Something emanates from her—some sort of energy, a force field rivaling the power I emit when casting. And it's shattered every protection I've laid, the entire web of cover I've carefully and lovingly weaved around her.

"She talking about the race?" the second guy asks, face crumpled in confusion. "That race with Adelphus don't happen for another month."

The men take a step toward her, and something inside me snaps.

Maybe I still could have talked my way out of the situation. Perhaps I could have grabbed Sarina, said she wasn't right in the head, and dragged her back to camp without anything happening.

But then they might have just followed us back to camp. Once, a fugitive running from Blacklock came to hide among us, and the devastation was complete. They set fire to tents, killed indiscriminately until they found him. Not one of us turned him in—he tried to run and they caught him.

So, even though I technically have options, it certainly doesn't feel like I do.

I turn, grabbing a torch from its mount on the wall beside me and swinging it at the meaty man, catching him astride the face with it.

I'm smaller than them. Weaker than them. But what I do have is the element of surprise. I lunge forward, slipping a dagger from the inside of my sleeve and catching the other man across the back of the leg, severing his tendon so he falls instantly to his knees, screaming.

Sarina is still going, her body stock still, rigid as she continues, "Second place goes to Glanmore, third to Rylan—"

The third man hollers, pointing at her, "A psychic!"

My heart has already skipped into overdrive, but this call has moved the skirmish from this tight circle to the whole of the market, people to our left and right turning to look at us, interest flashing in their eyes.

Up until this point, I hadn't been sure. Willow said there was news, whispers coming through that Jerrod was searching for psychics. For a long time—certainly when I was young, and my grandmother had her visions—people dismissed psychics as erratic, unreliable. If they even believed them.

But now, things have changed enough that soon there might be an entire market after my daughter, seeking the reward for delivering a psychic to Jerrod's doorsteps.

I've never met the man, but there's not a chance in hell I'm letting my omega daughter within fifty paces of him.

My body is practically vibrating with the need to protect her.

I'm spinning around, searching for the final remaining opponent, when something

cracks over my face, hard.

As I reel back from the blow, I look up to see the meaty man, embers still burning in his cheek, puss and blood oozing down from the wound, glaring furiously at me.

“You bitch ,” he says, stalking toward me. His one remaining friend steps toward Sarina, and the cord inside me pulls taut.

I will die defending her. Lunging away from the meaty man and toward my daughter, I call to her, trying to break her out of her premonition trance, trying to get her to have the presence to run away, turn, move on her own.

But she doesn't move. Instead, someone else comes flying in from the side, and the last thing I see before the meaty man strikes me again is a nauseatingly familiar shock of red-gold hair.

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When Dorian pushed the scent-blocker into my hands, I hadn't realized just how effective it would be.

Moving through the market, nobody turns to look at me. Nobody cares that I'm Ambersky, that I'm scented for my pack, likely even carrying Dorian's scent on me from seeing him earlier. To them, I must be a total blank slate, a ghost among their ranks.

Dorian had described the dark market to us the last time he went. The first and only time he went.

As I push through the crowds of supernaturals, tall and short, all stinking of their own pungent scents, memories push through my head of what happened when Dorian came to this very market.

Seeing Kira, my sister, up for sale. Bringing her home, back to the Ambersky pack territory, despite the fact that he had rejected her years before, in front of everyone.

My eyes dart to the left and right as I walk through the market, but besides some questionable goods—slime in tubs, various rocks of various sizes, powders and little animals locked in tiny cages—nothing seems too bad.

Meaning there are no omegas chained up, being auctioned off on a stage in front of drooling bidders.

Hood up, head down, I wind my way through the stalls and people, looking for my first objective.

Deliver the head of Aidan Grayhide to some of Jerrod's men, collect the sizeable payment for his death.

Our hope—Dorian's strategy—is that Jerrod wouldn't suspect any random shifter to have the resources necessary to craft a fake head like this.

To study Aidan and make it perfectly in his likeness, to magic in the rot and bodily fluids. While I may smell like nothing, due to the scent-blocker, the stained, heavy burlap sack at my side is drawing more than a few curious glances from the other shoppers.

I'd thought severed heads might be pretty common here—maybe not.

Finally, I reach my contact right next to a stand selling some sort of endangered fish, it looks like. He's a large man, thick around the waist and neck, and scowls at me when he sees me.

"Grayhide?" he asks, nodding to the bag. He's straight to the point, so I am, too. Dropping the sack, I kick at the head, unrolling it from the fabric and watching as it comes to a stop a single pace from the man's feet.

The air around us goes still and silent, some people sucking in air through their teeth, veering away, leaving a wide path around me, this man, and the head on the ground between us.

"Gods be damned," he finally says, shaking his head and reaching into his pocket. "Boss'll be happy to see this one. Slippery fucker avoided us for years. How the hell did you get your hands on him?"

I shrug, "He walked right into it."

After the money changes hands and he rolls the head back into the burlap, depositing it into the hands of the shifter next to him, I watch the four of them wander back into the crowd, heading west.

My next objective is clear—find the Llewelyn contact and trade the powder in my pocket for the Amanzite they have for us.

But there's something tugging at me. Something about the gleaming look in that big guy's eyes, something about the way they turned and started walking through the market with a purpose.

If Dorian was here, he would be right in my ear, telling me there's a plan for a reason, that we can look into the cronies later.

Or, better yet, he might just be saying that guys like that are nobodies—alphas, sure, but with not an ounce of integrity.

The kind of guys who let their natural standing pull a lot of weight.

That they're not worth the follow, that they're probably just going to go jack off on the corner.

But my intuition—my wolf—is telling me that's not right.

So, even hearing Dorian's frustrated voice in the back of my head, I move, stalking them through the market, slipping around a crowd of crooning succubi, through a gaggle of witches.

Finally, after what must be another ten minutes, the man seems to find what he's looking for.

I see her at the same moment her scent hits me on the wind. So contradictory to her personality, the scent is light and fresh, like the smell that hits you when you've just broken open an aloe leaf. Natural, clean.

Veva.

Without meaning to, my lips form her name, trace the shape of the vowel, my teeth coming to touch my lip twice. Veva.

Obviously, she's older, but still she looks just the same.

More meat on her bones, a startling new roundness to her hips that makes my mouth water.

Veva is slight, barely over five feet tall, a round face with dimples that pop on either side of her mouth when she smiles, but the dimples are not around now.

Her deep brown hair is shorter, curling around her shoulders rather than running down her back, and she has bangs now, sweeping just over her brow. When I look at her, I can still feel how that hair slips through my fingers. How it feels when I wind it up in my fist.

When I knew her, she was always wearing simple dresses. But now, she wears a pair of black jeans that hug her form, a black leather jacket zipped up to her neck. An outfit made for the dark market, the shine of the material catching the flickers of the torch beside her.

She lowers her gaze, reaches into her pocket, pulls something out and hands it to the man. Veva is alone at this market, and the thought of that makes me want to march right in there, pick her up, and take her home with me.

Except, for obvious reasons, she'd probably spit in my face.

Hot shame is just starting to creep up my neck when I watch the man grab her hand, holding it there for a second too long, and I step forward, ready to break his fucking jaw for daring to even look at her wrong.

Then, suddenly, he releases her, stepping back, and Veva has an almost... smug expression. As though that's exactly what she expected.

But everything changes in an instant.

It's so unexpected, it takes my mind a second to process.

Beside her, a little girl flashes into existence. Nothing there in one moment, and a small body there the next, like the world had glitched and forgotten to load her in.

I blink, trying to focus, but there's a hazy quality to the air around her, almost like it shimmers with magic. She's talking, saying something, but I can't make it out.

Through the haze, I made out several details that make my heart tighten.

Red-gold hair, straight nose, freckles over her cheeks. Everything about the little girl is familiar to me, almost as though I'm looking at myself. Looking at Kira, when she was that age.

Two words rock through me, strong enough to knock me right off my feet: my daughter .

Veva moves faster than I've ever seen in my life, grabbing the torch to her left and swinging it, knocking the meaty man across the face. One of them shouts, pointing at the little girl. Another tries to move, but Veva has already dropped down, drawing her

blade across his ankle.

Time seems to slow as I watch the blood spurt, the milky white tendons popping free of the skin, bouncing out like loose springs from an old mattress.

I'm moving before I realize I've made the decision to.

Veva might hate me. And, at this moment, she's fighting them in a display of skills I never knew she had. But there's no way she can take all four of them, and there's no way she can protect that little girl, on top of it.

I can't shift—it will break the scent blocker—so instead, I hurl myself at the meaty man, grabbing him just as he starts to swing at Veva.

It glances off of her, and she drops to the ground.

My chest tightens, every nerve in my body screaming for me to go to her , but my training kicks in.

If I want to save her, I need to focus on him.

With a mighty bop , I slam my forehead into his face, exploding his nose into a crush of red. That, coupled with the nasty burn on his left cheek, must be enough to finally make him pass out, because he crumples to the ground, knees buckling into the mud.

When I turn, I find the man with the sliced-through tendons still down, crying and trying to slide away, one hand wrapped around his ankle, like he might be able to hold everything in place if he moves slowly enough.

Ten paces away is the man still clutching Aidan's fake severed head, and five paces from me is the final man, still looking like he might have some fight in his eyes.

Moving quickly, I sweep his legs out from under him, grab his head, and twist, listening for the bone-shuddering crack that tells me he's dead.

Just as I'd hoped, the final guy—the head-holder—turns and runs as fast as he can, considering the cargo he's hauling. Good. That's at least one of my objectives that I haven't failed.

A small crowd has formed, but one look from me makes them shy away, inching back into the market, returning to their own tasks.

Here, there's no ambulance to call, no help from the alpha, no forces to help keep the peace.

Onlookers are only interested for the sake of their own entertainment, or to see what they can gain.

When I turn back around, the little girl is bent over Veva, her tears already spattering down onto Veva's black leather jacket.

I step forward, thinking the little girl might run away when she sees me.

Instead, she tips her head up to mine, meeting my gaze.

Though she's crying, there's a set of determination in her eyes.

It reminds me so much of Veva that it's like I've been sent back in time, seeing her as both a little girl, and the woman unconscious on the ground.

Something snaps into place. A knowing. A line from me to this girl, clear as day. It feels so seismic that I think the entire world should adjust to accommodate this new knowledge, that she should understand it, too.

But she's only thinking about Veva.

“Please,” the little girl says, looking pale, like she might pass out any moment, too. “Please , help my mom.”

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Sarina .

The moment my brain starts to pull itself out of the foggy, messy blackness, I can only think of my daughter.

Frantically, I try to piece together what happened to me before I blacked out—everything at the market.

Sarina having what appeared like a premonition, shedding the spells I'd cast around her. The fight.

That meaty man, swinging his arm toward my face.

And the flash of red-gold hair. Hair I'd recognize anywhere.

I fight to open my eyes, to sit up against the aching in my body. Pain throbs heavily, consistently, through the bone, making rounds around my occipital nerve and swirling under my brain before returning.

It's enough to make me start retching, but I hold it back, stuffing the nausea down at the bottom of my stomach, where it's more manageable. Finally, I manage to get my eyes open, and the first thing I see is Emin Argent, sitting next to my bed, leaning in with a glass of water.

The sight of it instantly makes my chest warm, so I swat my hand out, knocking the cup from his hand and using my shaky arms to push myself to standing. Karma acts immediately, as the cup spills all over my lap, soaking through the thick cotton

blanket and onto my thighs, but I don't care.

"Sarina," I try to say, but my mouth feels like it's been stuffed with cotton balls. Maybe a sip of that water would have been good, after all.

But I'd die of dehydration before accepting a single drop of water from Emin Argent. He stands over me, mouth slightly open, eyes wandering over my form as though he's still trying to figure out what just happened—what reason I could possibly have to knock the water out of his hand like that.

If my throat didn't feel like one of those twelve-pound, iron shot put balls, heavy, ice-cold, and rolled in dirt and sand, I might just scoff at that idea.

"Mom!"

The sight of Sarina is immediately soothing, my fight-or-flight settling down when I see that she's in one piece and okay. There's another, strange woman with her, and I wonder for a second why I couldn't smell my daughter—in fact, couldn't smell her, this strange woman, or Emin.

Then I try to take a breath through my nose, realize it's completely stuffed with blood and snot, and understand why my throat is so dry—I've been breathing through my mouth.

"Sarina," I try to say her name again, but it comes out as a dry croak. The strange woman—shorter, buxom, a set of curves that makes me instantly jealous—gives Emin a strange look and crosses the room, filling a glass with water at the tap.

When she hands it to me, I drink greedily, one hand still wrapped protectively around Sarina's back, like I might need to tug her out of here at any moment. I wish I could smell, that any sense of scent was coming through my nose, but since it's not, I have

to rely on context clues.

If Emin is here, if he brought me somewhere after the fight at the market, that means I'm probably in Ambersky territory. The last place in the world I want to be. And the woman standing beside my bed, staring down at me...is it Kira Argent ? Emin's sister?

"Hey," Kira says, reaching out and putting a hand on the bed next to me. "Take your time. Need more water?"

I shake my head, set the glass down. She looks completely different from the dowdy girl I knew back when Emin and I were messing around. Over the years, I'd heard whispers of what happened to her, but she was two years under me in school, and I was long gone by the time everything went down.

According to some of the people in the camp, a woman with a description like Kira spent some time working for Jerrod Blacklock. So how in the world did she get away from him, back here?

When I'm able to pull my gaze from her, and back to Sarina, I realize Emin is staring right at my daughter, that look on his face like his wheels are turning. And that's the last thing I need right now.

"Emin told us about what happened," Kira says. "Dorian and I would like to offer you succor here until you're healed."

Now that I've had water, I could probably say something, but I don't.

Instead, I just tighten my hold around Sarina, pulling her closer to me, nearly onto the bed, and nod again.

I'm already trying to work it out—Sarina and I can't go back to the camp.

Can I even get word back to Willow? To get our things?

I think of the money under my mattress. Willow is the only person the magic won't blow out of this century if she tries to retrieve it for me.

On the chair across from my bed is my leather jacket, the outline of the remaining gems in the pocket. I calculate how much I can make from them—some of them highly specific, difficult to sell to anyone except the person who ordered it.

“Kira,” Emin says, his voice with a strange twist to it. “Can I have a moment alone with Veva?”

Kira, once again, gives him a strange look, then glances at me.

“I have nothing to say to you,” I say, heart beating double-time. In a perfect world, this would be enough to get him away from me, but his face hardens, his gaze darting to my daughter again.

“Well, I have some things to say to you ,” he says, setting his jaw. “And I'm saying them, whether you want to hear them or not.”

The look on Kira's face tells me that her brother hasn't told her a thing about what happened between us. The entitlement of it—the way he's looking at Sarina as if she's something he can lay claim to.

He can't. He made that choice ten years ago, and he doesn't get to take it back now.

Sarina pulls back from me, rubbing her eyes and pushing her hair over her shoulders. She's a tough girl, but this has been a lot, even for her—and the last thing I want is

for Emin to be putting ideas in her head.

If he remembers that night, he'll be thinking Sarina belongs to him. It lines up perfectly with the day I told him I was pregnant, the day he sent me away without so much as a backwards glance in my direction.

"Fine." I suck in a breath, run my shaking fingers through Sarina's hair, pushing it back from her forehead. To her, I say, "Go out in the hallway with Kira. We'll be leaving soon, but I'll have to talk to him for a second."

Sarina holds my gaze. She's smart, knows better than to ask me questions now. Now and then, in my spare moments of downtime, I've thought about what to tell her about a father. That time might be coming sooner, rather than later.

"Okay," she says, and before she goes, I take her wrist in mine, raising my hand and casting a protective spell on her with every ounce of energy I have left in my body.

It's not as strong as I'd like, but it will keep her from going anywhere she doesn't want to go.

It will keep her from getting too far from me, a meta-magical tether between our two bodies that will wreak havoc if broken.

Kira tries to hide her surprise at my casting, then takes Sarina out into the hallway, gently closing the door behind her.

The moment it shuts, Emin crosses the room, comes to the side of the bed, and says, his voice deathly quiet, "That girl belongs to me, doesn't she?"

I bristle immediately. Nobody belongs to him—and certainly not my daughter. In the time between her leaving and Emin asking his question, I've already figured out what

to say. It won't do me any good to point out the truth—that he made his choice. Turned me away when I told him I was pregnant.

He's an alpha. And we're in his pack's territory.

Even when I was an Ambersky, I didn't belong. Emin Argent has always been able to pull rank on me, and I'm not going to let him do it to get my daughter out from under me.

Instead, I'm just going to lie to him. With my casting and the scent-blocking on Sarina, we should be able to keep him from knowing until we go.

“No,” I say, simply. “She doesn't.”

He frowns. “How old is she?”

“She'll turn eight in a few months.”

At that, he blinks, and I watch his mind turning. The key to this is how small Sarina is—line her up with the other eight-year-olds, and she'll fit right in. I need him to think of her thin little arms, her height—or rather, lack of it—and believe me.

“But...she's so smart,” he says, slowly, brow wrinkling. I wonder if he's also thinking about the implications for that fake first baby—that I must have been wrong about being pregnant, or I must have lost it.

The thought of that—of having lost Sarina before getting to meet her—is so painful that I push it away, crossing my arms and ignoring the sting of the movement. I choose instead to focus on what he's just said. “She's my daughter. Of course she's smart.”

“So, you were with someone else. After me,” Emin clarifies, and when I see a flash of jealousy in his eyes, I want to murder him.

“Oh, Emin,” I whisper, leaning closer to him. “I was with a million people after you. Each of them better than the last. And I’ll be with a million more, seeing as how it’s none of your fucking business.”

His eyes flash exactly how I knew they would—despite his denial, despite the way he threw me out years ago, I know the truth. Emin Argent is my mate, and I’m his, and no matter how much he wishes it weren’t true, the idea of me with another man makes him want to claw his eyes out in frustration.

“Now,” I say, defiantly turning my gaze from his. “I want my daughter, I want my things, and I want to get the fuck out of this territory.”

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“You can’t leave until you’re healed,” I insist, crossing my own arms, mirroring her without realizing it.

When Veva turns and looks at me, I wonder if it’s possible for casters to weave their spells without speaking, because it feels like she could melt me down with just the murderous glint in her gaze.

Even as I say it, even as the conversation moves away from the subject of Sarina, my body is still reeling with that information. She’s eight years old, which means Veva was already gone two years before she was born. No overlap.

Sarina looks just like me—or maybe she doesn’t.

Maybe that was just my wishful thinking, my intuition leading me wrong.

It could have just been the desperation, the hope that there was something tying the two of us together, that the little girl might be a tiny piece of leverage to bring Veva back into my life.

That I might have, even with the loss of the beginning, a family like what Dorian and Kira share.

Veva has been with other men. And not only that, but she’s had another man’s child.

Because of me, because I was stupid enough to get caught up in my family’s status game, because I was stupid enough to push those feelings aside and deny to myself that Veva was my mate, even though I knew deep down that it was true.

When Veva speaks, it draws me out of my thoughts, returning me to this healing room, the smell of the herbs and salves, the sharp sting of the antiseptic in my nose. The wet spot on the bed that's damp now, starting to dry in the arid breeze from the open window.

Outside, a sparse tree blows in the wind, kicking up some dust from the hard, rocky ground. An aloe vera plant stretches up outside the window, one of its massive leaves resting against the glass and grating against it slightly with each gust of air.

“Are you keeping me here against my will?” Veva asks, and the sharp edge to her voice tells me that it would take a whole lot of us to accomplish that.

I'm no expert when it comes to magic, but I just watched her—broken and battered, still trying to heal—cast a pretty fucking strong spell over her daughter in fifteen seconds.

I've been around when Claire and the other casters work on imbuing the Amanzite. I've escorted them to the borders, watched the hours-long process to strengthen the lines, magic that shimmers in the sun and makes it harder for enemies to cross over into our territory.

So I have some idea about just how powerful Veva is. And if she has that kind of power when she looks like this—broken nose, bruises coloring her face and a pale countenance giving away her exhaustion—I don't even want to know what she can do at full health.

“No,” I finally say, deciding that's the smartest answer. “But it's not going to do you and Sarina any favors if you leave now. You'd be putting both of you at risk.”

“Forgive me,” Veva bristles visibly, scowling at me, “if I have no interest in your parenting advice. How many do you have, Emin?”

I know the purpose of the question is to discredit me, but there's something under there, too. The question of whether I ever managed to move on from her. If I got rid of her as easily as it seemed.

Of course not.

I've been with other women, sure. But it always felt muffled, like a play version of the real thing. Wrapped up in cellophane, no real connection. The best nights were the ones when I could pretend it was Veva Marone in my arms.

I admit, "None."

The look on her face only barely manages to hide her relief as she says, "Exactly. So it would be best to keep your stupid opinions to yourself, don't you think?"

Even though I expect the venom, it still stings. Veva has always had something about her—a fighter buried deep inside—but in high school, that's still where it was. Deep inside.

Now, it's right there on the outside, teeth bared, claws raised.

"You didn't used to talk like this," I say, stupidly, wishing I'd thought of a different way to say what I mean—that I miss her, that I want her back, that I want to find a way to cross this ravine between us.

That I haven't stopped thinking about her since the day she disappeared, since the morning after I told her to get out of my room, and I showed up at her mother's house, only for Opal to tell me, half-drunk and giddy, that her daughter wasn't there.

"Probably off sleeping around somewhere," were Opal's exact words, and I'd had to bite my lip to keep from knocking her on her ass for talking about Veva like that. I'd

never hit a woman—never would—but Opal made me want to.

Veva lets out a dry, short laugh that actually reminds me somewhat of her mother, then says, “Yeah, well, I didn’t used to do a lot of things. But life changes, and we change with it.” Then, after a withering glare that sweeps the length of my body, she says, “At least, some of us do.”

“Look, Veva,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I know after what happened—it was—”

“Emin,” she hisses, and I realize it’s the first time she’s said my name. “You have no idea what life has been like for me. We were together as teenagers. It doesn’t matter. We don’t even know each other anymore.”

Maybe we don’t, but that doesn’t stop my body from tugging me toward her, insisting there’s something more to us than just a teenage fling. The gut-deep, bone-sure feeling that she’s not just another woman in this world.

She’s my woman. And I was stupid enough as a teenager to deny that fact to myself, but I’ve grown since then. Realized that my father—my parents—were misguided in their constant quest toward status.

Nothing is worth letting your mate go. I realize that now, but maybe it’s too late.

“Veva—” I start, though I’m not sure if there’s anything I could possibly say to make her listen, to get her to understand that I’m not the same person I once was. The boy that pushed her through that window, told her to leave—he had no idea what real life is like.

After seeing Dorian and Kira make it work—watching her bloom into herself, seeing what life has been like for them both—I have this steady, sure feeling that Veva and I

can do it, too. We just have to talk about this.

“Emin, I don’t know how to make this clear enough to you,” she snaps, the slightest waver of uncertainty in her voice. “I am not interested in anything you have to say. Is that clear?”

I’m just opening my mouth to respond to that when there’s a knock at the door, and Veva and I both look to it. Whatever spell she cast must tell her that Sarina is okay, because she hasn’t leapt from the bed yet, hasn’t started threatening.

Our gazes catch, and I nod at her—it’s her healing room, not mine. Her decision whether to tell them to come in or not. I can already smell, from here, that it’s Kira again, with someone else. She probably called him the second she stepped into the hallway with that little girl.

“Come in,” Veva croaks, and I wish she had taken that first water from me. She probably needs more—if I was her, I probably would have sucked down a gallon already.

The door opens, and this time, it’s Dorian and Kira who come in together, Sarina right behind them.

At once, she goes back to Veva’s bedside.

Dorian shoots me a look much like his wife did, and I bite my tongue, already resenting the questions I’m going to have to answer about my connection to Veva Marone.

I did a great job of hiding it in high school. So much so that even Dorian—my best friend and soon to be alpha leader of the pack—had no idea I was hooking up with her.

“Hi, Veva, right?”

“Yes, Dorian,” Veva rolls her eyes at him, and the feeling in the room shifts. An omega talking like that to an alpha—the alpha leader, no less—makes the air feel thick with discomfort. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, but Kira smiles, and Dorian even lets out a low chuckle.

“So, you remember me?”

Veva cuts her eyes to Kira, then says, “Sure. And I remember you treating Kira like shit in high school.”

Instantly, I’m embarrassed. Veva may not belong to me, in any concrete way, but it still feels like she’s speaking for me, too.

Kira’s eyebrows shoot up, and Dorian nods, running a hand over his chin, his mouth. “That’s fair. Trust me when I say I’m making up for that every day. As much fun as it is for me to talk about the mistakes of my youth, I wanted to talk to you about something else.”

Veva shifts in her bed, her arm snaking around Sarina again. Then, her eyes move to me.

“You want to talk to me?” she asks, not tearing her eyes from mine. “Make him go away.”

Silence falls over the room. I can practically feel Kira and Dorian burning with curiosity, wanting to know what this is all about. Finally, after a long moment, Dorian sighs and says, “Emin?”

I bite my tongue, turn on my heel, and push out of the room.

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The moment Emin walks out of the room, I feel my nervous system start to calm. Sarina is at my side, he's not here, confusing my body, and now I can focus on the two people in front of me.

Dorian Fields. The last time I saw him, he was a teenager, prepping to take over his grandfather's role. I'd heard, distantly, that the old man died, and Dorian took over, but it's different seeing it in real time. The man that he's grown into.

The improbable woman at his side—the fact that she was, somehow, able to forgive him for everything she put him through. I can still remember the sound of his voice carrying down the hallway, the fact that Emin followed Dorian's lead, teasing his own sister in front of everyone else.

“Veva,” Kira says, glancing at Dorian and stepping toward me. “We know you’ve been through a lot, so just tell us if this is too much, okay? We can come back later.”

“Sarina and I will be leaving as soon as we can,” I say, sitting up and trying to ignore the pain in my body.

“The healers said it’s going to take a while for you to get better,” Dorian says, keeping his distance from me, but holding my gaze. I have to admit—it’s putting me at ease. The way he’s speaking to me as an equal.

As an alpha, and especially as an alpha leader, he could compel me to do what he wanted. Even with all the casting I’ve done on myself, and my powers, my biology would make me obey.

But he's not doing that. He's talking to me like I'm a person.

"At least a few weeks for your sense of smell to heal," Dorian says, his voice low.

I can feel Sarina stiffening with worry beside me, and I give her a quick one-two tap on her back.

Our secret little signal— everything is okay .

"You're a smart woman, Veva. You know it's not smart for you to leave like this.

I think we can help each other out, here. "

I suck in a breath, considering. "Okay. I'll listen."

"Kira said you cast a pretty strong spell in here, on her," Dorian nods to Sarina, who sits quietly, but pushes her hair behind her ears.

"We're working on a...project. And we could use that kind of power to help us finish it up.

So here's my proposal: you and Sarina stay while you heal up, and we compensate you for your work on the project.

In a few weeks, you're feeling good enough to leave, we have the results we want, and you have a little extra coin. Everyone wins."

For some reason, I think of Emin. Not everyone wins.

I blink hard and try to shake the thought from my head—there is no reason for me to be thinking of him.

Our connection is already getting in my head, and I can't have that.

Half of me knows it's important for Sarina and me to leave as soon as possible, but the other part of me understands that I won't be able to protect us like this.

Not without my sense of smell. Not battered, bruised, and exhausted like I am.

Not without the money stored under my mattress, back near Grayhide territory.

Sarina taps me—one-two, one-two. She thinks we should do it, wants us to stay. I shift, look into her eyes, and it only takes two seconds for me to see what's going on in that head of hers.

She's scared after what happened at the market. Doesn't understand why it happened. We haven't even had a chance to talk about her premonition—for me to explain what it means. Some downtime—a little space to be in one place—might be good for us.

A few seconds after his proposal, I ask, "What is the project? I'm not using my abilities to hurt anyone."

"Of course not," Dorian says, not even sounding offended. "Our pack has changed a lot, Veva. You'll understand that I won't want to share the details of the project until you agree to stay, but I promise it's not harmful to anyone."

"I'll second that," Kira says, setting her hand on the blanket again, her serious eyes landing on mine. "I wouldn't stand by and let something like that happen."

Out of everything, it's Kira's presence that puts me more at ease. She doesn't seem like a prisoner—she called Dorian, after all. Asked him here. Seems like she's at his side by choice, and not out of obligation. When she glances at him, it's with an admiration that makes my stomach twist.

Sarina taps me again. One-two, one-two.

“Okay,” I say, then hold a hand up. “But I have a few conditions. And requests.”

Dorian crosses his arms, glances at his wife, then says, “Name them.”

The sun is setting by the time Sarina and I leave the building, and I realize it’s the pack hall, the healing center tucked in the back corner.

Kira walks ahead of us, chatting about getting us clothes and things, but a flash of color startles me, so I grab Sarina and pull her to my side, hand already rising to cast.

Not that I have any energy left in me for magic, but the assailant hopefully doesn’t know that.

“Veva,” the woman says, walking so quickly she’s out of breath when she stops in front of me. Her eyes skip rapidly from my hand, to my face, to Sarina tucked away behind me, then back to my face, scanning it like she can’t believe what she’s seeing. “Veva.”

The word slips out of me before I can reconsider it, before I can look for another word to use when addressing her. “Mom?”

A sob rips out of her chest, and she takes a step toward me, holding her arms up. Kira stands to the side, watching the interaction play out, and I glance to her—for reassurance? For information?—before taking an instinctual step away from my mother, who doesn’t seem like my mother at all.

My mother can’t usually say my name without slurring it, can’t walk in a straight

line. Her clothes are never wrinkle free, her hair is not combed like this. And her eyes—brown like mine—are never as clear as they are right now.

She stops, tucking her arms to her side, and is surprisingly not offended by the way I've moved away from her.

“Sorry,” she says, taking a breath and pushing her short gray hair out of her face. “I’m sorry, Veva—it’s just that—I didn’t think I was ever going to see you again.”

“What do you want?” I ask, heart picking up, mind already racing. She’s seen Sarina—knows about her. For some reason, I can’t stop thinking that it’s my job to make sure my mother doesn’t hurt my daughter.

Although my mom never raised a hand to me, she found plenty of other ways to scar me for life. And I’ll die before I let my daughter go through the same thing, no matter how happy my mother looks to see me.

“I deserve that,” Mom says, running her hands over her hair again and nodding. “I know I’ve hurt you, Veva. I want you to know that I’m sober. I have been since you disappeared.”

A breath rushes out of me, evacuating my body without my consent. My mother is sober. And, from the sound of it, me leaving actually affected her. She actually realized I was gone.

“Okay,” I say, dumbly, because I can’t think of any other words.

“I-I would love to talk to you,” she continues, eyes flicking to Kira, who is now looking away, like averting her gaze can give us more privacy.

“Make amends. I know I don’t deserve that, Veva, but it’s just so good to see you.

I heard—someone said they saw a girl who looked like you, and I—it would mean a lot to me. If we could have a conversation.”

I open my mouth, but I can’t get anything out.

Kira finally speaks. “Mrs. Marone? Veva has been through a lot. Maybe the two of you could talk this through later?”

The luna looks between the two of us, face soft and understanding, the look in her eye telling me that with one word from me, she’ll shut this thing down. Tell my mother that I want nothing to do with her.

But, for some reason, I don’t feel as cold toward her as I used to.

Maybe it’s the fact that I’m a mother now, or maybe it’s being near her, seeing the strange sight of my her, sober.

She seems like a different woman than the one that told me to fend for myself and regularly let the energy bill lapse, so I shivered under many blankets in the cold, barren nights, alone in my room.

“Maybe,” I finally manage to get out, my grip on Sarina firm.

That, somehow, seems to be enough for my mother, who nods, and manages to walk away. As Kira continues leading us to her car, I choke out a weird, muffled, “Sorry.” I’m not sure what it’s for—my mother? Me? But Kira just laughs as she unlocks the car and gestures for us to get in.

“Trust me,” she says, sliding into the driver’s seat and glancing over at me as I climb into the passenger’s. “I know a thing or two about having a strained relationship with your mom.”

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“So, what the fuck was that?”

The second I hear Dorian’s voice, I’m on my feet, glancing around him, disappointment surging through me when I realize Veva and Sarina aren’t with him.

He stops, crossing his arms and leveling a look at me. “They aren’t here.”

“Where are they?”

“See,” Dorian tilts his head, studying me. I don’t like it—especially knowing that, as my alpha leader, he can already sense something is up with me. “Why does it matter so much to you, man? What the hell is going on with you and Veva Marone?”

The way Dorian says her name—still with the tinge of how we used to say it in high school—instantly reminds me of the reason I’d turned her away all those years ago. It’s only a tenth of the inflection my father used when saying her name, and it still stings, still sends a message about her.

At once, it enrages me and fills me with shame. The fact that anybody would talk about her like that. The fact that I talked about her like that, pushed her away, sent her off into a life where she needed to sell her things at the dark market to survive.

I suck in a breath, look away from Dorian, try to figure out what and how to tell him.

More than anything, I don’t want to tell him. Don’t want to admit the shame of the entire situation—the fact that I was with Veva Marone . The fact that I hid it from him. The fact that I still want her more than anything.

The worst part of it all—that I turned her away. That I was the reason she disappeared.

That I acted, like all the rest of us, like I had no clue what happened to her. Sometimes, when we met up with old buddies from high school, they'd tilt their heads, say something like, "You remember Veva Marone? Wonder why she left like that?"

And I'd shake my head, shrug my shoulders, act like I had not a clue where she went. When the theories came out, always scandalous and cruel, always with that tone, I'd clench my fists under the table and keep my mouth shut, hot embarrassment and shame pounding through me like a river.

"Emin?" Dorian presses, his lips turning to a thin line. "Hello?"

I sigh, then refill my lungs.

"Well, Veva and I knew each other better in high school than we let on."

"I'd say so," Dorian lets out a dry laugh, "since you didn't let on that you knew her at all. Listen, Emin, as the alpha leader, I need to know what's going on here. Need to make sure I have the whole picture."

"And, as your friend," I say, heart thundering, "I just...can't. I need a little time before I can tell you."

Dorian holds my gaze for much longer than feels comfortable, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine.

"Fine," he finally says. "But I need to know one thing—that little girl, is she...?"

“No.” My eyes hit the floor, the disappointment rolling through me when the words come out. No. She’s not—she’s two years too young for that to make sense. No matter how much I see myself in her, or how much I wish it could be true. “She’s not.”

“Okay.” Dorian nods once, twice, then claps his hand on my shoulder. “You need a way to let off some of this steam. I can feel it radiating off of you, man. Not good to keep it all bottled up. Even if you’re not going to talk to me, you have to do something with it.”

“You’re not going to tell me where they are?”

He shakes his head. “No. Not sure she wants that right now.”

“Right.” I feel the tension wound inside me, hot, tight knots in my shoulders. My hands are shaking, and my entire body sways with the urge to find Veva, to go to her.

Dorian is right, and I let out a breath, wondering if I should shift, go out on the border, do some patrol. “You got any ideas?”

“Sure,” Dorian grins. “At least one.”

Aidan’s right hook slams into my jaw, nearly knocking me clean off the mat. If I wasn’t wearing this ridiculous headgear, he might have cleaved my head right through.

“Fucking shit,” I mutter, shaking my head to clear it and righting myself, seeing two Aidans through the fuzz in my mind.

Smaller than me, with messy gray hair that definitely needs a trim, staring at me with concern.

I wait for the two versions of him to turn back into just one, then say, “Training’s working out, dude.”

“Yeah?” For all the world, Aidan looks like a puppy that’s just been told he’ll get to go for a walk, his eyes lighting up. “You think so?”

But I’m already moving toward him, catching him off guard and sweeping him off his feet, so he lands flat on his back. Miming a blade, I pretend to sink it right into the center of his chest, and he looks at me with wide eyes, as though I’ve really just killed him.

“Lot of power behind your hook,” I say, grinning at him. “But you have to learn to keep you guard up.”

“Can’t believe I trusted you,” he mutters, but he’s smiling as I pull him to his feet.

Dorian was right—it may be painful, but at least sparring with Aidan is helping me let out some of the roiling feelings inside me. No matter how hard I try, my mind keeps running through the loop—thinking about Sarina, and how much she looks like me.

Aidan swings at me, and I dodge this time, not letting him catch me across the head again. If he does, the fucker might just give me a concussion.

As we fight, my thoughts swing back over to Veva, with another man. Thoughts of her carrying that other man’s child. Watching that other man walk away, leaving her alone with a baby.

I want to get my hands on him, kill him.

Then I remind myself that, except for the fact that she wasn't pregnant, I did the exact same thing. Basically pushing her out of my window, telling her to go, that the thing between us was over. That I wanted nothing to do with her.

That night, she came to me to tell me that she'd felt the mating bond between us. The last time we were together, I knew it. Felt it in my bones. And the moment she brought it up, held it in the air between us, I would have to face it.

And I couldn't.

Aidan catches me in the stomach, and I grab his leg, whirling around and taking him to the mat. We roll, fighting for dominance, each trying to find the killing shot on the other, get him to tap out.

This is what I need. I need to exhaust myself, pour this energy out of me. Maybe if I fight hard enough, I can make it so I'm too tired to keep turning these thoughts over and over in my head.

Like where Veva is. What she's doing right now. If she's safe, wherever Kira and Dorian put her. Aidan gets his forearm against my throat and I grit my teeth, throwing him off of me and jumping back to my feet.

"Gods," Aidan pants, chest heaving. "It's fucking hard to pin you."

"I've got a few years on you, man," I say, sucking in my own air. "It's impressive, how strong you've gotten since getting here."

Instantly, his face darkens. "Still not strong enough to kill that fucker."

That fucker is Jerrod Blacklock—I know that. Once a week, Aidan spars with Dorian, who carries with him the strength of the alpha leader. If Aidan wants to be able to best Jerrod, he'll need to be able to at least hold Dorian off.

Which he is nowhere near doing.

“You’re getting there,” I say, trying to be reassuring.

Aidan already looks much stronger—the first time I saw him, out on the border between Grayhide and Ambersky territories, he was a scrawny thing.

Said he’d been sick, and the deep bags under his eye, the wan gray complexion of his skin, said “sick” might not have been the most apt description.

I never asked about it. Maybe Dorian knows exactly what Aidan went through.

“I’d like to get there faster,” Aidan says, setting down his bottle resolutely and fixing his eyes on me. “You up for another go?”

I’m exhausted, my muscles burning and trembling slightly from fighting for this long. But when I reach into my mind, I’m still capable of thinking, so I take one last, long drink and set my bottle down, too.

“Always,” I say, stepping back onto the mat, holding my hands up, and urging him to attack. “Bring it on.”

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The motel we're staying in is just on the nice side of dingy, clean but worn down, the color fading from the wallpaper and the baseboard dinged from decades of cleaning carts and luggage running up against it.

It's the nicest place Sarina has ever slept in her life.

"Mom!" she calls from the bathroom, her eyes wide as she pokes her head out. "The water just keeps coming!"

"Don't waste it," I warn, because I don't want her to get used to the limitless water of indoor plumbing. Sooner rather than later, we'll be going back to what we had before. A different kind of living, one that makes you appreciate your resources more.

I hear the sink turn off, and Sarina comes out, her face scrubbed pink, her hair piled on top of her head.

Since she was little, she's followed my lead on everything—even the way I do my hair for bed, my routine.

Sometimes, I'm shocked by how smart she is, how capable kids are at learning things.

It's not like I ever sat her down and said she should follow a routine each night—she just saw me doing it, and so did it herself.

Sarina sits down in the middle of her big queen bed. I won't, but I want to ask her to sleep in my bed tonight. I want to tuck my arms around her—it feels like the only

way I'm going to be able to get any sleep.

I'm still exhausted from the casting I did in the hospital, and my body feels more like an amalgamation of parts than a cohesive, capable thing.

My muscles complain each time I attempt to use them.

Even holding my head up drains my energy, a soft burning sensation spreading across my shoulders and back when I try to do it.

"Sarina," I say, "would you double check that the door is locked?"

I hear her stand from her bed, then a moment later, there's the sound of the lock moving, Sarina pulling on the door handle.

"It's locked," she says.

"Can you move this end table?" I ask, gesturing to it. If she can't, I'll get up. But I'm really hoping she can.

Sarina carefully unplugs the little alarm, the lamp, then drags the end table over the carpet toward the door, alternating between dragging and walking it.

Just before she reaches it, there's a knock, which makes my body surge with adrenaline. I'm on my feet, out of the bed, and ignoring every ounce of pain in my body as I move toward my daughter and the threat on the other side of the door.

I still can't smell anything.

Go, I mouth to Sarina, then point at the bathroom. Lock the door.

I have never been more grateful that my daughter is smart, and used to following my instructions. She crosses the room and silently shuts the bathroom door. A moment later, I hear the lock click.

The knock comes again, and before I can figure out how to peek outside, how to call Dorian—or someone —a voice drifts through.

“Veva?”

A feminine voice. Familiar.

“It’s Kira. Can I come in?”

The air exits my body in one large whoosh , and I instantly feel weak as I reach for the handle. I open the door only a crack, peering out, finding the short, curvy woman standing on the landing, a dish wrapped in foil in her hands.

“Sorry to bother you,” she says, the moment her gaze lands on my face.

She must be able to see the exhaustion there, see how tired I am.

How all this is weighing on me. More than anything, I wish I could cast, lace this room with protective spells.

But I’m a wrung-out rag, the magic that normally fizzles under the surface of my skin gone.

Like my body is using all its energy to repair what is broken.

As if in response to the thought, my forehead starts to pulse painfully.

“Oh,” Kira says, frowning and reaching into her pocket. “Your nose—”

I open the door and let her in, knocking one-two, one-two on the door to the bathroom. Sarina opens it slowly, fear and determination on her face until she sees me.

“Mom—you’re bleeding—”

“Watch out, love.”

I move into the small bathroom, tip my nose back, whip the toilet paper from the holder and wad it up there. Everything hurts—my nose throbbing, and consistent, looping migraine swimming just behind my eyes.

By the time I come out of the bathroom, I find Kira sitting on the end of the bed, while Sarina sits at the small table, already halfway through a serving of what looks like chicken pot pie.

My stomach turns at the thought of eating, my mouth tasting of blood, my throat sour.

I stare at the food, wishing I could have cast over it, checked to make sure it was okay.

But Kira is feeding my daughter, and as of this moment, I have no choice but to trust her.

My eyes wander to the packet of almonds and the Pop-Tart sitting on the other nightstand. The dinner I’d been about to serve up.

“Thank you,” I say, hearing how nasally I sound.

“Has it been bleeding a lot?” Kira asks, eyes pulling from Sarina and moving to me. “We could call the healer—”

“No, no,” I shake my head. “I just stood up too fast, I think. Thank you for the food, that was really kind.”

“I figured a home-cooked meal might do you good,” Kira smiles, and tips her head, letting some of that pretty copper hair roll over her shoulders. She’s wearing a jumper-style dress that fits her body well. It almost looks tailored.

“Plus,” Kira goes on, “I had so many meals stocked up from before I had the boys, and this one needed to come out of the deep freeze.”

“The boys?” I ask, eyes widening. “You-you and Dorian?”

Kira’s eyes go soft. “Yes, I know it’s weird. Believe me, he’s making up for being such a tool in high school. So far, he’s even given me two beautiful babies as reparations.”

She laughs, and a moment later, I’m watching as she scrolls through photos on her phone, showing me the twins as tiny little, wrinkled things. I watch as they fill out, lift their heads, give their first gummy smiles.

“Are they around six months?” I ask, eyes darting to Kira, who’s still smiling at her phone.

“Yes!” she says, beaming. “Lots of people think they’re younger than that, but they’re just small for their age. What about yours?”

“Eight,” I say, hoping it’s quiet enough that Sarina doesn’t hear. Luckily, she doesn’t—too absorbed in the food in front of her, the abandoned magazine she’s

flipping through, eyes drinking in the photos and articles.

That girl will read anything.

Lowering her voice, Kira says, “Dorian is working on sending that message now. But I wanted to ask—is there anything else you girls need? If I get Sarina’s measurements, I could make a few dresses for her. We also have a thrift store—”

I’m already shaking my head. “No, Kira, that’s so kind, but it’s too much.”

“Please,” she says, taking my hand in hers, and I’m so shocked at the contact that I forget to pull away. Her eyes meet mine. “I’ve done nothing but nurse, burp, change and sleep for the past six months. I would love a project.”

I bite my tongue, but call Sarina over. She asks Kira a million questions as she takes her measurements, and Kira asks for her favorite colors.

Then, just before she goes, Kira stops, eyes lingering on me for a long moment. Even without magic, I can tell she wants to ask about Emin and I, and I will her not to.

“Veva,” she finally says. “Is there anything else you need? Anything at all?”

“Actually,” I laugh, glancing at my daughter. “Would you mind helping us get our hands on a library card?”

Kira’s eyes light up. “I’d love to. Let’s plan to go first thing tomorrow, okay?”

“Library card?” Sarina is listening now, her eyes wide and bright on me. For the first time, I feel a pang of regret about the way I’ve chosen to raise her.

The camp has taught her community, resilience, but there are a lot of things about this

type of life that would be good for her, too. With her love of reading, the library will be like an all-you-can-eat buffet.

“Sure,” Kira smiles, her hand on the door. “You can even get your own, Sarina.”

After Kira leaves, that idea hovers in the air. Sarina having her own card—having endless access to books like that.

I get the deep, bone-sure feeling that Sarina and I are setting off in a different direction now, that her mind is always going to be a bit different after this experience.

But I don’t have the energy to work it out, don’t have the willpower to think it through. The only thing I can do, after the door shuts behind Kira, closing out the sunshine and plunging our motel room back into darkness, is sleep.

Except not even a minute later, Kira is knocking again.

“One second,” I say, peeling myself up off the bed.

She must have forgotten to take her dish with her. I grab it from the table, walk past Sarina, and open the door.

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“We should do this more often,” Aidan says, his body folded in half as he ties his shoes. I stare at him, wondering how in the world he has the energy for this—I’m older than him by at least five years, but he shouldn’t have such a jump on me when it comes to recuperating after a training session.

“I think I’m getting old,” I laugh, and Aidan blinks.

“You’re like, barely thirty, right?” he shakes his head, then waves his hand at me. “Maybe you just need to train more.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Hey,” Aidan says, standing, slinging his duffel over his shoulder. “Let’s go to the diner. I swear the food there is great right after sparring.”

“I’m not a nutritionist,” I say as we push through the doors and into the waning afternoon sunlight. “But pie sounds great post-workout.”

Aidan starts to walk to the left, saying something about the merits of cherry versus blueberry, something about antioxidants, but I can’t hear him.

At once, a sense of panic washes over my body like a bucket of ice water over my head. I drop my bag to the ground and start to run, feeling like I’m in one of those dreams where I’m moving my feet, but my body feels stuck in the same place.

It’s Veva—on the other side of Badlands. And she’s in trouble. I feel the threat like it’s right here, a knife against my neck.

Distantly, I can hear Aidan calling after me, “Emin! Emin—where are you—?”

But I don’t answer him. I just turn the corner, still running, heading for the highway, for the motel on the edge of town. It must be where she is. It’s where that tug is pulling me, telling me to go faster, faster .

When my feet hit the gravel of the motel parking lot, I hear something beside me and turn to see Aidan, having caught up, his own duffel still bouncing against his side.

“What the fuck—” he starts, but stops when our eyes land on the same sight upstairs. Flames, billowing out of one of the motel rooms. Someone on the landing, screaming. My eyes flit over the scene—one, two, three guys. All drenched in Grayhide scent, smelling like they were sent by the alpha.

The motel is shaped like a horseshoe, with the rooms on the outside, and the three landings only accessible by three separate sets of stairs. The room with the fire is on the left, the smoke billowing up and over the lip of the roof.

I should have known better than to let Veva out of my sight.

If they came for her at the market, it only makes sense that they’d come for her again. As I run, my mind swims with questions. First, how the hell did they get into our territory so easily? And second—how did they know where to find Veva?

A pop sounds from the room, likely a TV or light bulb exploding under the heat, and my heart squeezes, head already imagining Veva and Sarina in that room together, trying to get out a tiny bathroom window.

Or, even worse, trying to fight off more Grayhides in the midst of the fire.

Breathing hard, I take the stairs three at a time, launching myself at the man just

outside the room.

Aidan engages another, and though we've just spent the past two hours training, I feel filled with a bottomless energy, a sort of hyper-charged adrenaline pooling in my fingertips as I bury my elbow in the guy's stomach, catching him off guard.

The momentum of it sends him back, his ass hitting the railing, and I drive forward, clocking him across the jaw. This time, the motion is enough to send his entire body flailing over, his wail short before he hits the ground with a dull, wet thunk .

Maybe he's dead—I'm not sure. It's not the most important thing right now. Turning and holding a forearm up to my face, I step toward the fire. Coughing into the material of my shirt and trying to breathe, I call out, "Veva!"

"Over here!"

I don't expect her to answer me, and I don't expect the response to come from behind me. But when I turn, I see her at the edge of the landing across from me, Sarina huddled behind her, their backs to the wall.

Veva is holding her knife in her outstretched, shaking hand. She looks like she can barely keep herself up, and her nose is bleeding, the bright red blood streaking down over her white shirt.

The third and final shifter comes around the corner, having climbed a different set of stairs to get to her, and I watch her eyes set with determination, her knees bending.

"Stay back!" she says. "Stop!"

I recognize him—a barely-healed burn on his cheek, his thick neck shining with sweat in the sun. The same shifter that went after her at the market.

She's going to try and fight him, despite the fact that her knees are wobbling, her face a nauseating mix of pale and purple, the bruises over her nose and cheeks already looking worse than they did an hour ago.

I could run down the stairs, then back up the other set, but it would take too long. He only has a few steps before he reaches them, and I only have seconds to find out if Veva's going to be able to wield that knife in her state.

There's a six-foot distance between where I stand and the two girls. Without thinking, I draw back, suck in a breath of the smoke-smelling air, and run at the rail.

Veva swings her head between me and the shifter advancing on her, and I catch the briefest flash of fear—concern?—in her eyes when she sees what I'm going to do.

“Emin, no—”

But it's too late. I've taken a running jump, thrust my body into the air, flying across the space, arms windmilling, stomach dropping for the brief second I'm hanging with nothing below me.

If this was a movie, the frame might show my body midair, the billowing smoke behind me, the angle tipped to make me look much higher than a single story up.

Somehow, by some divine intervention of fate, I clear the other railing and come to a skittering stop on the landing. The meaty shifter halts, eyes widening, pace stuttering in his advance toward Veva and Sarina.

He was so giddy to get her, I realize. Excited.

“Going after a mother and her child?” I ask, swinging my hand back toward them, fury piling up inside me at the look on this guy's face—he was so excited to get to

Veva, but not so happy to go up against me. “You’re looking for a fight, you fucker? I’ll give it to you.”

He blocks my first hit, and delivers one right back, knocking me in the side of the head hard enough to cause an instant headache.

I stagger back, but when I rally and sweep my leg under his, it knocks him off balance and he falls to the side, his head hitting the iron railing with a metal clang .

I see the blood oozing from the side of his head, know that I could leave him like this—it’s enough to fuck him up, take him out of commission long enough that I could get Veva and Sarina away from here.

But all I can picture is the way he was prowling toward Veva. My woman. That child—the two of them defenseless. How he’d spoken to her at the market, looked at her. His hungry eyes, the cruelty in his smile.

If I let him live, he might just decide to go after some other woman, use his strength to go after an injured target. I let him live at the market, and the second he healed enough to stand, he came out here and tried to get her again.

I can’t have that.

Not stopping my advance toward him, I turn to the side, punch through a thin piece of glass, and pull out a fire extinguisher from its red box. He sees it in my bleeding hands and sits up, bringing his hands up in front of his face.

“Wait—” he starts, and I hate him even more for being a coward.

Distantly, somewhere behind my fury, I hear Veva say, “ Don’t look ,” just before I bring the fire extinguisher down on the fucker’s face.

Three good swings later, and he's not hurting anyone else, ever again.

I glance to the side, see Veva slumped down against the wall, her daughter in her arms, Sarina's face buried in her mother's chest. Good. Veva is right—Sarina didn't need to see that.

For good measure, I pick the Grayhide shifter up, haul him over the side of the railing, and toss him down to join his friend on the ground, watching with satisfaction as he hits the gravel.

When I look up, Aidan is standing across from me, six feet away, almost in the exact spot I jumped from, a body at his feet.

His mouth hangs open as he looks at me, expression caught somewhere between concern and admiration.

"Emin," he says, but his face starts to warble in my sight, his voice fading in and out. "...get the feeling you were holding back...?"

He finishes his sentence just as Dorian's truck swings into the parking lot, several other shifters hot on his tail. Good. We handled these guys, but there could be more coming. I glance at Veva again, and, seeing that she and Sarina are in one piece, feel a wave of exhaustion sweep over me.

I reach back to the wall for support, then everything goes black.

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“Thank you all for coming together so quickly,” Dorian says, barely managing to rub the exhaustion from his eyes.

He’s not the only one. Last night, Dorian and Kira’s babies took turns crying every thirty minutes.

On my bed, in the room across the hall, I’d stared at the ceiling, listening as Dorian and Kira took turns getting out of bed, tending to them.

Hearing Kira whisper to them, shush them, beg them to latch.

It reminded me of when Sarina was a baby. More than likely, I wouldn’t have fallen asleep anyway, not after the attack, but the constant crying was the nail in the coffin.

Beside me, Sarina is slumped in her chair, snoring lightly. Seems the babies kept her up, too.

This morning, after Kira put a cup of coffee in my hand, Dorian said he’d be calling an emergency council meeting to figure out what to do. Though I didn’t ask, he told me that Emin was okay, he’d just blacked out from the blow to his head, too much exertion.

“Maybe,” I’d said, eyes on the ground, “Sarina and I should just be on our way. I don’t want to draw any attention to your pack.”

Dorian had looked at me for a long time, then said, “ Our pack, Veva. Don’t forget that you’re Ambersky, too. If you want to be. And we protect our own. Which means

I'd like to have a meeting to make sure we can come together and plan to do just that."

This is that meeting. And, unfortunately, it includes both Argent men, whom I'd rather not see again. Kellen, Emin's father, looks far older than the last time I saw him, more wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. There's a sense of dejection to him that I can't deny, feels somewhat good to see.

Emin—sitting in a soft gray, long-sleeve shirt and a pair of jeans—looks even more exhausted than I feel, with a slight bruise under one eye and a subtle cough that must be from inhaling so much smoke yesterday.

He must feel me looking, because he raises his gaze to mine and I quickly look away, fixing my gaze out the window, where I see a colorful bird perching on one of the sparse branches outside.

We're in the pack hall, a place I'd only been occasionally as a teenager. Usually, to pick my mother up from an overnight jail stay when she'd had too much to drink. The people around the table look competent, and that, at least, puts me at ease.

"Emin," Dorian says, "why don't you recap your trip to the market for us?"

Emin clears his throat and sits forward, his eyes flicking to mine. It sends a shock through me, and I swallow, eyes trailing down over his chest and arms braced against the table. Mentally shaking myself, I force my gaze away.

"I arrived at the market around an hour after its start." His voice has the same effect on me, rougher from the smoke, so much deeper than when we knew each other as teenagers.

I have a sudden sense of grief—the fact that I've missed these past ten years with

him, didn't get to watch him grow up, watch his body fill out, his facial hair thicken, all the tiny changes I didn't get to be privy to.

Then I remind myself that was never going to happen. I remind myself of how it felt for him to turn me away that night, knowing I was pregnant.

Emin goes on, "I delivered the package for the first objective, but sensed something was...off. With the Grayhides I delivered it to. I tailed them through the market, until they came across Ms. Marone here."

Dorian crosses his arms. "So, you didn't seek out the Llewelyn contact immediately after delivering the package?"

I'm burning with curiosity—to ask about "the package." Was it what I saw that Grayhide shifter holding? The thing that looked suspiciously head-like?

"No," Emin admits, his gaze lowering to the table. "I followed my gut. Watched the exchange, then she," he nods toward Sarina, "had what I believe to be a premonition."

The gazes in the room shift over to my daughter, and I pull her against my side. She stirs, but doesn't wake.

"And that's when the Grayhides went after her?"

Emin nods. "Veva was defending herself and her daughter, and that's when I intervened."

Without meaning to, I say, "He saved our lives."

Emin meets my eyes, and for the first time since seeing him again, my hatred toward

him is dulled. It's the truth—if Emin hadn't been there, I would have died protecting Sarina, and they would have taken her anyway.

“So, what this tells us is that the Grayhides are on the hunt for psychics.” Dorian paces, his hand coming to his chin. “We all know Jerrod was furious about Kira leaving, and when he learned of her abilities, that's when he attempted to retrieve her.”

Dorian's hands are clenched, his shoulders tight. I almost ask what he's talking about, but I know it's not my place. Maybe I could ask Kira about it, what he means by retrieve.

“But they're not going after Kira anymore,” Kellen says, his eyes swinging to me, and a shudder runs down my back.

I've never spoken to the man before, but I know all about him. Saw the worst parts of him in his son, and it makes me bristle now. I glare back at him, watch as surprise flits over his features, tinged with confusion.

Of course, he doesn't understand why I would hate him.

“That's right,” a woman to my left says, running a hand through her short hair.

I think someone called her Leta earlier.

“So either they know that, with Kira's position as Luna and Dorian's mate, it would be too hard to get her”—her gaze swings to me and Sarina—“or there's something about your daughter specifically that they want. ”

“Veva is a powerful caster,” Emin says, and I hate the way my skin prickles with pleasure at the sound of those words—him admitting that. I remind my body that I

want no further reactions to him, like I could possibly train it to behave better. “Maybe that could make Sarina’s gift stronger?”

“Potentially,” Leta says, brow furrowed. “Claire?”

A woman with red hair shakes her head. “I’m not sure.”

“We should talk to Beth,” Leta offers. “See if she knows anything about a potential correlation there.”

“Okay,” Dorian says. “So what we do know is that the Grayhides were willing to come into our territory to try and get these two. Granted, it was the very edge, but they still crossed through. As of right now, we’ve had some border patrol shifters dump the bodies in the desert, Grayhide area, to try and make it look like an accident, but Emin made that pretty difficult. ”

Dorian glances at his friend, reproachful, and I try not to think about the wet smack of Emin hitting that man with the fire extinguisher. I try not to think about the satisfaction I felt when he tossed the man’s body over the railing, like he was taking out the trash.

“That means,” Dorian goes on, “that we’re looking at more Grayhide attacks.

That’s the last thing we need right now, especially since Aidan isn’t ready to take on Jerrod yet.

So we’re going to play defense, put more effort into keeping them out, but otherwise, we’re stopping all other activities in their territory.

Right now, we’re waiting until the right time to strike. ”

“I’ll communicate that to our border people,” Leta says. “And maybe we should add more?”

“Do it,” Dorian says, then, turning to me, “Veva, we would still like for you to stay and help with our project. Given what happened with you at the motel, we think it might be a good idea for you to stay with someone. It will be safer for you and Sarina, instead of being alone and near the edge of town like that.”

I bite my lip, shift in my chair. The last thing I want is to sound ungrateful, but if we continue staying with Dorian and Kira, neither Sarina or I will get any sleep.

But I don’t have to say a thing. Dorian gives me a knowing grin. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to ask that you stay with Kira and me. The boys are a lot.”

I hold his gaze, hearing what he’s not saying—those are his children. One night is one thing, but having Sarina and I in that house, when it could draw a threat to his boys? Not something he wants to do.

And I respect it.

“They can stay with me.”

All the eyes around the table swing to Emin, who’s sitting with his arms crossed, looking relaxed. But his eyes are on me, focused. Determined.

I square my jaw. My first instinct is to say, no way in hell , but then I’m reminded of the way he leapt across the balconies at the motel. How he took that risk to protect us.

Sarina shifts against my side, and I look up to the ceiling for a moment. Logically, staying with Emin makes the most sense. I know him, and I know he’ll protect us. I’ve already seen it.

“Fine,” I say, and watch as surprise moves over Dorian’s face. It probably doesn’t make sense to him, the way I reacted in the hospital room, only to give in instantly to this. But I have to do what’s best for my daughter, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

No matter how grateful I am to Emin for protecting us at the motel, I promise myself I won’t forget.

I won’t forget leaving my home, going through my pregnancy alone.

I won’t forget raising my girl in that camp, and I won’t take my eyes off the goal here—to help Sarina grow up into an amazing woman, and get her far, far away from here.

I level a stare at Emin, hoping he can read exactly what the expression on my face is saying.

We’ll stay with you, but you are not forgiven.

“Emin, wait—”

The moment I hear my father’s voice, I want to snap at him, tell him to shut up. Veva and Sarina are in front of me, walking to my SUV so I can take them back to my place.

It feels right, to have them there with me. And maybe it will give Veva and I an opportunity to really talk.

I turn and face my father. He’s slightly out of breath from following me out, and blinks, wiping the back of his hand over his forehead.

“I don’t want to hear it, Dad,” I say, quickly, feeling the weight of Veva’s stare on my back. I know what this looks like to her.

Dad’s brow wrinkles, his head rearing back. “Emin, I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes.” His eyes slide behind me, and I imagine he’s looking at Veva now, before returning his gaze to me. “I just wanted—”

He’s going to warn me away from this, say that offering a Marone a spot in my house is a huge mistake. Never mind the fact that I’m already the right-hand man for the alpha leader. That, realistically, there’s no higher I can climb.

And never mind the fact that it was his wife—my mother—who betrayed our family and dragged our name through the mud, not me.

“We can talk later,” I say it with finality, turn around, and lengthen my strides to

catch back up with the girls. Veva helps Sarina boost into the backseat, closes the door behind her, then turns to me.

When her hand lands on my chest, I feel that heat through my shirt, and have to suck in a breath, shocked by the instant, sticky lust that rolls through me.

Of course, I've had Veva Marone before, but not like this.

We were together as teenagers—when we were both fumbling and confused, trying to figure out what we liked.

Her body was different then, a straight line from top to bottom. As a teenager, she was so, so skinny—enough that I could run the tip of my finger over her ribs. Shame prickles the back of my neck at the realization—I should have been inviting her to dinner, not hiding her away.

But now she has curves. Hips and thighs. Lines that I would like to trace, relearn.

“Listen,” Veva says, lowering her voice and glancing quickly back at the SUV, as though to make sure Sarina can't hear her.

“This does not mean I forgive you, do you understand? I'm grateful that you're letting us stay with you, and I can admit that we need the extra protection, but you and I?

” she pauses, her eyes flicking back and forth between mine, like she's trying to make sure I'm hearing her loud and clear. “We are not friends, Emin.”

The sound of my name on her tongue makes my skin flush. I open my mouth, wanting to tell her that I've never wanted to be her friend—but she's already turning away, grabbing the passenger door handle and hauling herself up into the SUV

without my help.

Sighing, I circle the vehicle and hop into the driver's side, turning over the ignition and getting the air conditioning going, unable to keep the smile from my face when I hear Sarina let out a sigh of relief from the back seat.

"That's nice," she says, and when I glance back at her, see the way she's looking at the vents, I realize that she's not used to air conditioning.

Veva runs her hands over her arms and leans back in her chair, and when I adjust the vent so it's not blowing at her, she glares at me like I've slapped her, then turns promptly toward the window.

We ride the rest of the way to my place in silence, the town passing us by quietly through the windows. A pop song plays muted, just under the sound of the air conditioner.

When we pull up to the house and into the driveway, I lead the two of them up to the front, pull my keys out, and unlock the door, suddenly self-conscious of my home.

It's the same as many of the other houses around here—a hacienda style home, with tan stone and flat roofs, designed to let the heat out and keep the inside nice and cool. It's clean, simple—I don't own much, and spend a lot of the day out, anyway.

I bought the house after finishing up a two-year degree at the local community college, with my own savings for the down payment.

Really, I just wanted to get out of my parents' house.

My mom was excited about me buying my own house, thought it meant I would settle down soon, find a nice girl and start making grandchildren for her.

What she didn't know was that I've been hung up on one woman, and unable to really look at others. Makes it pretty hard to start a family.

"Your house is really nice," Sarina says when I open the door and let them both step inside. It lights something up inside me, and I resist the urge to say something stupid, like, it could be your house, too .

Instead, I thank her, then clear my throat and climb the stairs, showing them to the first guest room.

"There are two," I say, "so you could each have one, if you want, but this one has the attached bathroom—"

"We'll stay together," Veva says, putting her hands on Sarina's shoulders and tugging her backward into the room. "If you don't mind, we're both very tired."

Just before she closes the door, she catches my eye.

She may think we don't know each other anymore, but I know her. I know that look in her eye, know exactly what she's doing.

Veva might be tired, but she's closing this door right now because she's scared .

She's scared that if we talk to each other, she might accidentally let her guard down.

Let me in. I open my mouth, but before I can say anything to stop her, she's already shut and locked the door, effectively keeping me out.

"Emin," Kira says, the moment she answers the phone. "Dorian said Veva and Sarina

are staying with you—I can’t believe she agreed to that.”

“She barely did,” I say. I’m on the couch, hand over my eyes, feet over the arm. “And the second we got here, she marched right into the bedroom and closed the door on me.”

Kira is quiet for a long moment; then, finally, she says, “There’s something between you two, isn’t there?”

I want to tell her the truth. I want to say, Veva is my mate.

But I don’t. For some reason, it’s impossible for me to scoop the words up, to push them through this phone line and back toward my sister. It feels like they’re buried inside me, half under the space between the Veva in my guest room and the Veva of ten years ago.

I know it was callous of me to break things off with her the way I did, so suddenly, but when she came to our house, I was afraid like I had never been before.

I’m not sure what my father would have done if he’d found her in that closet, and for the first time during our affair, I thought about Veva, instead of thinking about myself.

Too long has gone by since Kira asked the question, but she is nothing if not patient.

Finally, I say, “Yes. There is something.”

“Were you mean to her in high school?” Kira asks, voice quiet. “Like how you were mean to me?”

I could never be mean to someone else like I was with Kira—it was a million times

worse with her, because she was my sister.

I was supposed to protect her, but my parents' fucked up view of the world made me think it was better to shut her out, make sure I wasn't attached to her, than to stand by her side.

"Something like that," I manage, throat getting clogged up when I even think about trying to explain what's happened between Veva and me.

I only managed to get Kira to forgive me last year, when Dorian brought her back home.

The last thing I want to do is remind her of how much I sucked.

"And now she won't come out of that guest room.

I tried asking if they wanted to order a pizza or something, but there was nothing.

No response. They should eat, but I don't even know how to get them out of there. "

"You know what?" Kira says, sounding suddenly giddy. "Give me an hour. I know exactly what will get them out of that room."

She gives me a set of instructions, and when I hang up, I follow them, moving through the house and getting things ready. I'd do anything to get Veva out of that room, anything to open her up to the idea of talking to me again.

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“What do you think it is? It kind of smells like spaghetti.”

Sarina has her face near the door and is inhaling deeply. I didn’t know Emin could cook, but whatever he’s making smells good enough that even I’m getting whiffs of it through my broken nose.

I sit on the bed, legs crossed, going through the gems I had left in my jacket from the dark market. I line them up, touch my fingers to them, try to estimate what I can get for them.

Part of my deal with Dorian was that he would contact Willow discretely, offer her safety here, and ask her to get my bundle of money from under my mattress. My chest pinches when I think of Willow, hope that she’s okay.

She’s a strong woman, been taking care of herself for a long time. But I have no idea if Jerrod will send people after her. If they’ll discover the connection between us and try to extort it to find us.

“Mom,” Sarina says again, eyes flicking to mine. “Maybe we could just go and see—”

I bite my tongue. There are two protein bars in my purse, and if I’m being honest, that’s what I thought we’d be having. If it was just me, I’d stay in this room for the whole night, just to avoid going out and seeing Emin.

But it’s not just me, and Sarina has her hand over her stomach, a tortured look on her face.

“Fine,” I sigh, scooping up the gems, sliding them back into the velvety pouch, and swinging my legs off the bed. When I face her, I lean down, smooth my thumbs over her cheeks, her freckles. “You stay here. I’ll go see if I can bring some in.”

She nods eagerly, and I close the door behind me, casting a weak protection spell over it. Some of my strength is coming back. I can’t wait until I’m at full power again.

I go down the steps as quietly as I can, slowing when I realize there are voices sounding in the kitchen—Emin isn’t alone. There’s a woman with him.

Stupidly, something like jealousy rears its head inside me, and I push it down, trying to ignore the clawing, desperate feeling. There’s no reason—absolutely none at all to be feeling like that about Emin.

That’s proven extra true when I peer into the kitchen and see Kira Argent standing at the stove, an apron wrapped around her, a spoon in her hand.

“Veva!” she turns and smiles at me, popping out her hip. “Come in, come in!”

I step into the kitchen cautiously, glancing over when I hear lowered voices. Dorian and Emin sit at the breakfast bar, laughing and talking about something on Dorian’s phone. When I appear, they glance up, and Dorian waves at me.

Without thinking, I wave back.

“Thank the gods you’re here,” Kira says, opening a drawer, pulling out a spoon, and handing it to me. “Please taste this and tell me what it’s missing.”

Everything about this situation feels like a fever dream. Just beyond the guys, on little play mats, I see the two boys on their backs, reaching for hanging toys, gurgling and

laughing happily.

Cautiously, I step forward, accepting the spoon and trying the sauce.

Without meaning to, I close my eyes and let out a little noise. It's some sort of Bolognese, perfectly savory, with all the right notes of sweetness, salt, and acid.

"Nothing," I hear myself say after a second. "I don't think this is missing a thing."

When I open my eyes again, Kira is beaming at me. "Have I ever told you you're my favorite?" she asks, taking the spoon back from me and depositing it in the dishwasher. She strikes me as the kind of woman that's very efficient in the kitchen.

"Pretty sure those two are your favorites," I joke, gesturing at the babies, and her face softens.

"I'm sure you get that those two are in a league of their own. No competition."

Silence falls, the understanding of two mothers hanging between us.

"Speaking of kids," Kira smiles, gesturing to a large rectangular bag just outside the kitchen. I blink at it, realizing it's piled to the top with folded clothes. "That's some stuff I whipped up for you and Sarina."

"Oh," I say, shaking my head and putting my hand to my chest, "Kira, you didn't have to—"

But I'm cut off by the sound of my daughter's voice, nervous and hopeful at once.

"Mom?"

Kira and I turn at the same time to find Sarina in the doorway, her eyes wide as she takes it all in. I can't even find it in me to be upset that she didn't stay in the room when she smiles, asking, "Is it spaghetti?"

"Same kind of sauce," Kira says. "Different noodles. Would you like to try some?"

Sarina nods, and in the next moment, she's receiving her own taste of the sauce. After a second, she delivers the same praise I did.

"Are you a chef?" Sarina asks, and I see Kira glancing over at her husband, something there in those words.

"Not yet," Kira says. "But I'd like to open a restaurant around here in a few years, when the boys are older. That's a secret between me and you, though, okay?"

Sarina's eyes get wide, and she nods. Kira turns back to the stove, and Sarina says, "Do you...do you have any books?"

Kira looks over her shoulder at my daughter. "This isn't actually my place, but my brother Emin probably has at least a few books lying around here."

My heart freezes when Emin looks up, his eyes landing on Sarina. A dialogue between the two of them, their eyes meeting. My daughter and her dad.

I watch Sarina carefully. Can she tell? Can she feel it?

"You like to read?" Emin asks, voice low.

"Yeah," Sarina shifts from foot to foot nervously, glances back at Kira as though for reassurance. "Kira said I could get a library card..."

“Come on,” Emin says, pushing up from the counter. “I’ve got something that can hold you over until then.”

When he turns and starts walking down the hallway, Sarina glances at me, a question in her eyes—should we follow him?

Before he can turn back and see us hesitating, before Dorian and Kira can wonder too much about the pause, I nod, putting my hand on her shoulder briefly before we tail him down the hallway.

Emin pushes the door open to a study, revealing a large oak desk, a worn rug, and light spilling in from the windows outside. It’s gorgeous, and the walls on the left and right are both lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

“Wow,” Sarina says, mouth open as we step inside. Her eyes dart to Emin’s, and she says, “You like to read, too?”

“I sure do,” Emin laughs, running a finger along the shelf. He glances at his hand and seems satisfied that there’s no dust. “Though, our tastes might be a little different.”

“Can I—can I read any of these?” Sarina asks, and when Emin nods, she moves through the room, taking out book after book and piling it in her arms, like we’re in the library.

My heart is flipping in my chest at this entire situation, and I’m torn between being happy for my daughter and being terrified at the three of us, in this room like this. The soft, open look on Emin’s face as he watches her run her finger along the spines.

Luckily, a call from Kira pulls us all from this trance.

“Come on, you three!” she says. “The food is ready!”

Sarina and I return to our guest room so she can set her books on the end table, and when we come back downstairs, Kira and Emin are already seated around the table.

Kira has one baby crooked in her arm, his face and her breast hidden by a nursing blanket, and Dorian comes back with the other, the little man held aloft in the air.

“Mission accomplished,” Dorian says. “Clean as a whistle.”

Dorian gets the boys back on their mats, then we’re all settling in at the table. There’s pasta, salad, a plate of roasted veggies, and even homemade lemonade that Kira passes around proudly.

“For that deep lemon flavor,” she says, “you want to macerate the lemons, not juice them. That’s the trick. These are from the lemon tree in our backyard.”

“It’s great,” Emin says, and Sarina asks, “What’s macerate?”

“It means I slice them up and cover them with sugar,” Kira mimes cutting, then sprinkling with sugar. “The sugar pulls the water out of them, making a sweet syrup.”

The conversation continues to flow around us, with Sarina asking questions of all the adults. Asking Dorian what it’s like to be an alpha leader, asking Emin how much his house cost. They’re all charmed by her, even when I try to explain to her that some questions are inappropriate.

“No, it’s okay,” Emin says, laughing. “Do you know what a mortgage is?”

Without meaning to, I relax. I smile, I laugh, and realize at some point in the night that I’m experiencing something I’ve never really had, other than with Willow and a few others in camp.

Community. Family. A sense of belonging.

Sitting up straighter in my chair, I push that feeling away—no matter how warm and enticing it is—and remind myself that this isn't permanent. That being back here, in the Ambersky pack, is not what my future looks like.

No matter how nice it is to finally have a seat at the table.

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Knowing Veva is just across the hall from me, I barely sleep.

Last night, I'd watched her war with herself, alternating between laughing and joining on the conversation and pulling back, trying to keep those walls up.

Kira was right—the food did bring her out of the room. But she's still not ready to give me a chance. Even after that moment with Sarina in my study.

After tossing and turning for hours, drifting to sleep, only to wake up to some strange sound outside, I finally get out of bed.

If I'm going to be awake, I might as well be getting things done. I go to my bathroom, brush my teeth, groom, dress, then head down to the garage.

The moment I flick the light on and smell the sawdust, something in my chest loosens up. If I had it my way, I'd be out on the lake, fishing—but this is the next best thing.

My last project was a new bookshelf for my study. I run my hands over some of the wood I still have left from that, thinking about the guest room. Once I have a plan, I get into the groove quickly, cutting and sanding, already thinking about what stain I might use for the piece.

“Good morning.”

“Ah!” I jump and turn to find Sarina in the doorway, staring at me, looking wide awake. There's a book tucked under her arm, and she's watching me with those open eyes. It makes her look like she absorbs everything around her. Maybe she does.

I should have smelled her before she spoke, even if I couldn't hear her over the sound of the machine. Maybe it was the sawdust, clogging up my nose.

"Sorry," Sarina laughs, her voice high and light, and not sounding sorry. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I quirk an eyebrow at her. "Really? Because it kind of seems like you meant to scare me."

Sarina laughs again, rocks on her feet, and I realize she's wearing one of the dresses my sister made for her. It's yellow with little flowers, and suits her well, contrasting with her hair.

The hair that looks so much like mine, so much like Kira's, that it doesn't make sense. It's not fair how much this girl looks like me, despite not belonging to me.

I can't keep thinking about it, or I'll drive myself mad.

"What are you doing?" Sarina asks, taking another step inside, her head tipping and turning as she takes everything in. My woodworking shop is in a little alcove off the main garage, which houses canoes, fishing gear, and my motorcycle.

"I'm working on a set of nightstands." Reaching over, I pat my hand against the wood. "Figured your mom and you might like to each have an end table in that room."

Sarina nods, matter-of-factly. "It would be nice to have a place to set my books."

"Oh," I tease, "your books?"

Her face goes red. "I'm sorry—no, I meant—"

“Sarina,” I hold up a hand, shaking my head. “I’m just teasing you. You are welcome to use anything in this house as long as you’re staying here. I just want you and your mom to feel welcome.”

She stares at me for a long moment, then says, “I just can’t figure it out.”

“What?”

“Why my mom doesn’t like you.”

I bite my tongue, looking away from her. It’s Veva I want to talk to about this, and I have to resist the urge to dig, to find out what this kid knows. If her mother has said anything about me to her.

“You want to help me out with this?”

Sarina looks intrigued and surprises me by throwing herself into the project, following my instructions as we measure pieces, sand them down.

“Do you like to build things?” I ask, while we’re sanding down one of the pieces. I could use my tool for this, but it’s too loud and too dangerous around an eight-year-old. Besides, it’s kind of nice to get in and do it by hand.

Sarina shrugs. “I helped my mom build our house.”

That gives me pause, and I pull back a bit. “You and your mom...built a house?”

“Not like this,” Sarina laughs, looking around at the garage. “Well, maybe kind of like this—about as big as this. Not your whole house.”

She’s surprisingly well-spoken for her age. It must be from all the reading.

“That’s impressive,” I say, “that you built a place to live together.”

“I like it a lot more than the tent.”

Again, I pause, something in my chest dropping at the sound of this. The tent, them building a small house together? Not for the first time since seeing Veva again, guilt pushes through me.

That night, when I turned her away, I hadn’t expected it to prompt her to leave the pack altogether. I’d had a sinking feeling, deep down, that she was going to point out what had been obvious between us for a while—the fact that we were mates.

I didn’t think the rejection would hit her hard enough that she would move to the Grayhide territory and live in a tent.

I’m just opening my mouth to respond to Sarina when there’s a knock at the door. I perk up, tip my head, and take a sniff of the air.

It’s Aidan, and he’s alone. Still, I steer Sarina into the living room and tell her to stay put when I go to the door.

“Morning,” Aidan says, grinning at me and holding out a canvas sack. “Dorian said this is for Veva.”

I stare at the bag, wondering what Dorian might be giving her, but reach out and take it, anyway.

Aidan raises his eyebrows at me, not too subtly trying to look inside the house. “Heard they’re staying with you—how’s that going? You have any time to train later?”

“Probably not,” I say, angling myself so he can’t see past me.

It’s not that I don’t trust him—it’s that, right now, with Sarina behind me, I feel like I can’t really trust anyone.

I believe Aidan, that he’s here, in the pack, to prepare himself for taking on Jerrod, but that doesn’t mean I’m willing to risk him being around Sarina. “Thanks, man.”

Closing the door behind me, I turn and peek into the bag, then suck in a breath. It’s several large bundles, of money, a heavy pouch that must be filled with coins. It’s a lot of money for a woman who was, apparently, living in some sort of shed that she built herself.

There’s an envelope, a few books, and a few other random personal items. My hands itch to reach, open the envelope and figure out what’s inside.

“What are you doing?” I startle, turning to find Veva standing in nothing but a large T-shirt at the bottom of the stairs, hands shaking as she takes Sarina by the shoulders and pulls her in, wrapping her arms around her.

“Sorry,” Sarina mumbles into her chest. “I tried to wake you—”

But Veva isn’t even paying attention to her daughter—her eyes are on me, the bag in my hand, pulled open at the top to reveal what’s inside.

“Is that mine?” she asks, and when I step forward to hand it to her, she practically yanks it out of my hands. All the familiarity, laughter, and warmth from last night is gone.

“Sarina,” she says, turning and pointing up the stairs. “Don’t leave that room without making sure I’m awake, and that I know where you’re going, okay?”

“We were building tables,” Sarina says, shrugging, a book held close to her chest.
“Sorry.”

“Go upstairs. I’ll be there in a second.”

This is the first time I’ve heard Veva use anything but a gentle, loving tone with Sarina, and I realize it’s slightly my fault. The moment the girl is out of earshot, I lower my voice.

“I was just checking the bag—”

“You were snooping,” Veva frowns, crossing her arms over her chest. It seems like she’s just now noticing the fact that she’s still in her pajamas, but I can’t think about anything else.

I’m finding it very difficult to pull my eyes away from her long legs, from the hem of that T-shirt, from the way her crossed arms accentuate her chest, rather than hiding it.

“I don’t want Sarina going anywhere without me,” she says, looking pointedly at me, and though she’s not saying it, I hear it loud and clear: I don’t trust you, Emin Argent
.

“Mom?”

I stand on the sidewalk outside the house, staring at it. Even just from here, I can see that something is different. The shrubs are well-cared for. The mailbox isn't leaning, the grass is trimmed, the windows are clean and whole.

Emin is sitting in his truck on the curb. He refused to let us out of his sight. It's annoying, but I understand, and am even grateful for him being there. After the Grayhide attack at the motel, I don't hate the idea of having extra help.

“Sorry,” I say to Sarina, swallowing down the lump in my throat and taking her hand in mine. “Come on, let's go.”

In my pocket is the note from Willow, telling me the camp misses us, but that she gathered up the things she thought we might want from our place as best she could.

In it, she also thanked me for the effort to offer her safety in the Ambersky pack, but that she would be staying at the camp, with the others.

Mentally, I reach her words for stability as we walk up the sidewalk and I ring the doorbell. In my other pocket is the little card from my mother, inviting me to come over and talk to her.

I shouldn't be here—if I'm angry at Emin for rejecting me, turning me away all those years ago, then I should be furious with my mother for making our family like this. Falling apart after the death of my father and leaving me to deal with the shattered remnants of our family name.

But, for some reason, I can't hold on to that anger.

"Veva," my mother says, opening the door, looking so happy she might cry. "And you must be Sarina."

Before, when I saw her outside the pack hall, I didn't get this good a look at her. But now, studying her in the bright light of day, I can see that my mother looks good—rosy color in her cheeks, her hair brushed back from her face, her clothes clean and wrinkle-free.

"Sarina," I cut in, giving my mother a pointed look. "This is my friend, Opal."

Mom's face shifts as she swallows that down—the fact that I don't want my daughter to know who Opal is to me. To her. The last thing I'm going to do is give Sarina the hope of a grandmother, then move halfway across the continent.

Or risk Opal being exactly the person she always was for me.

"Nice to meet you, Opal," Sarina says, holding out her hand, and Opal smiles at her the way all adults do.

"You as well," she says, shaking her hand, then turning and gesturing for us to come inside.

The house I grew up in is unrecognizable. Clean, for one. The kitchen has all new appliances. There's a TV in the living room, shelves full of books, which Sarina immediately turns toward.

"I made some lemonade for us," my mother says, bringing a glass out to Sarina. I watch, stupefied, as she puts a coaster down on the coffee table, underneath the glass. "Feel free to watch the TV, or read anything on the shelf, dear."

Sarina smiles at her, sinks down into a chair with a book in her lap, and my mother and I move into the dining room together. My hands shake as I accept my lemonade and sit across from her.

“The house looks great,” I say.

She smiles sadly. “Barely recognize it, huh?”

It draws a laugh from me. “No—it’s—you’ve done a lot of work on it.”

My mother stares at me for so long that I’m worried she might have spaced off. Then she gathers herself, swallows, and says, “I wanted it to be ready. In case you ever came back.”

The words hit me like a well-placed blow, making my throat swell up, and I suck in a breath.

“Mom—”

“Sorry,” she raises a hand, looks to the ceiling, then meets my eyes again. “Can I?”

A beat passes, and I nod. She takes another moment, then begins.

“When you left,” she starts, “it took me a few days to notice you were gone. That boy came looking for you—”

“That boy?” I blink at her, and she nods, running a hand over her hair.

“That Argent boy,” she says, softly. “I’d seen him around the house sometimes, and thought the two of you...?”

I glance back toward the living room, though there's no way for me to know how well Sarina can hear, or if she's even paying any attention to us. The last thing I need is for her to be asking any questions about why Emin might have asked after me.

Emin asked after me.

The knowledge of that sits heavy in my stomach, and though I try to stop myself, I picture him as a teenager, standing on my stoop, asking about me. What does that mean? Was he trying to find me after that night?

"But he came looking for you, day after day," Mom goes on, clearing her throat. "And that's when I realized you had left. I—I had some realizations about myself in that moment. After that day, I didn't touch the stuff again, Veva. I got clean, I went back to work, and I—"

She stops, looking like she's trying not to cry. Then a tear rolls down her cheek, and she dabs at it with her sleeve.

"I never stopped looking for you," she chokes out.

"I had a feeling that you were out there, somewhere. And now that you're back, I would like—I'd like for us to have a relationship.

I'd like for you to give me a chance to make up for the way I let you down.

And, if you'll allow it, eventually, I'd love to have a relationship with Sarina, too. "

I don't realize I'm biting my tongue until the hot, metallic taste of blood blooms in my mouth.

Too much time passes, but she's patient, waiting for my answer.

“I...” I finally manage to choke out. “I don’t know just yet. I need some time to think it through.”

“Sure,” she says, though I can still hear the disappointment in her tone. She plays with the damp sleeve of her shirt, rolling and unrolling it. “Of course. Take all the time you need, dear.”

This day has already been too long, but I promised Dorian I would start on the project as soon as I had my things from Willow.

This morning, after Emin handed them over to me, I used my growing energy to cast on them, hiding them in that guest room so he couldn’t find them unless he had his own powerful caster on his side, looking.

Now, I’m in the pack hall again, following the caster with the red hair as she leads me through the building, scanning her badge on various doors. Emin trails behind us, still insisting it’s safer for us if he’s here.

“You’re looking better,” the caster says, as I try to remember her name. “The swelling has gone down quite a bit. Did you notice a dip in your power while healing?”

“Yes,” I admit, though I don’t want to, especially not with Emin behind us. She nods and pushes through a final door, delivering us into what feels like a different world.

While the rest of the pack hall looks straight out of 2003—all beige walls and old, patterned carpet—this room is lush with leather furniture. A large stone fireplace is on the other wall, and the far wall is lined with books that even from here, I can tell are magical tomes.

“Wow,” Sarina says—and I finally remember the caster’s name.

Claire’s cheeks redden, and she shrugs, practically brushing away the compliment.

“Dorian said I could decorate how I wanted.”

“This is…” I nod, pressing my lips together.

Emin laughs, “Well, you should do the rest of the place.”

Claire laughs, too, then gestures for me to follow her back through. Touching Sarina’s shoulder, I say, “Don’t touch anything.”

Sarina nods, but keeps her head on a swivel, taking everything in.

“Right back here is where we’re working on our project,” Claire says, and we come up to a table in the corner of the room, strewn with various black gems and rocks.

While some of them look somewhat similar to Amanzite, anyone familiar with the stone can easily note from first glance that none of them are the real thing.

Amanzite is a smooth rock, and most of the items on the table look more like crystal, jagged and cutting, almost like a rock candy rather than a real stone.

For many of the other attempts, the color is off. Either too transparent, or too opaque. The wrong shade, more blue or purple than black. From the sheer amount of attempts on this table, it’s clear that the casters have been working on this for a while.

No wonder Dorian was willing to get my things in exchange for my help. All this magic must have taken a lot of power, and surely they need their casters for other things.

Claire shows me their current process, and we work on trying to cast a few. I haven't used generative magic in a while—making something from thin air—and I find myself breathing hard, pushing my hair out of my face, feeling bad for mentally making fun of their attempts so far.

"It's a whole thing," Claire laughs, when we work together for twenty minutes and only manage to produce a strange, squishy blue lump. "I'm confident we'll get it. But, sooner would obviously be better than later."

"Synthesizing something from magic is rough," I agree, slumping down in a chair and uncapping a bottle of water. Sarina sits to the side, curled up, solving math equations on one of her worksheets. Emin is in the chair beside her, a book open on his lap. I have to tear my eyes away from them.

"It's my worst area, actually," Claire says, then, seeming to think about it, changes her mind. "No, binding. Is generative your worst?"

"Casting? Sure," for the first time in a while, I think of my grandmother's gift. She passed shortly before I started seeing Emin. Since the day she passed, I haven't had time to do anything with it.

"What do you mean?" Claire looks puzzled. I don't know what it is—maybe the fact that we're both casters, maybe the fact that I'm so tired I can't stop myself, but I tell her.

"My grandmother was clairsentient," I say. "And she passed her gift to me when she died. I've never even had a premonition, so that must be my worst area. I really don't even know much about it."

"Wow," Claire says, shaking her head. Then, she moves quickly, grabbing a pad of paper and scribbling on it. "Here—this is the information for a psychic in town. If

you want to work on that.”

I take the paper, stare at the name, then fold it up and tuck it into my pocket. I don’t have the energy right now to think about it.

“Alright,” Claire says, already back on her feet. “Ready to give it another go?”

Veva is exhausted.

I know she won't tell anyone, but it's written all over her face, in the slump of her shoulders, the way her hands have been shaking since the first time she cast with Claire at the pack hall.

She was quiet the entire road home, looking like she was trying desperately to keep herself from falling asleep in the passenger seat.

Several times, I swear I caught her head bobbing forward, like it might just tuck into her chest, send her to sleep. And I was rooting for it—willing her to rest for a moment. Allow herself to relax in my presence.

We're back at home now, and I'm in the bathroom, taking a quick shower, not wanting to have the girls out of my sight for too long. Part of me wishes I could bring them in here with me like puppies, have them just on the other side of the curtain so I can check on them, make sure they're okay.

Every second spent with the door shut feels like another opportunity for something to go wrong. I know Veva has been casting protective spells on the house—mostly concentrated on the guest room—but it doesn't feel like enough. Especially when she doesn't have her full strength back.

After scrubbing and lathering, rinsing and drying myself off, I quickly throw on a pair of sweats and a soft shirt, then walk back downstairs, my feet thudding gently against the carpet on the stairs.

The sun slants in through the windows, a deep orange indicating the end of the day.

Distantly, I can hear the twinkle of the neighbor's wind chimes.

Smells float in through the open window—the chlorine of a neighbor's pool, flowers blooming at the end of the street, someone grilling up meat on their back patio.

The smell of summer, diffusing right into this room, taking me back to every summer I spent as a kid, showering after a long day fishing or hunting.

I'm surprised to find Veva and Sarina sitting in the living room, talking on the couch, their voices hushed. When Sarina laughs, Veva does, too leaning in and putting her hand on her daughter's arm. Sarina, as I'm learning she usually does, has a book tucked up under hers.

Sarina looks so small there on the couch beside her mother, who is small enough herself. Veva with her dark chocolate hair, her daughter with a shade so near mine that it makes my heart pang with familiarity.

For a second, I feel so much jealousy—so much yearning for something like what the two of them have—that I'm sick to my stomach.

Then it passes, and I just stand in the doorway, watching them for a second.

The way they chat so easily. How it's clear that both love and respect pass between them, natural, effortless.

Based on the way Veva's been acting, I thought they might go straight back into the guest room.

But here they are.

“Hey,” I say, and Veva sits up, straightening and pushing her hair over her shoulders.

She must have showered, too, because her dark hair is damp.

She’s wearing a green lounge wear set—it looks like Kira made it with Veva in mind.

The deep green complements her complexion, the cut of the fabric much simpler than the ruffles and scalloped edges Kira might use on something for herself.

Sarina is also wearing a set of what must be Kira-made clothing—except hers are a fleecy material, featuring several characters I don’t recognize.

When Veva’s eyes meet mine, there’s something new and strange there. I noticed it just after she came out of her mother’s house earlier. A sort of softening.

Specifically toward me.

I don’t understand it, but I’ll take it.

“Hey,” she says, then clears her throat. “So, Sarina and I usually have pizza on Fridays. We used to do it with...our neighbors. Watch a movie. We were wondering if you wanted to do it with us?”

The idea feels so foreign coming out of Veva’s mouth—an invitation to spend time with them—that it takes my brain several long moments to comprehend what she’s said.

Finally, I choke out, “Yeah. Of course. What—uh—let me grab the menu.”

I return to the living room a minute later with the pizza menu for a place down the street. I set it on the coffee table in front of them, then take a seat in the recliner,

balancing my phone on my knee, ready to call and make the order.

“What kind of pizza do you like?” I ask Sarina, and she pulls the menu toward her, scanning it, thinking. Her hair falls forward, and the overhead light glints off it. I catch myself staring at it, lost in that familiar hue.

“I like to try new things,” she says, finally, raising her eyes to me and catching me off-guard. “What’s your favorite?”

I laugh, tapping my finger twice on the box that says signature pizza . “Well, my favorite from this place is the crab rangoon pizza, but your mom is allergic to shellfish, so that’s out.”

Sarina and I get absorbed in the flavors, discussing the merits of each of their odd combinations.

This town doesn’t have much in the way of a food scene or night life, but it does have a pizza parlor with strange options.

Finally, decide to go with a small buffalo chicken, a small Dill-iscious, and an order of cheesy garlic bread.

“Sound good to you?” When I look up at Veva to make sure she’ll try our selections, she’s already staring at me, something strange in her expression. It’s hard for me to read.

We order the pizza, and I turn on the TV, wondering about the last time I even powered the thing up.

Watching TV by yourself is too depressing—and before Sarina and Veva got here, I didn’t spend much time at home, let alone in front of the TV.

If I could help it, I'd be out doing something for the pack, or hunting, fishing, working in the garage.

Anything to keep my hands busy, mind busy.

Sarina picks a movie—some new Disney thing with giant-eyed characters and lots of singing. I surprise myself by laughing pretty frequently. There's a little animal sidekick who keeps getting himself into situations, and it's actually pretty entertaining.

We break when the pizza is delivered, and I go down to the end of the driveway to meet the guy, since Veva has been casting protective spells all up and down the sidewalk.

After sliding various pieces onto our plates and settling back into the couch, I realize, with a start, that Veva has changed sides, so she's sitting next to me. The movie plays on, and we relax into each other.

When her thigh is fully pressed against mine, I lose all sense of the plot on screen.

Every neuron in my brain is focused only on the places we're touching, from knee to hip, the two layers of pants keeping our skin apart.

Without warning, I remember her how we were as kids. How I could touch every part of her. How wholly and completely she trusted herself to my hands.

Always sneaking around—at her house when her mother wasn't home, on that bed with the dingy pink comforter. I'd laid her out, marveled at the smoothness of her skin. At the way she touched me back greedily, hungrily, like she thought she might never get the chance again.

I remember each time she tried something new, weaving her fingers into my hair, tugging gently, apologizing breathlessly, then taking it back when I said I liked it.

Just before the big climactic scene, I feel Veva's body relax, and her head drops down onto my shoulder. I hold my breath, afraid to move, afraid that she might wake up and remember how much she hates me.

I have to apologize to her, find a time to speak with her. But Sarina is always around, and even when she's not, Veva has made it clear she wants nothing to do with me.

Or, at least, she'd made it clear. Before whatever happened today changed her mind, brought us to this moment right now.

When the movie is finished, I move as quietly as I can, shifting our plates to the side and propping my feet up on the coffee table.

Veva has shifted more onto me, one of her hands on my chest, and I have to concentrate to keep from running my hand over her hair, pulling her to me, holding her the way I used to.

Sarina is on the armchair, curled up, a blanket thrown over her. Using my phone, I turn off the lights in the living room, relax into the couch, and breathe deeply, inhaling Veva's scent so I'm surrounded in it as I drift to sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

When I wake up, I'm warm, comfortable, bathed in a scent that's so familiar it could be my own. I shift my body, letting out a low noise, and feel something tighten around my waist.

That's when it hits me—I am sleeping with someone. Not someone—a man.

Emin lets out a low, rumbling sigh and hauls me up so I'm more fully sprawled over him, and I feel a deep, full heat spread out over my face. My sweatshirt has ridden halfway up my torso, so our stomachs are pressed together, and though I'm draped over him, my leg is wedged between his.

Then, to make things even worse, he lifts his hand in his sleep and slowly, gently runs it over my hair, before dropping it back down into his lap. My breathing gets shallow, and I will myself to get up, to get off of him. To put distance between us.

But all I can keep thinking about is Emin as a teenager, showing up at my mother's house, asking after me. Why would he do that? Especially if he knew how his father would have felt about him being seen there?

Out of everything—him protecting us, offering up his house to us—it's this knowledge that's making it most difficult to hold on to my anger toward him. He came, he asked after me.

And now, in his sleep, he's reaching for me, pulling me to him, making sure our bodies are pressed together.

My eyes skip over to Sarina on the couch, and once again, I feel that familiar tug in

my gut. The knowledge that she's growing up without a father, but now tinged with the feeling that, instead of solely sitting in Emin's lap, that fact is starting to belong to me, too.

Because I could tell him the truth right now. I could tell him the truth about Sarina, and he'd do the right thing. I can tell that it's true—but my stomach tightens at the thought of it. If I tell Emin that Sarina is biologically his, that will force us to stay here.

Even if Emin Argent still wants nothing to do with me.

My mind skips back to the Llewelyns, that omegas-only college where Sarina could go and be free to pursue her studies without worrying over alphas. Without worrying about her heat.

When she was growing inside me, I'd hoped more than anything for her to be a beta. Even an alpha would have been manageable. But the moment she came out, I knew the truth—she would struggle through the world exactly the same way that I did.

Maybe as a teenager, she would meet her mate, fall in love with an alpha, and the trajectory of her life would change forever. I don't regret having her, I don't regret doing everything I could to give her a different life.

But that doesn't mean I want her to go through what I did. Having her options taken from her. Carrying the baby of a man who'd so callously push her away, turn her out. Living on the outskirts of society because of bullshit pack standings.

Even if Emin came back for me, even if he went to my mother's place and asked after me, that doesn't mean he didn't turn me away in the first place. And it doesn't change a single minute of the things that happened to me after that.

Slowly, carefully, I untangle myself from him and tiptoe up the stairs to the shower, where I scald myself with hot water and scrub with soap, desperately trying to rid myself of his scent.

“Good morning!”

When the door swings open, it reveals a tall, wire-thin woman draped in colorful fabric and bangles, her gray hair swinging around her shoulders, her round glasses magnifying her eyes as she peers at me. A smile breaks out over her lips.

“I’m Beth, you must be Veva—and Sarina!”

She surprises us by hugging us both, then we’re ushered inside.

Emin is waiting outside in his truck, and I’m glad to be out from under his gaze. When I came back downstairs this morning, Sarina was already up and reading, and Emin offered to take us to breakfast.

I sat quietly, chanting to myself mentally, a constant reminder not to fall into Emin’s charms.

Now, Beth shuffles us through a hallway piled with books on either side, plants stacked on top of them perilously. When we break out of the hallway, it’s into a large, light-soaked room, a table right in the center of it.

There’s a wall of windows on the far side, and crystals dangle from the window panes, catching and reflecting the light, sending shards of rainbow spinning through the space.

A dozen heads turn to us, a collective shifting when we walk in.

“Veva?” Kira stands, her eyes darting from me, to another woman, then to Beth.

“Our newest member,” Beth says, clapping and bumping her shoulder into mine.

“Veva, Sarina, would you like to introduce yourselves and your powers?”

I look to my daughter—I’d rather not tell this group of mostly strangers about her, but I don’t seem to have much of a choice.

“I’m Veva,” I say, putting my hand on her shoulder and drawing her to me. “This is Sarina, my daughter. I inherited clairsentience from my grandmother, and Sarina...”

She looks up at me, and I stare down at her, and I finish, “Well, we’re not quite sure.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” Beth says, gesturing for us to come in and take a seat. “Part of our job here is to test the boundaries of our abilities, press up against those thresholds. In fact, Ash here is without a gift, but enjoys joining us all the same.”

The woman Beth gestures to taps her finger against her temple, smiling. “Keeps me sharp.”

“Don’t lie,” Beth jokes, “it’s all about getting to have some of my famous tea.”

Ash shrugs, her hands wrapped around a mug, and takes a sip as the tendrils of steam curl around her face. She’s pretty, with dark brown hair, and I realize who she is—Dorian’s little sister.

We take a seat. Kira smiles at me, and I smile back at her. The others around the table are young—teenagers and adults accompanying them. Beth sits at the head of the table, leading us through several exercises.

It's a lot of breathing, clearing our minds, letting thoughts come and go.

"They'll drift through like clouds," Beth says, her eyes shut as she sways at the head of the table. "Acknowledge them, but don't trap them inside. Let them move on."

Later, when everyone is working through their own exercises, Beth drifts over to me.

"Okay," she says, dropping into a seat beside me. "You inherited this from your grandmother—clairsentience? What do you know of your power?"

A blush rises up my cheeks. "Well—nothing. We weren't that close, and my grandmother was a very private woman. She said she was giving it to me. I didn't—I mean, I'm still not even sure that's really a thing. Is it?"

"Yes, it very much is," Beth says, folding her hands in her lap. "Does your mother have abilities?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe my grandmother just said she was giving it to me, but didn't?"

"Would you say that you have good gut-feelings, Veva?"

"Well, I trust my instincts."

"That could very well be a symptom of your gift," Beth explains, gesturing into the rest of the room.

"Many of the gifts in this room are more...targeted. For example, Kira here is clairaudient. Her premonitions are centered around hearing— whether that comes from the past or future, or from the spirits around us."

Sarina shifts, looking around us uncomfortably.

Beth laughs, “ Benevolent spirits, dear.”

“So,” I say, crossing my arms. “Clairsentience is useless, then?”

“No,” Beth’s brows draw down so dramatically I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

She scoots forward, laying a hand on my arm.

“ No , dear, not at all. Just because something is subtle, doesn’t mean it’s not powerful.

You have a sense for what’s going to happen, what’s already happened.

You’re sensitive to energy, have an acute ability to understand what others are feeling.

You may even,” she whirls her hand through the air, then says, “have a certain sense of...auras. Not to say a visual sense, but clairsentients can often see right into the heart of a person, know whether they’re good or evil. Understand their intentions.”

“But I won’t have premonitions?”

“Clairsentients don’t often have explicit premonitions. If anything, truth comes to you in your dreams.”

“What about me?” Sarina asks, bouncing on her seat, moving toward Beth.

It’s startling to me, seeing Sarina at this stage in her life. Moving between maturity

and childlike behavior like this, excitement over learning about her gift.

“Well, your mother said you’d had one premonition. Can you describe that to me?”

Sarina nods, closes her eyes. “When it happened, I was someone else. I was an announcer man, at a race, watching horses.”

“Interesting,” Beth drops her head into her hand. “Do you have any idea why that happened?”

“I was thinking about horses,” Sarina admits, looking to me, like this is actually something she did wrong. “We saw one pulling a cart when we got to the market, and it just...melted from that into me being someone else.”

“Do you remember what they were saying?”

As though reading from a script in front of her, Sarina says, “Adelphus pulls ahead, despite all the odds, taking the race by fifteen full seconds! Second place goes to Glanmore, third to Rylan! What an upset!”

I realize the entire room has gone quiet, and is looking at my daughter.

“That is excellent , Sarina,” Beth says. “Many of us don’t recall our first premonition, so it’s really something special that you’ve held on to the whole thing.”

Sarina beams, but something takes root in my stomach. The sense that this “gift” might be a lot more trouble than it’s worth.

We go on with the exercises, and Beth guides me through identifying the clairsentience, and how it guides my gut feelings. Just before it’s time to go, she catches me by the arm and pulls me back.

“Veva,” she says, voice low, head tipped down, eyes flicking to Sarina as she pulls on her shoes.

“Keep an eye on your girl. With the way her gift is presenting...I feel she may develop more. And with the capacity for casting from your blood? Those abilities may be much stronger than a ten-year-old is capable of managing.”

“Oh,” I say, laughing and pulling back from her, running my hands down my shirt to smooth down the wrinkles. “I will. Also—she’s turning eight soon, actually.”

Beth’s eyes sparkle. “Oh, sure she is.”

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I'd give anything to be in that house right now, sitting beside Veva and Sarina. Logically, I know Beth is capable, and I know that with all the psychics in that room, one of them would know if something was going to happen.

But the distance still makes me ache.

I hadn't realized it before, or maybe I'd pushed it all the way to the back of my mind, but the time and distance from Veva had turned into a sort of low-grade headache, a humming, looping pain that circled my head like the fluids in a vehicle.

Always there, sometimes leaking out and causing damage.

And now that I have her again, now that she's close enough for me to actually touch, it's getting harder and harder to keep myself from doing it.

Maybe I should have told her to go to bed last night, shouldn't have cuddled up with her on the couch like that. But this is the first morning in a long time that I feel well-rested—the first full night of sleep I've gotten in ten years.

As their meeting goes on, I sit in the truck, scanning the street, keeping my eyes and ears open. It's unlikely that the Grayhides could get this deep into our territory, but I'm not taking any chances with them.

I wonder if they've found the bodies of the shifters we killed. Dead shifters trading hands between our packs isn't new—but with the rising tensions, I'm surprised the Grayhides haven't struck back yet.

An hour later, when my coffee is almost gone, the front door finally opens, and Veva and Sarina come out, waving good-bye to Beth and walking toward the truck.

My entire body lights up at the sight of them walking toward me. Coming home.

But when Veva opens the truck, helps Sarina up and inside, she barely looks at me.

“Should we grab lunch?”

Her shrug is noncommittal. She reaches for the seatbelt, pulls it over her body. “Whatever you want.”

I stare at her, words bubbling up in my throat. I want to talk to her. Talk about the fact that when I fell asleep last night, she was with me, and when I woke up, she was gone. Talk about the fact that she very clearly scrubbed any trace of my scent off her body.

Right now, I want to tell her that I want my scent on her. In fact, I want our scents together. I want to claim her like I should have all those years ago.

“Can we get chicken?” Sarina asks from the backseat, and I tear my eyes from her mother, meetings hers in the rearview, smiling.

“I know just the place,” I say. When I glance at Veva again, she’s looking steadily out the window.

Light from the moon spills in through the kitchen window when I pad in, rubbing my eyes, heading for the cabinet with the glasses.

I stop short when I smell it— her .

“Veva?” I ask, and a moment later, she emerges from the shadows. How the hell was she hiding like that? And how did it take me that long to realize she was down here with me?

“Sorry,” she whispers, running her hands up and down her arms. “I heard the steps, just casted to hide myself without thinking.”

I know that’s not true—she knew it was me. She was keeping herself hidden from me on purpose—that’s what she’s been doing from the moment she and Sarina got here. Trying to hide from me, to keep this from happening.

But I’m done hiding, done skirting around her.

“Veva,” I say, swallowing down the trepidation in my throat. “We need to talk.”

The sigh she lets out is long-suffering. For a moment, I expect her to turn and run back to the guest room, fall back on the tactics she’s been using to try and stay away from me.

Instead, she goes a bit soft, stepping forward and sliding onto a stool, resting her head in her hands on the counter.

“Okay.”

Stunned by how quickly she’s given into talking to me, it takes me a moment to regain myself, to remember what it was that I wanted to say to her. Why I said we needed to talk in the first place.

“Well?” she asks, sounding more tired than accusatory. “What do you want to talk

about?”

I blink at her, then say, “That night.”

“What night?”

“Don’t—you know what night, Veva. The night you left.”

Even though it’s dark, I catch sight of her gritting her teeth, her jaw shifting, her eyes roaming over me. I straighten up, worried she might be looking for the best spot to lay a blow.

“Why do you want to talk about the night I left?” her voice is deadpan, completely devoid of emotion, and I realize this is just a different type of wall, a new method of keeping me out.

“I came to your mother’s house the next morning,” I say, stepping toward her. It’s going to be harder for her to shut me out if I’m standing right in front of her.

I watch her nose twitch, see the way she catches my scent.

The scent of her mate.

“I know.”

That stuns me—I wasn’t expecting her to know that. I was saving it as proof. Proof that I would have taken her as my mate, even if that’s not necessarily true.

“You know?”

“My mother told me, the day I went to see her.”

“Okay,” I bite my lip. “So—I came to see you because I didn’t want you to just...take off like that, Veva. Things were complicated with us, but that doesn’t mean I wanted you to run off to the Grayhides—”

“I have never been a Grayhide,” she says, emotion filtering into her tone for the first time since we started this conversation. “Sarina and I lived on the outskirts of that pack. Which is basically what I was doing here.”

“Veva.” I’m at the counter now, and I set my hands down, just a few inches from hers. “I—”

“And you know what, Emin?” she straightens up, and I realize she’s still on the last thing I said. “Things were not complicated between us. I came to you. I tried to tell you—”

“I just couldn’t hear it then,” the words come out through my teeth. “You know the position I was in, with my father. My parents, both of them, their fixation on us climbing ranks in the pack—”

“Oh fuck you, Emin,” Veva hisses, standing.

Her stool nearly topples over, but she throws a hand out, backward, and steadies it with her magic.

The sight of it is mesmerizing, and despite the conversation we’re having, a thrum of pleasure rolls through me at the sight of my mate, her competency. Her strength.

My mate.

“Fuck you,” Veva repeats, her face a bottle of fury as she glares at me.

“Do you want to know something? You walk around here like you’re some big, tough guy, but the truth is that you’re a coward .

You couldn’t hear it back then? You were fifty percent of that equation, you ass.

What I came to tell you that night was just as equally your problem, and you made it all mine. ”

“I know !”

I don’t mean to raise my voice, but I do. It rings through the space, and for a second, there’s just the sound of Veva’s heavy breathing. I glance up at the ceiling, listening for the sounds of Sarina waking, scared by the sound of a man yelling.

Veva says, “She’s still asleep.”

“I was a coward, Veva,” I meet her eyes, hold them, take another step toward her. “You’re not going to hear me denying that. But here I am now, trying to make up for it. Telling you that I...I knew it back then, too.”

She frowns. “Of course you did.”

“Okay,” I let out a quick breath of air through my teeth. “Yeah. But I couldn’t say it. I can say it now.”

Panic crosses over her features, and she glances at the ceiling again. “You can?”

“Yes.” Reaching out, I take her hands in mine. “Veva—I know you’re my mate. We’re mates.”

It feels so good to say it that I keep going, ignoring the look of confusion on her

features.

“I felt it back then. Being with you is unlike being with anyone else. When I’m with you, it just feels right.”

The Veva I’ve come to know—so prepared, mature, resolved—is gone, and instead, standing there, is the Veva from when we were teenagers. Scared, confused, her face wide-open to me.

“Emin,” she says, her voice shaking with something I can’t identify—rage? Fear?
“Please tell me you’re fucking with me right now.”

Now it’s my turn to frown. “No. I’m not. I—”

She pulls backward, shaking her head, her back hitting the wall as her eyes catch mine.

“Emin,” she spits, “I didn’t come there that night to claim you as my mate.”

I blink. “You didn’t?”

“No,” she laughs, and the sound is wet, almost hateful, but whether it’s toward me or herself, I can’t tell. “I came to tell you I thought I was pregnant . With your baby.”

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The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I didn't mean to say them, didn't mean to let them out. All this time, I thought Emin knew what I was saying.

It's hard for me to think right now. Usually, I know exactly what to do, what to say. But this is scrambling the past for me, changing what I always thought of to be the undeniable fact.

Without meaning to, I'm remembering that day, the moment coming right back to me, as clear as if it had happened only minutes ago.

From the look on Emin's face, he must be remembering that moment, too.

Is he lying to me? Pretending like he had no idea that I was pregnant to save face now? My intuition tells me that's not true—that the surprise and confusion on his face is genuine. I can practically hear Beth in my ear, telling me that as a clairsentient, my intuition is probably right.

When he finally opens his mouth, the only thing Emin gets out is a breathy, broken, “What ?”

I swallow, try to take another step back, but I'm already up against the wall. Emin isn't crowding me, but he's close enough that I can smell him. His scent wafts around me, thick and full, distracting.

“I...I thought you knew,” I say, everything about my memory of that moment shifting. Somehow, now, looking backward, Emin looks more scared than vindictive. He looks more like a kid, startled by his father. Afraid of the implications.

Only thinking about what might happen if I say we're mates, and he has to reject me outright. It's so clear to me that I feel silly for misremembering it all this time—Emin didn't understand what I was trying to tell him.

Maybe he'd glanced down at my stomach, but not with understanding, just following the movement of my arm.

"Veva," he chokes, his hands rising to his hair.

He takes fistfuls of it, copper strands sticking out at odd angles as he stares at me, his face pained.

Anguished. "You have to believe me—I had no idea that's what you were trying to tell me.

I never would have—" he puts his fist to his mouth, glancing away from me, looking for a moment like he might be sick. "Oh, fuck ."

The silence stretches between us, my heart thrashing around in my chest, desperate to get out.

Over the years, I'd thought about this moment. A confrontation with Emin, a chance to finally call him a coward and make him feel terrible for everything he's done. But this isn't going anything like what I thought.

He didn't know. The shame and grief suddenly, and without warning, shift over to me, cloaking my body.

"Emin—" I start, not sure where the sentence is going. What will I say? Admit that I acted rashly for running away? Explain the misunderstanding?

But he cuts me off, stepping forward and grabbing my biceps, looking down at me with eyes so genuine and open it makes a sob rise in my throat.

“Veva,” he says, “I’m so sorry.”

Of everything I thought he might say, an apology wasn’t what I expected. I linger in it, caught like a bug in a web, paralyzed and trying to figure out what to do. Emin Argent. Apologizing. To me.

“You...you are?”

“Yes,” he breathes, shaking his head, looking to the side. “I’ve been trying to apologize to you this entire time, but— fuck , Veva. If I had known—”

Then, he freezes, something else occurring to him. He glances up at the ceiling, his eyes going wide.

“Does that mean...Sarina...?”

The hope is plain on his face, evident there in his expression. He wants it to be true.

My mind feels like a wind tunnel, filled with ideas and thoughts moving far too fast for me to reach out and touch, let alone examine. Emin didn’t realize what I was trying to tell him that night—this entire time, we’ve been on completely different pages.

That means he’s not who I thought he was. I thought he was the kind of man who could turn away a pregnant woman. According to him, based on this conversation, that’s not who he is.

I should tell him the truth—that I lied about Sarina’s age. That biologically, she

belongs to him. That she was already taking root in my stomach the night he pushed me through that window.

But I can't.

All this time, I've always considered Sarina when making decisions. I've sacrificed everything to give her a better life. For the past ten years, my true north has been her. When it comes to making a choice, I choose the option that's best for my daughter.

Now, I default to that.

I can't think, don't have time to work through it with Emin standing here, asking me the question point-blank.

So I lie.

"No. She's not."

He lets out a sharp breath, his shoulders rounding. Then he nods, raising his eyes to mine. "Okay."

His voice is choked, and I can see what he's thinking. Maybe I was wrong about being pregnant back then. Or maybe, knowing I'd have no support, I made the only decision I could.

I can see that he wants to know, but desperately doesn't want to ask.

The rising tide of emotions inside me finally crests at the thought of losing Sarina back then, and I feel something I haven't felt in a long, long time.

A sudden, intense infusion of heat, and a thick wetness between my legs.

“Oh no,” I mutter, gasping and sliding back from him, the sudden onslaught of the condition foreign and intimate at the same time.

“What?” Emin asks, raising his hands up like he’s afraid he might have hurt me. “What’s—”

But he doesn’t finish the question. Instead, his eyes go wide, and I catch him swaying forward slightly, breathing in deeply, clearly getting the scent of what’s happening in my body.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I anchor my hands in my stomach, cast at the organs inside. Skimming my hands over my arms and legs, I try to cool the blood, gather up the hormones, stop it from happening.

It’s been years since I’ve gone into heat. Usually, between the herbal supplements from Willow and my own consistent casting, I’m able to keep it at bay. Track it, manage it, keep it bottled up.

“It’s okay, Veva—”

“Sarina has never been around me in heat,” I say, eyes snapping up to Emin. “I don’t want her to see me like this, I can’t—”

A wave of lust so powerful it nearly knocks me off my feet rolls through me, and Emin steps forward like he might catch me. I put my hand out, knowing what’s going to happen if he touches me.

“Please,” I gasp. “If you want to help me, call Kira. Ask her to...ask her to take Sarina.”

I can’t believe I’m saying it, even as the words come out of my lips. For ten years,

I've never been apart from Sarina for more than an hour at a time. Now, here I am, asking her to go to a near stranger.

But I can't let her see me like this.

From the time Sarina was born, I worked hard to keep my heat at bay. And I'd planned to teach her how to do that for herself, too.

"Okay," Emin says, nodding and backing up, his hands still held up in front of him like he's being apprehended by the police. "Okay, Veva, don't worry—I'll help you through this. It's okay."

When he goes up the stairs, I slide to the floor, hands shaking as I run them through my hair. Still, I'm casting, trying to slow this, to stop it.

But it's too late.

I'm about to have my heat here in Emin Argent's house, with the knowledge that he's not nearly as bad as I thought.

Groaning under my breath, I let my head fall into my hands.

"Fuck ."

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“Can’t I just see her?” Sarina asks, wringing her blanket between her palms, her head tipped up to look at me.

“I’m so sorry.” I shake my head, crouching down so I’m on my heels, eye level with her. “You can’t. She’s not feeling very well, and she doesn’t want to get you sick, too.”

It’s not quite the truth, but Veva made it clear she didn’t want Sarina to see her like this. Didn’t want to freak her out about getting her own heat before being able to explain it to her.

“Okay,” Sarina says, but her voice is small. She turns, the blanket now bundled up against her chest as she stares out at the road. “Okay.”

We stand together on the porch, the cool night breeze rolling through, waiting. Eventually, two yellow headlights appear in the distance, and we watch as Kira and Dorian come rolling down the road, turning into the driveway.

“Hey, Sarina,” Kira says, voice calm and maternal. I blink at her—of course, Kira has had twin boys. She’s married now, with a partner, a family children of her own. But this is the first time that I really see her for the woman she is, and not the little girl from when we were kids.

Sarina steps into Kira’s arms without word, and Kira holds her for a second, then pulls back, smiles, and says, “Come on. We’re going to have a sleepover, and it will be so much fun.”

As Kira gets Sarina into the car, Dorian comes around the front, his eyes meeting mine. It's the look of two alphas, knowing exactly what it's like to be around an omega in heat.

"You going to be able to handle this?" Dorian asks, dipping his head.

"Yeah." I swallow, try to give him my most confident grin as I shrug, act like it's nothing. "It's all good, man."

Dorian stares at me for a long moment. Obviously, Omegas in this pack go into heat frequently.

Contrary to popular belief, it's not like we lose our heads the second we smell them—but being alone in the house?

It's a different ball game. A little more tempting, sure, but stronger alphas shouldn't really struggle.

The only difference is that Dorian doesn't know Veva is my mate. If he did, he probably wouldn't leave me here with her alone.

"Okay," he says, finally, and I feel the twinge of guilt—the knowledge that I'm keeping something from him. But I know without asking that Veva wouldn't want me sharing this information. Even with the alpha leader.

"Okay. Thanks for taking her." I nod to the car, where Kira is buckling Sarina in.

"I'm surprised Veva is cool with it," Dorian says, running his hand over his chin. "But Kira is excited. She wants to have a girl next, I think."

That makes me laugh, then Kira is shoving a basket into my arms.

“These are for her,” she says—then, eyeing me, “You’d better be a gentleman, Emin.”

I nod, accept the basket, wave goodbye to them from the porch. Just outside the door, I can smell her—her scent amplified, thick, heady and feeling like it’s wrapping right around my throat.

“Veva,” I say, hearing how hoarse I am as I push through the door. “I’m coming back in—”

She’s standing in the center of the living room, her eyes shut, her hands pressed into her stomach. When I step in, her eyes fly open.

“They have her?”

“Yes, they just pulled away.”

“Is Kira going to text?”

“She said she would when they get home.”

“I need to get Sarina her own phone,” Veva says, starting to pace the floor. I stay rooted to the spot, ignoring the urge to go to her, put my hands on her.

Help her ease away some of this pain.

Moving slowly, I set the basket down on the table, then back up, like I’m doing a hostage exchange. “Here. This is stuff from Kira.”

But Veva doesn’t even glance at it, she’s too busy stalking back and forth, her hands in her hair.

“This is going to be horrible,” she says, voice low, eyes on the floor.

“It’s okay,” I try. “I’m here—”

“You don’t understand.” Her voice is rough, desperate. “Ten years of suppressing my heat—I’ve never heard of anyone doing that before. It’s going to—it’s going to be bad.”

“It’s okay , Veva. I’m here for you.”

“Ha,” she lets out a dry laugh, turning to face me, her pupils blown so big it instantly makes my skin feel warm. “Right.”

“Listen.” I cross my arms over my chest, shake my head, back up so there’s more space between us.

More space, and the couch, and the coffee table—my mind is already making a mental map of the quickest way to get to her.

Despite that, I go on. “Veva, listen—you’re safe with me, okay?”

I’m not going to lie—it’s going to be rough, but I can behave.

I’ll keep you here, and I’ll keep you safe, and you can get through it and—”

“You don’t under stand , Emin,” she says, her eyes roaming up and down my body. She’s practically licking her lips as she looks at me. “It’s not you I’m worried about.”

I frown. “Nobody is going to bother you here—”

“Gods,” she laughs, shaking her head. Right now, she’s the most beautiful I’ve ever

seen her—cheeks flushed, dark hair tousled, wearing shorts and a tank top, looking hungry.

Her long legs are exposed, her chest rising and falling quickly.

“You really don’t get it, do you? Emin, I’m not worried about anyone but myself.

I want to climb you like a fucking tree, do you get that? ”

I blink, unable to swallow, and she goes on, stalking toward me, her eyes dark and focused.

“Here I am, fucking flooded with lust,” she growls.

“And here you are. Standing in front of me. And I know —I know what you feel like, Emin.” Her eyes flick downward, and just like that, I go from half-hard to fully there, my cock pressing painfully against my pants.

When her eyes find mine again, she looks downright murderous.

“I know how good it would feel to ride you. I know that it would make all this wanting go away, at least for a second.”

It takes every ounce of self-control in my body to stay still. To not react to the fact that Veva is thinking about riding me— fuck —I have to keep my feet right where they are. The moment I give into the urge to move, I’m going to touch her.

She’s so close.

And she smells so fucking good.

“No,” I manage, shaking my head, forcing myself not to think with my dick. Pushing away the insistent lust, I clear my throat, find Veva’s eyes again.

Alphas and omegas. It’s supposed to be irresistible, that pull. Especially to your mate.

And it’s damn near killing me not to touch her right now, but I gather up the pain, the empty, aching yearning, and shove it to the bottom of me.

“No,” I say again, shaking my head in jerky movements. “I know that’s not what you want, Veva. I swear to the gods, I won’t lay a single finger on you.”

“But you don’t know anything, Emin,” she says, taking another step toward me, and she’s practically fucking panting. “Because I do want you. You’re the only person I’ve ever been able to want.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re in heat,” I shake my head again, take a step backward.

“No,” she counters. “I’m saying that because you’re my mate. And all those years ago—” she closes her eyes for a second, then opens them. “I thought you knew. When you turned me away. But you didn’t know. You’re not the man I thought you were.”

“It’s doesn’t matter, Veva. You’ve made it perfectly clear that you want nothing to do with me.”

“That’s when I thought you would have turned away a woman pregnant with your child.” She tips her head up, meets my eyes, holds my gaze. “But you didn’t.”

“And I wouldn’t.” We’re closer now. I could reach out and touch her. I don’t. “But this isn’t what you want—”

“Emin,” she practically hums. “It is what I want. I trust you. I need...fuck, I need to be touched right now. And I trust you to do it.”

Our stand-off holds. If she touches me, I'll cave. Her words ring through my head— I am what she wants.

But that's not what she means—she just means she wants me to help ease some of this pain, some of this lust. Not that she wants me. Not forever.

Not even after this heat.

Finally, it's just one word from her mouth that finally brings down my walls.

Stepping forward, hovering her hand just above my chest, she whispers, “Please.”

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Yes, yes, yes .

It's the only word that chants through my head when Emin steps forward, slanting his lips to mine. It's everything I remember, everything I've missed.

Even if he and I were a bit fumbling as teenagers, still trying to figure out and find out rhythm, our pleasure, one thing has always been true—Emin Argent is a phenomenal kisser.

As a teenager, it was the thing that made my heart melt most. More than the stolen glances at school, or the forbidden nature of it all. It was the way it felt to be in his arms, pressed to the wall, and kissed like he had just come back from battle, and I was the only thing he could think about.

Emin kisses you like he needs you, like you're pure oxygen, and he's drifting outside the atmosphere.

In a second, he's spun us around so I'm pinned against the wall.

His hand slides behind my head, his fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of my neck as he tips me back to get more leverage.

To slide his tongue against mine, his movements like a practiced routine, his hands and lips coordinated.

One hand on my hip, his thumb brushing up and under the hem of my shirt, sending shivers up and over my skin.

I feel goose bumps form, trailing after his touch, following him like they want more, more .

His tongue is against mine, seeking, searching, pushing deeper. A nip to my bottom lip, a new slant of his lips, his mouth and hands working together to leave my body nothing but a raw bundle of nerves.

And just when I'm breathless, afraid I might actually die from suffocation, he pulls back, trailing his lips down my neck and to my jawline, sucking, biting, teasing at my pulse point.

He stops, breathing deeply, holding it for a moment, and I realize he's taking in the scent of me. The thought of that is intoxicating—that he's scenting me, and that he likes it.

Pressed against the wall like this, I can already feel him hard against me. He wedges one leg between mine, pressing into that sensitive core, and I sob against him at the pressure, feeling him hard at my hip and wanting him instead at my center.

Embarrassingly, the friction of his leg against me alone is almost enough to make me come undone. I'm pulsing, throbbing with need in a way I never have before. He seems to realize it, because his grip tightens on me, his thigh pressing in closer, the friction lighting up black dots in my vision.

“Are you going to come for me right now?” he asks, his breath hot against my ear.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about Emin through the years. If, on a lonely night, I didn't occasionally picture him, think of the way he used to touch me. In my fantasies, we were always in bed, him above me, his bite sharp on the back of my neck.

In none of my fantasies did I come against the wall, on his leg.

“Not like this,” I try, but Emin is shaking his head, his mouth pressed to the side of my neck, his breathing ragged.

“Veva,” he rasps. “I’m going to make you come as many times as you want tonight, so you’re going to do it right here, right now. Come on baby, I want—”

Just hearing him promise that sends me flying apart, my arms wrapping around his neck, my hips moving feverishly against him, seeking more friction. I’m soaked through my underwear and shorts, likely even through his pants now, the slick of my heat just coming and coming.

It’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, this orgasm.

And yet, the moment it’s done, I know that I can come again. I’m still shaking, still so damn sensitive. It’s as though my body truly has stored up ten years of sexual frustration, ten years of missing heats, ten years of true loneliness.

Another man has never touched my body.

I’d tell myself it’s because I was too busy, or because I didn’t trust the men at camp, but that’s a lie—there were several very fine men there. Men who wanted me, lusted after me, and would have been happy with a single night out in the brush.

Willow tried to encourage me more than once.

But how could I tell her that my body only wanted the touch of a single man? Only the scrape of his knuckles over my skin. Only the press of him into my body—anything else would either be downright disgusting or simply frustrating, a tease of something I knew would never be coming.

Other than safety, that's the biggest reason I took so many measures to suppress my heat. Because, without Emin there, I might actually lose my mind from the lack of satisfaction, the wanting and wanting without any resolution in sight.

My body would only accept one form of pleasure, from one specific source.

The thought of that—the thought of what I know I'm getting tonight—makes my entire body shudder in anticipation, the desperate aching of it making goosebumps break over out over my skin.

I shiver, then Emin is picking me up, carrying me like I'm nothing, and I know where we're going.

He pushes open the door to his bedroom and deposits me gently on the bed, moving methodically, like he's an actor only following the very obviously laid script for this moment.

Emin pulls my hips to the edge of the bed, gets on his knees before me.

"Emin," I say when he peels my shorts off and sucks in a sharp, quick breath, his dark eyes locked on the part of me that's drowning in my heat. Embarrassment threatens to surface through the lust. "Emin—" I try again, when he grabs the insides of my thighs, forcing my legs open.

And then his name is pulled from my mouth as he buries his face between my legs.

The gasps and sounds that come from me are mortifying, desperate and wide-open, but Emin either doesn't notice or doesn't care, because he carries on, lapping at me like it's the only thing he's been thinking about for the last ten years.

"Veva," he groans against my clit, the vibration settling into my bones. "You have no

idea how long I have waited to taste you like that.”

“The heat,” I try, gasping for air, hovering just above the precipice of my next orgasm. My legs are shaking—my entire fucking body is shaking. “The slick, I’m sorry—”

Emin draws back, something almost sadistic on his face. Then, he eases a knuckle inside me, and I nearly black out at the endless rush of endorphins. Like I’ve just gone down the other side of the roller coaster.

“Don’t you dare fucking apologize to me,” he growls, dragging his tongue along the length of me, hot and wet and practically obscene. “You taste...you taste like you belong to me, Veva.”

Maybe he realizes it, maybe he doesn’t, but when he says belong , he thrusts his finger fully inside me, and I cry out, clenching around him as my second orgasms shudders through my body, ecstasy lighting up from my deepest organs and all the way out to the tips of my fingers.

I feel like a firework contained the shape of a human body. Like my cells have been replaced with photons, like I’m barely staying whole through the cresting, endless waves of pleasure.

“ Veva ,” Emin growls, crawling up the length of me, his hands lingering and touching, obsessive and thorough, like he wants to map every inch of my body, burn it into his brain to remember later.

“Emin.” It comes out as a whimper. Any other time, I’d care. I’d not want to be so needy, but I can’t control it. “ Emin .”

“Tell me what you want,” he teases, his voice low. How he’s holding anything back

right now is completely beyond me, and infuriating to now end.

“You know what I want,” I growl, lifting up and pressing against him. He sucks in a breath through his teeth, then grabs my hips, pinning me to the bed.

“I want to hear you say it, Veva.”

Air comes out of me in sharp little bursts. If Emin doesn’t fuck me right now, I might actually start sobbing.

The realization hits me with a start—I would do anything to have him touch me, to have him inside me. So I level my gaze at him, go still, lower my voice, and tell him exactly what I want.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

“I want your cock inside me, Emin.”

A full-body shudder works the length of me at the sound of her asking, telling me exactly what she wants.

Veva, my mate. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life—the only woman I really see, period. Even the anticipation of having her is better than any sex I’ve had in the past ten years.

The taste of her is still on my lips, the shaking, desperate feeling of licking into her thrumming through my body, through my blood. I’ve never gone down on her before—as kids, I wasn’t even really aware that was an option.

But when I first scented her, when I’d pressed my thigh between her legs in the living room and realized just how wet she was, what that slick was doing to her—I knew I wanted to taste her. To get her on my lips, my tongue.

My fantasies of her over the years, of the woman she might have grown into, didn’t do her justice.

Her eyes are dark, hooded as she stares at me, and her legs are warm, loose.

I drop my lips to her neck, breathing hard against the skin there, stopping to bite and kiss at her pulse point, that part of her that smells most like her.

“Okay,” I murmur, knowing the brush of my lips against her skin is making her shiver. “Whatever you want, baby.”

She starts to writhe beneath me, desperate, and I kick my sweats off, letting my cock free. I'm so fucking hard, the tip sensitive to the brush of the sheets as I move, twitching eagerly.

I'm good with my hands—I know that. I can build anything from a pile of scrap wood. But right now, getting her fucking pajama top off feels like solving a puzzle cube, one that just gets more and more frustrating with every second she's not naked before me.

In a brief, momentary break from the suffocating lust around us, Veva laughs, that sound breathless and dry, as she lifts up from the bed, grabs the top, and hurls it to the other side of the room.

Fuck—her bare chest is a thing of beauty.

I could drown myself in the miles of smooth skin, but I'm too captivated by her nipples, taut and warm, and the way they feel under my tongue, the way she arches her back and thrusts her fingers into my hair when I touch them, tugging my face toward her until I really am suffocating.

“Ease up, baby,” I murmur, biting her gently so she'll let me go, but that's the wrong move—even this gentle bite on her nipple reminds me of what I should be doing to her right now.

To my mate.

Biting her, marking her, merging our scents together.

Telling everyone in this pack—everyone on this damned continent—that this woman belongs to me.

A mark ten years too late, and something I'd do this exact second, if my logical mind didn't push to the front, forcing me to shove the impulse to mark her way down inside me.

Veva might be my mate, but I'm damn sure she doesn't want me to mark her.

That if I bit her, she would hate me for it.

So I don't. I bite down on the inside of my lip, wait for that impulse to pass, focus on my hands and how I'm touching her, drawing her pajama shorts and panties down her hips, knowing the press of my cock there—near her entrance, but not inside her—is driving her insane.

Veva throws her hands over my shoulders, digs her nails into my back, murmurs in my ear, her voice low and mewling, pleading, until the words merge together and all that's left is a long, low, needy sound from her lips.

I'm torn—part of me loves her like this. Clinging and desperate, needing me. The other part of me can't stand being outside of her for another fucking minute.

So I brace my arms on either side of her head and notch my tip against her entrance, watching her face, loving the look of anticipation, frustration, raw, unfettered want in her expression.

Veva bites her lip, tips her head back, brushes her bangs from her forehead. When she meets my eyes again, part of my commanding woman is back, taking over to get what she wants.

“Just fucking do it,” she snaps. Then, rolling her hips, she throws her head back against the pillow and practically whines, “Please, Emin.”

It's the combination of those things—her demand, then the pleading, then the sound of my name on her lips that pushes me over the edge, my final thread of restraint snapping. I've spent the past ten years without her, and I can't survive another second of the deprivation.

When I sink an inch into her, I have to stop and suck in a breath, steady myself.

She's so tight around me, spots start to flash around my vision. Arms shaking, I take her inch by inch.

So far, having Veva again has been a lesson in resistance. Resisting the urge to thrust into her, to seat myself inside of her fully. Resisting the urge to let my urges take over, to have her, wreck her, let that feral beast inside me control the pace and rhythm.

What feels like an eternity, Veva has taken my length. She shifts, a strange expression crossing her face as her body accommodates me.

After this, it's going to be difficult for me to give her a good time, to stretch this out. I'm so fucking close to bursting that even the knowledge of being this deep in her is bringing me close to the edge, cock twitching with the urge to come inside her.

"What?" I rasp, watching her face, wanting to make sure I'm not hurting her. "Are you—"

"You're bigger than I remember," she breathes, fluttering her eyes open and rolling her hips once, damn near shattering all my reserve. "It's...nice."

That makes me laugh. Here I am, soaked in her slick, drowning in the scent of her heat, going absolutely out of my mind with the need to fuck her senseless, and she's just called my dick "nice."

“Nice?” I ask, sliding out, watching as the smile drops right off her face.

Thrusting back in, I watch her mouth open in an ‘o’ shape, eyes shutting again, one of her hands rising to grip the bed frame.

I slide out, thrust in again, hands a vice on her hips.

“I’m going to need you to come up with a much better word than nice , Veva. ”

When I pull out again, she opens her eyes, levels my gaze and says, “Then show me something other than nice, Emin.”

The word fuck comes out of me so fast I’m not sure I actually say it. Body taking over, I grab her hips and flip her, pushing her down into the mattress, yanking her ass until it’s flush with my hips.

“Fine,” I growl, slapping her ass, gripping her hip, then taking a handful of her hair with my other hand. “I won’t be nice, baby. That’s what you want?”

She nods, her hair tugging against my hand, and I slide inside her, the sensation of fucking her from the back so carnal and raw that it takes me over, the sound of our bodies meeting filling the room, her moans and whimpers and screams rising and falling.

Veva throws her head back, rocking her hips into me violently, taking me so well that I have to keep myself from curling over her and biting the nape of her neck, marking her.

I want to. I want to mark her, make sure no other man on this planet ever even thinks of having this woman like this, touching her, seeing her body. She belongs to me, only.

But I don't. I bury my cock inside her, feel the knot forming, growing, pulsing inside her.

I release into her, the hot, sticky liquid mixing with her slick and making an absolute mess of the sheets.

I roll her onto her side, my knot still inside her, pulsing for minutes on end.

I kiss just behind her ear, tuck her hair to the side, skim my fingers over her bare hip.

All that, but I don't mark her.

I won't.

No matter how much I want to.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

As the days of my heat pass, one thing becomes abundantly clear—I would not have survived this without Emin Argent.

An omega's heat is a time of extreme arousal, but also, extreme vulnerability. Not only do I spend the days wanting , but I spend them wanting in a highly specific way. It's like pregnancy cravings, and Emin fulfills each one.

I don't just want to fuck, I want him to lift me up onto the kitchen counter and take me.

I want him to put his fingers inside me, hook them in a specific action.

I want him to see how long he can knot inside me, his member swollen and quivering as we whisper to each other on the pillow, his face occasionally going blank with pleasure.

Without any alpha during this time, I genuinely might have lost myself, the wanting too much to overcome. But without Emin? I would have been unsatisfied to the point of tears. To frustration, anger, violence.

Every time I open my mouth to bite him, the urge to sink my teeth into his neck growing stronger and stronger, I just manage to pull myself back. Just manage to clamp my mouth shut, force myself to draw back.

I will not mark him. And he won't mark me.

After nine full days, my heat finally starts to abate, easing up and letting go of its

hold on me. I don't miss the look of disappointment on Emin's face when I come out of the shower and say I think the worst of it is over.

For nine days, he's done nothing but hold me, touch me, feed me, clean me, and fuck me. And now, feeling like a newborn calf, I walk through the front door, heading to Emin's truck.

He walks ahead and opens the door for me, watching me carefully as I climb inside.

"Are you sure you're not sore?" he asks, when he climbs into the driver's side.

"I'm sure," I laugh, then shrug, pulling the seatbelt over my chest. "It must be a biological thing. Not sore at all."

He swallows, turns and looks out the driver's side window. Starts the truck, but doesn't pull out of the driveway.

"Emin?"

"Veva." When he turns back to look at me, his voice is hoarse. "What are we—what are we doing?"

I'd thought, foolishly, that I was going to be able to get through the heat without an attachment to Emin. That I could use his body, get the relief I needed, and feel nothing at all for him after.

Of course, that turned out to be impossible. How could I not feel softer toward him, after more than a week of doing nothing but touching him, talking to him, running my fingers through his hair?

We talked about growing up. We talked about my mother, the gift my grandmother

gave me, what it was like living in the camp.

Emin apologized over and over for what he did, kissing the tops of my knees, the inside of my elbows, my eyelids. Every inch of me. Giving me such pleasure that I could hardly focus on what he was saying, let alone think of the past.

“I don’t...” I face the front of the truck, sucking in a deep breath. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to spend more time with Emin.

Knowing that he went looking for me, that he had no idea what I was trying to tell him—he’s not the man I thought he was.

But is this what I want? A relationship with him? The very thought of it feels foreign, to tie myself to another person.

And there’s the question of Sarina. What do I do about that situation? Because she knows how old she is, and if Emin and I decide to make a go of this, I’m going to have to tell him the truth. He deserves the truth.

But, is that what’s best for Sarina? The Ambersky Pack might be better for omegas than the Grayhide, and things might have gotten better even since I was a teenager, but that doesn’t mean things are good .

It’s too much to think about. Too hard to come up with a conclusive answer.

“I don’t know,” I finally manage, and when I glance at Emin, I realize he’s staring at me, a strange, open look on his face.

“Veva.” He sucks in a breath, says. “Listen. I—I know things are complicated for you. And I’m not asking for a promise. For a definite answer. But I want...I want you to try. Try this out, give it a chance? Give me a shot to show you what life could be

like here, with me?”

I swallow. Even just him asking for this feels like enough for me to say yes. I resist it, resist the urge to give in.

For the past ten years, I’ve been hating Emin. Maybe that entire time, it was a cover to keep from feeling what has always been deep down.

“Okay.”

The word slips out, but the look on Emin’s face is enough that I know I can’t take it back. He puts the car into reverse, rolls out the driveway. Turns on the radio, starts to whistle.

I’ll give it a chance, I decide. But I’m never, ever going to stop thinking about what’s best for my daughter, even if it’s not what’s best for me.

“Mom!”

The moment Sarina flies into my arms, the constant, low thrum of anxiety in my chest eases up. I just can’t stand to be away from her.

I’m crouching in Dorian and Kira’s driveway, clutching my daughter to my chest. Dorian and Kira stand at the edge of the driveway, Dorian with one of the twins and Kira with the other. Behind us, Emin’s truck idles.

“You look different.” I finally pull back and hold Sarina at arms’ length, turning her side to side so she giggles at the movement. There are a few more freckles across her nose. Her hair is a shade lighter, more strawberry blonde. “Have you been outside a

lot?”

“In the pool a lot,” Kira says, smiling down at my daughter. “But always with sunscreen.”

“And lemon juice!” Sarina adds, touching her hand to her hair.

I glance at Kira, and she blushes. “I hope that’s okay—we’d talked about it lightening hair and she wanted to try it.”

“Kira,” I say, standing up and shaking my head at her. “You took my kid for nine days without warning and you think I might be mad she had lemon juice in her hair?”

Kira laughs. “Some people are really uptight about their kids.”

I want to say, But you kept her alive .

Sarina drifts to the side, talking to Emin, and I resist saying it. All this time, since having Sarina in the camp, I’ve been trying to keep her alive. Sometimes with Willow’s help, but also mostly alone.

And now—now there’s someone else I can trust. A second place Sarina can go, if I need it. The realization feels like the strangest weight lifted, right off my shoulders.

So instead, I just reach out and touch Kira’s arm, and say, “Thank you.”

When she meets my eyes, I get the sense that she understands what I’m trying to say. That it’s about more than watching my daughter—it’s about showing me that I can trust someone else with her. Like Emin said.

Emin steps away from Sarina and pulls his sister to the side, whispering something in

her ear. Together, they look over at me—seeming more like twins and less like they have years of distance between them—then back to each other, whispering more.

“Hello?” I ask, waving at them. “Are you telling secrets over there?”

Emin smirks at his sister, then comes back to my side.

“I’m on a mission to get you to stay in Ambersky,” he says, eyes roaming my face, then darting to Sarina, who is already in the back of the truck, reading a book. “And Kira had a few ideas about how to do it.”

I raise an eyebrow, heart picking up pace. Emin wants to keep me here, wants to prove to me that it’s worth staying. That also means he’ll let me leave. He’ll let me pick him.

Another piece of the weight lifts from my chest, and I realize with it gone, I feel closer to freedom than I ever have before.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Dorian and I stand on the edge of the border, shivering against the cold wind that rolls over us. It's often cold in our territory, especially at night. The ground doesn't hold much moisture, or heat from the day, which means that when the sun goes down, the temperature drops quickly.

But this cold—this is a cold unlike what we feel over there. I shiver in the brunt of the wind, which feels like a full-on assault, and glance at my alpha leader, who stands tall, like the wind and the icy affront doesn't bother him in the slightest.

“And why aren't we wearing coats, again?”

” I ask, leaning over to him, checking for signs of frostbite on his fingers.

It was a full day's run from our place to this edge of the border, where the land turns from red rocks to arctic tundra, the air getting cooler and cooler until the slight crunch of snow underfoot startles you out of your thoughts.

“I don't own a coat that would do a thing against this wind,” Dorian bites back, frowning. “Other than shifting, I don't think there's much we can do here. Just try to be tough for a second, buddy.”

I knock my shoulder against his as he laughs, which somehow manages to warm me up slightly. A moment later, there's a brilliant blue light, and we see the bright white coats of the Llewelyn pack climbing up the incline, their fur hardly rippling in the wind.

They move at a casual pace, clearly not bothered by the ice, and apparently not caring

that I'm going to freeze solid at any moment here. A light dusting of snow collects on their coats, and they shake it away as they approach, creating a little poof of white that drifts off and away from us.

Their scents are strange to me—sharp, clean. Almost like eucalyptus and star anise. Something off-putting to my nose, even more than the Grayhide scent.

Right before our eyes, they shift into lithe pale women, all wearing furs and dripping with royal blue, from the jewels around their necks to the rich color of the fabric that peeks out from under their coats.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the first one says, looking to each of us, her blue eyes flashing, looking supernatural. “We are pleased to do business with you. Have you the praxath?”

At Dorian's nod, I reach into my pocket and pull out the paper envelope. Opening it, I hold tightly while tilting so they can see the glittering red powder inside.

This is the powder I brought to the dark market. The powder I never ended up trading for the Amanzite because I was too busy helping Veva and Sarina.

Apparently, Leta was able to appeal to the Llewelyn for another meeting using that fact—that I missed the meeting to defend an omega.

“Very well,” the woman in front says, nodding and gesturing to one of the women behind her. She steps forward, produces a small bag. She undoes the drawstring, revealing the dark stones within. “And your Amanzite.”

We hand them over at the same time. I'm careful not to even brush her fingers. First, because I don't want to, and second, because these Llewelyn alphas can be sensitive about touch.

“It’s been a pleasure,” the woman in front says. “Please, do contact us if you manage to procure more pranaxath.”

And with that, the meeting is over. We have another day’s run back to the border, and I’m anxious to get going. Because I’m freezing, but also because my mate is at home, and after having nothing but her for nine days, I want her back. Can’t stand this physical distance between us.

“Alright,” Dorian says, rolling his eyes as we shift, getting out paws against the ground as we start back through our territory. I miss Kira, too, and you don’t see me crying .

No crying , I push to him, increasing my pace, already thinking about that moment the edge of town will come into view. Just running .

“That smells so good !” Sarina cries, running ahead of us, bouncing on her heels. I don’t look, but I can feel Veva smiling at her. Anytime Sarina is happy, Veva is, too.

“It’s the barbecue,” I say, glancing at Veva, seeing if she’s figured it out yet. “Part of the competition every year.”

“Oh, Emin, you made it sound like this was going to be fun,” Veva jokes, rolling her eyes. “Is it the cloud watching festival?”

“It is,” I nod, watching Sarina’s mouth fall open the moment we turn the corner. Our town here at the center of the territory is the central hub for the pack, but it’s also the venue for the cloud watching festival every year.

When we were together in high school, Veva made it clear what her feelings were on

it, but I've always loved it.

I love the crowds, milling around. I love the rows and rows of people on their backs, pointing up at the sky.

I love the themed food and the competitions and the sense of community that it brings.

And, glancing at Veva now, seeing how she takes it all in, I realize she might have been exaggerating her hatred for the festival. That maybe it had less to do with the festival itself, and more to do with the fact that back then, I never would have brought her as my date.

The second I think it, I reach over and lace my fingers through hers, tugging her so she's walking closer to me.

At first, when she meets my eyes, hers are filled with surprise. It quickly melts to something softer, and she glances down at our hands, giving mine a squeeze.

Sarina turns around, and Veva pulls her hand from mine. I swallow down my disappointment.

"What is it, though?" Sarina asks, eyes wide as she looks around. "Why are all these people here? And when did this start? Why is it—"

"Okay," I laugh, holding up a hand and bringing us to a stop in front of one of the vendors. "Those are questions for a book. But I can tell you what I know about the festival, will that work?"

The line moves forward, and Sarina nods.

“So, this is the Ambersky territory. Do you know why it’s called that?”

Sarina shakes her head, glances at Veva. Of course her mother knows—it’s a required lesson in school. She just never told her daughter because Sarina has never been a child of the Ambersky pack.

I clear my throat, then say, “We’re called the Ambersky because in the fall, our skies are so clear that you can see the auroras, millions of them, all in shades of yellow—”

“Amber,” Sarina whispers, and I nod.

“Ambersky sounds a lot better than yellow sky, huh?”

“So, what does that have to do with cloud watching?” Sarina asks, not laughing at my joke. Veva gives me a sympathetic snort.

“This is the last week of summer, and as the climate shifts, it brings with it heightened humidity. It’s the one week of the year that we have clouds—so many of them. Fluffy and big and white. So we celebrate with a festival, get all the cloud watching in while we can.”

We reach the front of the line and I order us three drinks. Sarina watches, amazed, as the vendor creates them for us—Veva’s pink, mine blue, and Sarina’s amber—spinning sugar-lofted clouds into each of them, using candy and magic to create a drink that encapsulates the feeling of cloud watching.

“Woah,” Sarina whispers, accepting the drink and staring into it. “How do they do that?”

“Casting,” Veva says, and there’s an edge to her voice that wasn’t there before. “Magic, like what we have.”

Sarina busies herself with her drink, and I skim my thumb over Veva's hand. "Everything okay?"

"Sorry," she says, staring down at her cup. Her clouds start to move, and I realize she's casting on them herself, turning them to different shapes. "I never—well, I haven't had one of these since I was really little. Before my dad died."

One night in the middle of her heat, she'd rested her head on my chest and told me about her father dying in a skirmish on the border, patrolling and protecting this land. She told me how, after that, her mother fell apart.

If she was deep in her addiction, her mother was likely not bringing her to the cloud watching festival.

And, when we were teenagers, I wasn't bringing her, either.

"Well, we have a lot of lost time to make up for, don't we?" I ask. Then, spinning around, I tap Sarina on the shoulder. "What do you say? Want to give cloud-wrangling a go?"

Sarina's eyes get wide, and Veva laughs as I pull them both up, tugging them toward the games.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

“To the left!” Emin shouts, waving his hand at Sarina, who giggles relentlessly as she tries to wrangle the cloud in the center of the ring. A caster moves the cloud, having it cleverly evade her rope when she throws it.

It’s a gorgeous day—one of those shining memories you reach for when remembering a season, everything shining in a perfect, golden glow. I know that when I think of this summer—of coming back to the Ambersky pack—this moment will surface in my mind like a movie reel.

Sarina, laughing, her eyes bright as they swing to Emin. The two of them so similar. The pack around us, milling about, feeling less and less like the enemies of my childhood and more like fellow citizens. Shifters from the same pack, wolves traveling together in the same direction.

They mill past, holding cotton-candy clouds, sipping their magicked drinks, talking about the talent competition, the new games, the parade happening at dusk, the magical fireworks that will shoot into the sky later, illuminating the space above the clouds then drifting down, tinging them with different colors for days after the festival.

I’m so absorbed in the fun, and in my thoughts, that I don’t even hear the approach of footsteps to my left.

“Care if I join you?”

My mother’s voice is gentle, probing, and above all, nervous. I turn to her, eyes skipping from the drink in her hand to the small smile on her face.

Of course, she looks older than I remember. I'm just not sure if my memory of her is from when I was a kid—when she couldn't have been more than twenty—or if it's accurate to the time I left.

When I left, my mother was wan, dark bags under her eyes, a yellow to her teeth I didn't think she'd ever be able to remove. Her middle had bloated from the alcohol and drug use, her eyes taking on a desperate quality

But now her cheeks look full, her eyes bright and focused, little clouds on her headband, bouncing over her hair, matching the clouds on her baby-blue dress.

It hits me that my mom used to be like this, making us matching outfits for the festival, laughing with me and insisting we played every single game. After my father died, so did that part of her.

Or, at least, that's what I thought.

"Just lemonade," she says, jostling her cup, and I shake my head, feeling my cheeks warm.

"Sorry, I wasn't—" I touch the tips of my fingers to my head, gesture at her little clouds. "I was admiring your outfit."

Her smile softens, and she tips her head down, "Do you remember, we used to—?"

"Opal!" Sarina is looking at us, waving us over, cutting right through the conversation. My mother turns, looks at Sarina like she's a celebrity.

"Sarina, so nice to see you!"

"Come and try this," Sarina says, and I've never seen her this open, this sociable

before. Maybe it's the festival. Maybe it's Emin at her side, laughing and coaching her through a game that's impossible to win.

Opal gives me a knowing look. "Well, alright."

As she steps up next to my daughter, taking the rope from her, I feel my hands start to shake. Clearly my mother is a different person, but I can't shake the feeling that I need to watch. Make sure she never gets close enough to hurt Sarina the way she hurt me.

"Your mother seems to be doing well," Emin says, coming to my side and brushing the back of his knuckles over my side. He's been doing that all day—little touches that send my heart into a fit.

"She does seem to be," I say, carefully, keeping my voice low. Sarina lets out a piercing giggle and throws her head back, voice carrying as she says No, Opal, try...

Without another word, Emin just laces his fingers through mine again, squeezes, and drops them. I shouldn't, but I drop my head to his shoulder, breathe in, and lift it before Sarina can look over.

When I meet his eyes again, they're shining with something I'm too afraid to name, so I just look away.

And when I do, I see Sarina with her hand open under the lip of the ring, twisting her fingers.

In the ring, the cloud that's been bouncing around, avoiding the rope since Emin first paid to play, goes completely still.

Opal, in the middle of throwing the lasso, still launches it, and it slaps onto the cloud,

flattening it so it poofs into nothing.

Everyone around cheers, calling and whistling, and Opal's cheeks glow red.

You're not supposed to catch the cloud—all the adults know it.

"How did you...?" the caster asks, eyebrows shooting up. He opens and closes his fingers, stares down at them helplessly. "How did you?"

"I'm so sorry," Opal breathes, shaking her head. "I didn't—can you bring it back?"

Sarina giggles, turns, and meets my eye. Then she seems to realize she's been caught, her eyes going wide as she snaps back around, the picture of nonchalance.

"Of course," the caster says, shaking his head and re-animating the cloud. Once again, the crowd cheers.

Someone calls out, "Hey, what's the prize? She lassoed the cloud!"

"Oh, uh," the caster looks around, as if needing help. "...Free cloud drink?"

Sarina cheers, which incites even more cheering, and I decide that's enough, smiling at everyone and taking her by the shoulders.

"I swear," my mother says to Emin. "I really wasn't trying to hit it."

"I know, Opal," Emin laughs, in a tone that tells me he knows exactly why that happened, too. "Nobody is going to arrest you for cloud murder."

"Oh, thank goodness."

“Maybe just cloud slaughter?”

Sarina erupts in another round of giggles, and when I glance at the three of them—Emin, my mother, Sarina, laughing, cheeks flushed, so, so happy—it feels like a fever dream.

A fever dream that I might like to stay in just a bit longer, even if I know it’s not real.

It’s dark, and I’m drowning in the scent of Emin Argent.

Once again, I’m in his closet. Climbing out, going through the window. Stumbling down the street, getting to my house. Stuffing my bag full of clothes. No idea where I’m going to go, but with the knowledge that I have to leave.

When I open the back door and try to take my first step into the yard—

“Veva.” It’s Emin, but not as a teenager. Now, an adult. And I realize I’m an adult, too, breathing hard, glancing past him at the trees pushing up against the property line.

“Move,” I say, trying to step around him. He doesn’t move, but he’s still in front of me.

“Don’t go,” he says, and when I close my eyes, I feel his touch everywhere, caressing. I’m like the stone, and he’s the caster, imbuing me. “Veva, don’t run away.”

I want to stay, but then I look past him, see Sarina already disappearing into the forest, and my entire body fills with panic. I have to go with her—I can’t let her get

away. Can't let her run away like I did.

If she goes, I know where she'll end up. At the border to the territory, maybe trying to get back to camp? Jerrod Blacklock's men with their hands on her body, hoisting her up and over their shoulders. She struggles, screams, and they laugh at her.

Gasping, I wake up in a cold sweat, body shaking. The dream has never gone like that before.

"Hey," Emin says, running his hand over my hair, his voice thick with sleep. "Hey, love, are you okay?"

Love .

I shouldn't have, but the moment Sarina fell asleep, I snuck out the room and into this bed with him, slotting my body to his. Sliding out from under his arm, I try to calm my shaking hands.

"Yeah," I rasp. "I'm okay, I'm just—I'm going to go back in. Before Sarina wakes up."

Emin blinks sleepily, looks at the window—which is still dark—then returns his gaze to mine. We stare at each other for a moment, then he says, "Okay."

I slink across the hallway and slide back into bed with my daughter, lying on my back, forcing myself to breathe. The dreams have never been real, have only ever been a repeat of that day. I always, always wake up from them.

But something about that one was different.

I roll over onto my side and stare at Sarina, telling myself she's okay until I drift into

a restless, uneasy sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

“Emin, what the hell are you doing?”

Veva is in the casting room, working on the Amanzite, so I’ve been pacing in the hallway, thinking. I glance up when Dorian comes down the hallway, looking at me like I’ve lost it.

“What?”

“You’re talking to yourself. You’re going to scare the new recruits.”

Aidan appears behind him, grinning. “Nah, Emin doesn’t scare me. Now, those psychics—”

He fakes a shudder at the idea of it, and I catch his gaze.

“Careful. Veva is one of those psychics .”

Dorian watches me carefully. Someone comes down the hall with a cart, and we move to the side to let them through. Inside the casting room, there’s the hushed sound of them working together, the gentle emanating pulse of the magic seeping out through the cracks in the door.

“So...” Dorian starts, eyes flicking from me, to the door and back. “Wanna tell me what’s going on there?”

Aidan watches, curiosity in his gaze, and Dorian looks between me and him.

“Unless you...?”

“Nah,” I sigh, waving a hand in Aidan’s direction. “It’s fine, but—”

Another person rolling a cart goes past, and we fall silent until they’re gone. Then, I say, “I’d rather not talk about it in the hallway.”

“Heard,” Dorian says, gesturing over his shoulder. “Follow me.”

I hesitate, looking at the door, not wanting to leave Veva, but Dorian gives me a look. “We’re in the pack hall,” he says, pointing to at least three of the guys in this hallway alone. “She’s in good hands. Going upstairs isn’t going to change that.”

Still, I don’t want to leave, but the idea of talking to Dorian about this feels right. So I follow him up the stairs and into his office.

“Really?” I ask, laughing at the name plate on his desk. “We’re really going to have this discussion in here? It looks like a principal’s—”

I’m cut off when he goes to one of the bookcases, tips out a book, and opens a secret door.

“What?” Aidan laughs, bringing his hands to his head. “No way—those are real?”

Dorian shrugs, laughing as we step through. “Perks of being the alpha leader. They asked what I wanted for my office...”

“And you said, speakeasy?” I laugh, turning and taking in this secret room—all lush leather and dark wood. In fact, it looks oddly close to the casting room. “Did the casters put this together for you?”

“Like I said,” Dorian shrugs, “perks of being the alpha leader. And, just to clarify, we had this done before the problem with the Amanzite started. I was not pilfering magic for my own personal gain—”

“Calm down, goodie two-shoes,” Aidan laughs, putting his hands behind his head and kicking his feet up as he drops into a leather chair. “Nobody here is going to tell on you. I’m definitely going to have one of these when I’m alpha leader over at the Grayhides.”

“Feet off,” Dorian says, his voice nearing a growl, and Aidan sits up, looking a bit sheepish. “You’re not an alpha leader yet, Grayhide. I’d make sure to keep that in mind.”

Aidan nods, and I watch as he scoots back in his seat, his head turning to take more of the room in. It’s odd watching him, thinking about how young he really is. Sometimes, like when he’s training, he seems much older than his twenty and change.

Dorian moves to the other side of the room, mixes each of us a drink. When they’re dispersed, he looks at me over the top of his glass and says, “Well?”

Well.

I reach into my pocket, feel the little box I’ve had in there since yesterday. It belonged to my grandmother, and she gave it to me before she passed. Said it would go to my wife, when I found her.

“Well,” I say, clearing my throat and pulling it out, popping it open so they can see the ring. Aidan jerks back like I’ve pulled out a gun, and Dorian very slowly sets his drink on his desk.

“Woah,” he says, eying the box. “Uh, is that for...?”

“Veva.” I swallow, nod, and tuck it back into my pocket, feeling the weight of it there. “I didn’t tell you this before, but...she’s my mate.”

“Okay,” Dorian says, frowning and crossing his arms. “That would have been good information to know.”

“I know,” I rub my hand over the back of my neck. Dorian is my leader, but that information was also private. He eyes me, then rubs his hand over his jaw.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit...premature? For that? Even if she is your mate...?”

“Well, there’s more, actually.” I cough, look to the ceiling, then go on. “I told you that Veva and I knew each other in high school?”

Dorian picks up his glass. “Yeah.”

“Well, yeah. We knew each other. For two years.”

He pauses with the glass to his lips. “Two years?”

“Yeah.” When I close my eyes, I see a montage of it.

The first time we found ourselves together, assigned to cleaning the home economics room together the end of sophomore year.

“Two years. And...I denied it to myself back then, but I knew she was my mate. She came to me one night. Said she needed to tell me something. I thought she was going to finally say it, point out the connection between us. But my dad...” I pause, glancing over at Aidan, seeing his confused expression.

But Dorian knows exactly what I’m talking about. And I don’t have the energy to

explain about my dad right now.

“Anyway, he came to the door, and it was like he knew—I mean, we had never met at my house before. So I made her leave, basically pushed her out the window—”

Aidan sucks in a breath, and I amend, “I was on the first floor, man.”

“Oh.”

“You said you thought that’s what she came to say,” Dorian says, his eyes on me. “What did she really come to say?”

I bite my lip, glance at Aidan again, making sure the threat in my gaze is apparent. “This doesn’t leave the room.”

He mimes zipping his lips, and it almost makes me laugh.

“She was going to tell me...she thought she was pregnant.”

Dorian is staring at me with a deathly serious look. “She thought she was pregnant? What does that mean? She wasn’t?”

I shake my head, “I’m not sure. I didn’t...ask. I don’t know if it was a false alarm, or if she lost it—” I cut myself off, the idea of it too much to think about. The idea of her, in pain like that.

“Emin.” Dorian’s voice is so quiet, I almost don’t catch it. He clears his throat, finds my gaze. “Is it possible that...is it possible that Sarina is that baby?”

“I already told you.” I shake my head. “Sarina is eight. The timeline doesn’t line up.”

“But...what if she isn’t eight?”

Of course, I’ve thought it. She looks so much like me. I want it to be true. But—no.

“Veva wouldn’t lie about that.” I’m shaking my head too quickly; it starts to give me a headache. So I stand up and start to pace. “She wouldn’t. Not...not when I asked her, point blank. She wouldn’t keep my own child from me like that.”

Dorian holds eye contact with me. “Even if she thought she was protecting Sarina?”

I run my hand through my hair, shake my head again, and make for the secret door.

“Emin—”

“Gotta go,” I mutter, searching for the book that’s going to let me out of here. “They’re going to be done soon.”

Dorian doesn’t chase me out, but lets me go. I’m just pushing out of his office, and into the hallway, when I run into the last person I want to see in here.

“Emin,” my father says, straightening up when he sees me.

“Can’t right now,” I say, moving to push past him, but he steps in front of me, holding his hands up.

“Emin.” He sucks in a breath of air, squares his shoulders. I look more like my mother, but I see myself in him, too. His chin, the shape and set of his eyes. “Son.”

This is already too much, I can tell.

“Dad—”

“Just hear me out,” he says, the words coming out in a whoosh. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for ages now, and I—”

When he shakes his head, it’s like looking into a mirror, and I realize where I got the gesture. From watching him do it growing up.

“I’m sorry.”

I blink, trying to process the words. Coming from his mouth. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” he says again, hands still held up. “For—for everything. I realize now that the way we raised you and Kira—we forced your sister out. We failed her. And, maybe you turned out okay, but I can see now how our behavior affected you. Now that your mother—”

He stops himself, and I see genuine grief there for the wife he lost. The wife he maybe never had. My mother, who betrayed us.

“We don’t have to talk it through now.” He lowers his voice. “But I would like to—I’d like to have a relationship with my children. With my grandchildren. If that’s something you’d be open to.”

I let out a quick, disbelieving breath. Of all the things I thought would happen today, getting an apology from my father was not one of them.

“Maybe,” I finally manage, before I actually do push past him.

He doesn’t say a thing. Apparently, that’s enough for him, for now.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Without meaning to, I fall into a routine within the Ambersky pack. A week has already gone past since my heat ended.

I've been working on the Amanzite casting, meeting with Beth and the other psychics. Having dinner with Kira and Dorian, holding their cooing, gentle babies in my hands.

And I've started to remember how much I love the color of the sun, slanting over the landscape, everything glowing red like when you tip your closed eyes up to it.

The simple pleasure of watching a lizard climb the side of the building, tasting the fresh citrus and how Kira works it into delicious recipes, fresh lemonade, cream pies, roasted fish.

Time has started to move along easily, with Sarina visiting the library each morning and sinking into her books throughout the day.

One of the casters mentioned to me that the city school is actually very good, and the look of hope on Sarina's face—delight at the idea of attending class, doing something more than homeschooling—made something in me shift.

It makes something in me wonder if this might not be a bad place to raise my daughter, after all. The moment I think it, I push it to the back of my mind, but it's there.

I've started to grow a bit complacent, gotten used to the way things feel around here.

I don't have to wake up every morning and gather water, beat scorpions out of our shed.

Hope Herold has something good for breakfast, scrub the dirt out of our clothes.

I've become accustomed to the easy, quiet comfort of Emin's presence, the way he's been trying so hard to convince Sarina and I life in Ambersky is worth it.

And that's why I notice the second Sarina and I come out of the casting room, and Emin stands stiffly, waiting for us.

"What's wrong?" I ask, brow pulling down immediately. The way he looks at me—surprise, coupled with suspicion—makes my stomach turn.

"Nothing," Emin shakes the look off his face, replacing it with a terse smile. Putting a hand on my elbow, he guides me toward the door. "It's nothing—let's get some lunch, huh?"

Sarina, with a book under her arm, perks up at the idea of lunch, skipping along beside him. I walk behind them, biting my lip, unable to ignore the similarities between the two, even down to the way they hold themselves, their gait, and that red-gold hair, glinting in the early afternoon sun.

It's past midnight when I crack open the door to Emin's room and slip inside, crawling into his bed. He turns and tucks his arm around me, pulling my body into his automatically, but there's still something there I can sense—some sort of reservation.

"Emin," I start, though I'm not sure if he's even awake. "What happened today?"

He's quiet for a long moment, long enough that I start to think he might actually be asleep, that I'm whispering to nobody in the dark.

Then, he speaks. "I had a conversation with my father."

Without meaning to, I suck in a breath between my teeth. As a teen, I would cross the street if I saw Kellen Argent coming toward me downtown. I was terrified of him—terrified of hearing what he might have to say about me.

Terrified that he might find out about Emin and me, take some drastic action to keep us apart. Anything to keep his good standing in the community.

We'd all seen the way he and his wife, Mhairi, treated Kira. Back then, we all thought her talking about her gift was just a little bit of weirdness, maybe a way to get some attention. I didn't understand it—the last thing I wanted was attention.

The Argents cared so little for their daughter that they didn't even bother to educate her on what it means to be an omega. She had no idea what her heat was, and came to school having started her first one. The alphas in her class were instantly uncomfortable.

At least it was entertaining to watch them grapple with the fact that they were thinking those thoughts about Kira—a pudgy, unpopular girl. She was only in class for an hour before a teacher sent her to the nurse's office with a scowl.

All that to say that Kellen Argent isn't a man I'd want to have a conversation with. And I can't even imagine what Emin went through as his son.

"You did?"

It feels like there's something else—something Emin isn't telling me. Something he's

keeping from me. But, knowing what I'm keeping from him, I can't exactly fault him for wanting to keep some things private.

I stare into the dark, listening to Emin as he speaks, his voice a low rumble that moves through my body with each syllable.

“He said...he said he wants to have a relationship. That after what my mother did—betraying that pack—he's realized that they really fucked us up as kids. Obviously, Kira deserves that apology more than I do, but, still...”

“Emin,” I twist in his arms, coming face-to-face with him. Even in the dark, I can make him out perfectly, from the long slope of his nose to his eyebrows. “You deserve that apology. What he did to you wasn't okay.”

“Sure,” Emin lets out a bitter laugh. “But Kira...the shit she went through, Veva. We should have believed her about her gift. Shouldn't have told everyone that she was a liar without even checking to see if that was true.

And...you remember Dorian being mean to her in high school, but do you remember that I was doing that shit, too?

Bullying my own sister, just to make sure nobody associated me with her? ”

“I think there's merit to taking accountability,” I murmur, running my hands over his chest. “But it's also okay to acknowledge that your parents pushed you in that direction.

It was wrong for them to ever make you feel like you needed to be cruel to your sister—don't get me wrong, it wasn't okay...

but I can't even imagine doing that to Sarina. Trying to pit her against a sibling?”

A long moment passes, and I loop my arms around his neck, bringing my lips to his cheeks. “Emin?”

“I know,” he rasps. “I’ve apologized to Kira. But it just never feels like it’s going to ever be enough. With the mistakes I’ve made in the past...it just feels like I’m never going to make up for all the harm I’ve caused.”

Without saying it, I know we’re not just talking about Kira anymore. We’re talking about me, all those years ago, climbing out his window. Disappearing into the night, and taking his unborn child with me.

Earlier today, I was wondering what the process might be to get Sarina enrolled in school. My mind is starting to shift toward the idea of staying—not just in Ambersky, but with Emin.

I should tell him.

The truth hovers there on my tongue—that Sarina is his, that I’m his.

But fear steamrolls back in, pushing those thoughts from my head. Reminding me that if I tell Emin about Sarina, she won’t just belong to me anymore. He’ll have control, be able to keep her here. Be able to keep me here.

As an alpha, what he says goes. Even if Ambersky is nicer to omegas, the second he knows that Sarina is biologically his, he’ll have more jurisdiction over her than I do, her mother—the person who birthed her alone, took care of her alone.

Nursed her and fed her and raised her the best I could without another person there to take care of us.

“Veva?” Emin whispers, trailing his finger along my hairline. “Are you still awake?”

My eyes are shut. I stay completely still, evening out my breathing. I haven't committed to anything yet—I could still tell him at any moment.

I could tell him the truth at any moment.

But when Emin starts to snore softly, his face pressed into my hair, I realize I've let the moment pass again without telling him.

I have to—it's only fair. But I have to find a way to push through the fear, to convince that protective mother inside me that Emin won't hurt Sarina if I give him the chance to.

For at least an hour, I stare into the dark, mind working, trying to figure out what the hell I'm going to do.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Dorian runs ahead of me, following his nose, and I tail just behind him.

We've been tracking an antelope through the valley for the past hour. We don't hunt often—our food stores are fairly high—but Dorian asked me to come out this morning with him. The two of us started hunting together in high school, and we haven't gone since his twins were born.

As we dive through a thicket of brush, following the scent, Dorian asks me through the mental bond, How are Veva and Sarina doing ?

Our last conversation was the one in his office. The one in which he implied Veva might be lying to me about Sarina. I'm not angry with Dorian, exactly, but I haven't wanted to think about it.

Even considering it feels like a betrayal to Veva.

And after everything, I don't want her to find a single reason to leave. To think that staying in the pack, in town, with me, might not be the right choice.

Good , I finally answer, focusing on the feeling of my paws against the ground, the wind rushing through my fur. It feels good to shift, to run—over the past few months, we've been on a limited shifting order to preserve our supply of Amanzite until the casters are able to form it through magic.

Just good ? Dorian sends back. We've always been close—best friends through high school. We were best friends when his grandfather died, and stuck through it last year when Kira came back, and he claimed her as his mate.

Sarina is doing really well. I think about her smile each morning, her curiosity in the workshop, wanting to help me with every project. She even asked me, shyly, if I might be able to build a bookshelf for the guest room.

The fact that Veva didn't automatically speak out against the idea was telling—she's thinking about staying.

Sarina loves going to the library, and she's even been making friends with some of the other kids in the pack. Veva said yes to a swim camp, and she'll start that twice a week.

Sometimes, in the mornings, when Sarina and I are cooking breakfast or reading together, she'll mention her life back at the outskirts camp.

Talk about a Herold who made sure to feed her and her mother, or mention the other kids there, many of them scrawny and working hard to make what money they could for their families.

"I was the only kid with time to read," Sarina said. "I wish they could have, too."

Have you ever thought about bringing in people from the Grayhide pack ?

I send it before I think it through, and Dorian gives me a side-eye, the expression comically similar on him, wolf or human form.

I just mean—

We run on for a second while I think it through, then I continue, Sarina has talked about some of the folks in that camp. The one they were living in. Seems like a lot of them might be interested in a permanent place to stay. Maybe they might find a place here, like Veva did.

Dorian is quiet as we slow, stalking. The scent is strong, but we have to figure out where she's gone. We sniff around for a second, and when we catch a solid trail, we take off again.

It's something to think about , Dorian says. But it's also worth remembering that Veva came from this pack. So it's a little different, bringing her in. Might be more difficult to find a spot for a bunch of Grayhides.

According to Sarina, not all at that camp were even Grayhides—in fact, many of them weren't shifters at all. People would flow in and out of the camp, only some of them staying long-term. Many of them running from something, many of them afraid to go home, afraid of Jerrod's leadership, too.

It's something to bring up another time. But, each time Sarina describes a new person in that camp, how they've helped her, I feel a tug to make sure they're safe. Give them a stable home.

We run for a while longer, then Dorian sends, Look, man. I'm sorry if I said something out of turn the other day. You know I'm on your side, always.

The situation with Kira really has changed Dorian. In the past, we might let a conversation like that fade into the past without really acknowledging it, only the unspoken apology of continued friendship solving the issue.

I know, I send back, just before we turn, diving into a patch low low-lying, scraggly trees. The antelope is close, and my heart starts to pick up at the thrill of the kill. Dorian and I both played sports in high school, but that rush is nothing like this one.

Something primal—a satisfaction in knowing you're feeding yourself, your family, your pack.

When we bring the antelope back, they'll prep it, dry most of it out, and cook up most of it into stews in the pack hall.

Everyone gets dinner, every kid in the pack always knows they can find something to eat.

After everything that happened with your mom , Dorian says, even the communication through the bond sounding cautious, I just want to be careful. Are the two of them thinking of staying?

I haven't pushed the issue with Veva yet. My mind flashes back to the ring in my bedside table at home, the pull I feel every morning to just get down on one knee and ask her. The marriage is less important than marking her.

And I think about marking her every single night. Whether I'm just pulling her body to mine, snuggling in close, or touching her, feeling her—I want to get my teeth into her. Let my scent seep into hers. Make the bond official, strengthen it so it can withstand anything.

It would be good for them to stay , Dorian says. I think Veva is a great addition to our casters.

The conversation is over when we pick up the scent, as strong as its been through the entire hunt. At this point, the antelope is just around the curve. We can smell its fear, hear the exhaustion in each puff of breath it releases.

Here! Dorian sends to me, skidding to a stop and launching himself at the animal. He goes for the throat and I find the back legs, and we take it down in a matter of minutes.

Nice work—

Dorian cuts himself off when we catch a different scent—Grayhide.

Lie low , Dorian commands, and I instantly crouch down in the grass, watching as he stalks ahead, searching for the wolf.

Looking for me ?

I jolt at the sensation—an unfamiliar voice in my head, a wolf that I haven't bonded with.

Someone not from my pack. It scrambles my senses, reminds me of what it feels like to accidentally brush up against an electric fence.

The jolt so sudden and complete that it feels like a shove right in the center of your back.

Show yourself , Dorian demands, his growl coming loud and clear through the mental bond.

I'm not here to fight, the voice says. Dorian is hunkered down two feet ahead of me, his head on a swivel, still trying to find the source of the communication.

The antelope to our left stinks of coagulating blood, its flesh still warm and cooling rapidly as the sun starts to set, the cool desert night descending over us, bringing a definite chill.

Bold words , Dorian growls again, from a wolf too coward to face us .

I knew you would attack me on sight , he counters. But I think it would be beneficial for both of us if you let me say my piece. Is that something we can agree to, Fields?

A beat passes. I can practically feel Dorian weighing his options—likely still trying to work out how the hell another wolf—a Grayhide —has wormed his way into our communications like this.

Finally, Dorian says, Fine. Show yourself, and we can continue this conversation as men.

A second later, a large wolf appears as though from the shadows, materializing just behind a massive red boulder. His black fur ripples in the breeze, glowing with a red undersheen in the low light of the setting sun.

Then he shifts, revealing a tall young man with a similar shock of black hair on his head, every free inch of his skin littered with the lines of pack tattoos.

“Oren Blacklock,” he says, his dark, serious eyes locked on Dorian. “I’ve come to ask for your help in killing my father.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Claire lets out a low curse to my left, dropping her hands in frustration.

We've just poured every ounce of our energy into this spell, and what lays on the table in the center of the room is exactly the right color for Amanzite, but instead of a stone, it's an oozing, goopy mess that spreads out over the center of the table.

"Huh," one of the other casters says, lowering her head and breathing in. "Smells like butterscotch."

Claire stalks away from the table, working her hands, massaging her wrists. While I've been throwing all my power into the casting, Claire is the one who's been guiding the metaphorical bus, steering us in the direction we need to go.

"Hey," I say, dropping a hand onto her back. "Take a breather. It's okay. What we're attempting here it's...it's a lot."

Through her hands, Claire says, "I just with I could get this right. It's like—it's like I just—I've held the Amanzite, and we've broken it open, but I feel so disconnected from it. Like I can't nail what it is that makes up the structure—"

I suck in a breath so quickly that she snaps up, looking around, worried.

"No, sorry," I say, breathless, my hand on my chest. "Fuck, Claire I just—I think I just had an idea for how we can do this right!"

She blinks. "You did?"

Some of the other casters are looking over at us, their curiosity piqued.

“Forgive me for prying,” I say, crouching down so I’m eye-to-eye with her. “You’re not a shifter, are you?”

“No,” she shakes her head. I didn’t think so. Most casters are non-shifters, and shifters who can cast are extremely rare. Sarina isn’t old enough for her first shift, but given her abilities, I doubt she’ll be able to.

But I can shift. I don’t do it very often, not wanting to use my gems in the camp for shifting. But I can—and that might just be the thing that can get us closer to this.

“We need a shifter to help guide us to the right structure,” I say, straightening up and starting to pace. “We can swap, Claire. I’ll try guiding the spell, and you—”

But Claire is standing, shaking her head. “No, Veva. We need you for that power. If you’re guiding it, you won’t be able to push that power into the spell.”

“I can do it.”

I startle, turning to find Sarina standing beside an armchair, looking at us with wide eyes. Her book lies face down on the arm of the chair behind her.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, but she takes another step, holding her hands up.

“I want to help,” she says, her brow wrinkling. “I know how to put my power into a spell—you taught me.”

Claire gives her a sympathetic look. “That’s very nice of you, honey, but we’re going to need a lot more power than that. Your powers won’t crest until you’re much, much older.”

I open my mouth, but the door opens and Emin comes walking in, looking breathless, harried. His eyes skip from me, then to Sarina, and the expression on his face calms.

“What is it?”

My hackles rise. I don’t like the way he walked in here, like something might be wrong. Like he needed to make sure we were okay.

“It’s fine,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s okay—”

“Emin.”

His eyes meet mine, and I hold his gaze for a second, willing him to tell me the truth. He sighs, pulls me to the side.

“Dorian and I came across something...interesting. During our hunt. And we’re dealing with it, but I wanted to make sure the two of you were okay.”

He gives me a look that says, I can tell you more later, but not here .

Fine. I nod back, turn to go back to what we were doing, but another idea comes to mine.

“Emin.” He stops at the sound of my voice, turns back to me, eyebrows raised.

“What?”

Ten minutes later, we’re arranged around the casting table. Group casting doesn’t normally require holding hands, but in order to loop Emin into this, we need physical touch. Sarina insisted she wanted to participate, so she and I bracket him, holding his hands in ours.

“We’re going to push our power toward you,” Claire explains. “I’ll do most of the steering, but I’m going to channel it through you.”

“And you want me to...?”

“Think about the Amanzite. Picture it. Imagine that connection you have with it when you’re shifting—all that stuff. The goal is to get as close to the real thing as we can.”

Emin lets out a thin breath. “I’ll do my best. No promises.”

“I have a feeling this is going to work,” Claire says, nodding and taking Sarina’s hand in hers. “Alright—let’s begin.”

Closing my eyes, I let my power rise to the surface of my skin, like water coming to a boil. I gather it up, channel it, push it toward Emin and Claire.

We’ve been doing our best each time with this, but this time is clearly different. Every other time, Claire has been busy guiding the ship, but now, with her full power, we’re buoyed, far more ability to take the spell where we want to go.

The caster to my left whispers a quick, surprised, “Wow .”

It’s what we’re all feeling. I throw everything in me into this spell, pushing, pushing.

My maternal instincts call on me to open my eyes, to make sure Sarina is okay, but I can’t—I won’t interrupt the spell by pulling my attention away.

I can only hope that including her was the right decision, and that she has the discipline necessary to stay keyed into the spell.

The magic rises and falls inside the room like flood water, leaving us all gasping for

air and boneless when it pulls away again.

And when I open my eyes, the table is heaped with a pile of synthetic gems.

“Did we...?” one of the casters asks, eyes wide.

“They look imbued,” Claire says, nodding. Usually, procuring the Amanzite is the first step of the process. After that, the casters imbue it with magic. These stones sparkle with trapped energy—showing that they’re already imbued.

Not only did we create the gems from thin air, but we managed to infuse magic directly into them during the process. I’ve never been a part of the Amanzite management system, but I imagine that would greatly cut down on time.

“Woah,” Emin says, eyes wide as he reaches forward, picking up one of the gems and holding it between his finger and thumb. “This looks so much like the real thing. It’s—wow.”

Claire braces herself against the table, her arm visibly shaking with the effort. Several of the other casters have sat down right on the floor, and are taking tiny, quick sips from their drinks.

“Care to give it a shot?” Claire asks, gesturing toward it with a trembling hand. “It looks right—the last test is to see if a shifter can use it.”

Emin looks skeptical, but grips the stone tightly in his hand, closing his eyes and stepping back from the table. I glance at Sarina, who is looking on in total awe.

I’ve only shifted in front of her a handful of times, and she’s so curious about everything. If the Amanzite works, Emin will be able to shift painlessly, then shift back still wearing his clothes, holding all his possessions. The magic within the stone

will allow it.

The first time I saw a shifter change forms, it felt like an optical illusion. But now, having done it several times myself, I see each part of it, the concentration, the movements, the transition from one form to the other.

As simple as sitting down, once you know how to do it.

“Woah,” Sarina whispers.

She’s seen me shift before—but I’m an omega. My wolf is small, coming just above her shoulder. But Emin...Emin is a force to be reckoned with, his raised head higher than mine, his exhalation like that of a horse. The presence of a larger being.

Then, in a matter of seconds, he shifts back, blinking at the stone in his hand.

“Holy shit,” he murmurs. Then, raising his eyes to mine, he shines with pride as he says, “You actually did it.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Veva, Sarina, and I stand on Kira's front porch. Sarina has just knocked, and stands back, holding the bundle of flowers we've brought with us from my little garden.

Both Veva and Sarina were surprised to find out I had a flower garden outside the house. Veva kept glancing at me, her eyebrows raised, until I finally broke and laughed, "What?"

"Oh, nothing," she'd joked, running her hand along my arm. "I just hadn't pegged you as a flower garden kind of guy, that's all."

"I hope I can continue to surprise you," I'd said, catching her off-guard. Pleasure coursed through me at the flush that spread over her cheeks. Like the way we used to flirt—me always catching her off-guard, turning things around on her when she least expected it.

Now, as we wait for someone inside to open the door, my body is still thrumming from the day—finding Oren earlier, taking him to a jail cell, Dorian staying behind to talk to him. Watching the casters— Veva —create the Amanzite from nothing. The power in that room was staggering.

The power of my mate is staggering.

"Come in!" Dorian appears at the door with one of the twins held loosely at his side. Lately, he's gotten into the habit of holding his kids like Sarina holds books—tucked under arm, stacked haphazardly in her hands.

We file inside, and I catch Kira say Dorian, would you please put our son upright ,

with laughter in her voice. Then my sister appears—my father right behind her.

I knew he was going to be here tonight, and still it feels weird.

As though I don't exist, my father steps into the room, clasping his hands together and addressing my mate.

“Veva,” he says, his face serious. “I’m trying not to be in the habit of dancing around things that are uncomfortable, and I’m sure you know that I’ve contributed to the...

attitude toward you and your mother in this pack.

I’ll no longer be participating in that kind of behavior, but I wanted to apologize to you in person for any harm I may have caused. ”

Behind his back, Kira stands with her mouth dropped open, eyes wide. This is not something I ever thought I’d see my father do. And yet, here he is.

“Thank you,” Veva says, her eyes scanning over him. Something in her expression seems to change, almost like she’s realized he’s telling the truth. “I hope you can find some peace, Kellen.”

His eyes widen at that, and he swallows hard, nodding and looking away.

“Alright,” Kira claps, laughing awkwardly. “Well, the pork chops are done, so should we...?”

“We should ,” Dorian says, sweeping out of the room, likely to deposit the boys elsewhere during the meal.

Five minutes later, we’re sitting around the table. The room smells like sage and

apples, the pork chops still steaming in front of us, roasted potatoes and vegetables fragrant with herbs, a salad glistening under the light.

Kellen asks Sarina questions about her latest book. Kira tells a story about Noah, she and Dorian arguing about whether or not he was really saying Mom , or just hiccupping.

Halfway through the meal, Veva reaches for my hand under the table, and I hold it until it's time to clear the dishes away.

“Good morning, everyone,” Dorian says, standing at the head of the table the next morning. “Thank you all for coming to this emergency council meeting. There are several new developments that we must discuss. The first being this—”

He pauses, reaches into the velvet pouch on the table, and takes out the synthetic Amanzite. When he sets it on the table, it's with the full gravity of what this means.

“Emin tested this yesterday. It's fully functional,” our alpha leader sounds almost out of breath.

“It means what you think it means—no more relying on trading for the stones. No more bartering and panicking. The incident from last year—in which someone stole nearly our entire supply of Amanzite—would have been easy to circumnavigate. This is a huge accomplishment, and we have to thank our excellent casters.”

Claire waves her hand. “Thank Veva,” she says, gesturing to her. Veva sits beside me, and her cheeks flush at the mention. Claire goes on, “It was her idea to involve a shifter, and her power that helped us to finally accomplish this.”

There's some talking around the table, then it calms, and Dorian clears his throat.

"Our next order of business is a bit more serious. Guys—bring him in."

The door opens, and Oren Blacklock comes shuffling into the room, bracketed on either side by a shifter. He's bound at the ankles and wrists, but his eyes shine brightly as he looks around the room, taking it in.

"Yesterday late morning, Emin Argent and I were hunting along the southern border, and we encountered Oren Blacklock, son of Jerrod Blacklock."

There's an intake of air, general shuffling around. Discomfort. Aidan sits at the end of the table, and I watch as he sits up straighter, his back going rigid.

Oren Blacklock's grandfather killed Aidan's mother. I'm surprised the man still has his ass in that seat. I might not have that much restraint.

Silence falls through the room with one pointed look from Dorian, then he looks to the man standing before us. His black hair shines, his dark eyes covered with a heavy brow. This closely, I can make out the straight lines of his tattoos.

"As your alpha leader said, Jerrod Blacklock is my father." He takes a moment to look between each person in the room, his eyes lingering on Aidan, widening slightly. Does he recognize him? Oren was surely only a baby when Aidan's family was slaughtered.

Oren sets his jaw, continues, "I intend to kill him and take over as the leader of the Grayhide pack. My father is not fit to lead."

Dorian tilts his head, as if to ask why Oren thinks that. Oren snorts, like it's a pointless question, but goes on to explain.

“My father is addicted to several substances. His mental acuity has been declining for years, and now he’s leading our pack into ruin.

He verbally and physically abuses to my mother and sister.

More than that, he’s engaged in kleptocracy from the very beginning of his rule.

He steals from the pack funds, hoards food for himself, and does not have the interests of our shifters in mind. ”

“Okay,” Dorian says, leaning forward, pinning Oren with a stare. “What does that have to do with us? And why should we believe you?”

“You want my father dead, too, I’d imagine.

What’s your death count along the border from the past ten years?

” Oren cocks his head, then says, “I already know. It’s higher than you want.

There are shifters in this pack grieving the loss of their loved ones as a direct consequence of my father’s rule. And that includes you, Fields.”

The reference to the death of his grandfather doesn’t ruffle Dorian.

“As for why you should believe me—don’t.

I’m willing to partake in any truth testing you can do.

Ask your casters to bind me in a contract, dose me with truth serum.

But I assure you that partnering with me is the correct move.

My father may be a poor excuse for an alpha leader, but I've been preparing for the role since I was born.

Through my tutelage of his leadership, I have seen everything to do differently. ”

“Again, Blacklock, what is it that you need from us?”

“The tradition is to engage in a one-on-one duel to the death for the alpha leader position, as I'm sure you're aware of.

” Oren pauses, and his gaze falls on me.

He has the speaking tendencies of a leader—engaging each person in the room.

“My father will never agree to a duel with me. In fact, if he had been cognizant enough to realize I planned to dissent, he never would have let me leave the territory alive.”

At this, Oren's eyes move to Aidan, who sits completely still, his expression unreadable.

“Proven by your attendance at this meeting,” Oren says, something like appreciation flickering over his features, “my father went to great lengths to ensure your death. In fact, he has your head sitting in our home.”

That makes Dorian laugh, and Oren cracks a dry smile, going on, “In exchange for information and a future allyship between our packs, I request assistance in confronting my father with a duel. Once I get him, one-on-one, and know that nobody will interfere, I can kill him quickly.”

“You can take him back,” Dorian says to the shifters, who turn and start to escort Oren

from the room. He holds his head high as he goes, and Dorian turns to address us, meeting my gaze. “As you can all see, there’s a lot for us to discuss.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

For the first time in a very, very long time, I'm wearing a nice dress.

My hair is pinned up, and I'm wearing lipstick.

The whole of it feels foreign on my body, which has been used to bathing in streams, patching together clothes, slathering my face in a sun-tonic, braiding my hair back away from my face. Unfussy.

This—the whole night—is very fussy.

My dress is black, slinky, made for me by Kira. Her brother can't keep his eyes off of me, and my hands only shake slightly as I hold my glass of champagne, trying not to think about what I'll be doing once everyone is here.

We're on the roof of the pack hall. Fairy lights dance above us, and above that, stars shine in a cloudless sky. Fall is coming, which brings with it the amber skies for which this land is known. But before the auroras settle in, stargazing is at its peak.

Alphas, omegas, and betas mingle, moving through the crowd, laughing, forming little groups. I stand by the punch bowl, trying to busy my hands with something.

At the council meeting, after a long discussion about what to do with Oren Blacklock that ultimately ended in needing more deliberation, Dorian instructed several event planners to put this celebration together.

Never in my life did I think I would be at an event thrown by the alpha leader. Me, Veva Marone. And not just me, but my mother and daughter, too. A whole line of

Marone women, a class of shifter I thought would never rise from obscurity in shifter society.

My mother is across from me, sitting with Sarina at a table and laughing with her. I watch the two of them, a pinch of apprehension still coiling in my chest. But there's something else there, too. Something I'm afraid to look at too closely.

Something like hope.

"You keep sneaking off."

If it was anyone else, I might jump at the sound of the voice next to me, but it's Emin, so I turn without thinking and curl into his side, letting him put his arm around me. I breathe deeply, inhaling his scent.

His scent soothes me, and I relax, shaking out the tension in my shoulders.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," he grumbles, complaining about my perfume for the third time tonight. It makes me laugh, the thought that he misses my scent so much he'd bring it up again and again. "I'll pay you next time to go without it."

"It's just a little perfume, Emin."

"You don't need perfume, Veva."

"You are the only person here who thinks that."

"I'm the only person with an opinion that matters," he counters, drawing me in even closer. I breathe in his scent again, then nod against his chest, letting the flood of emotions inside me out for just a moment.

“I’m nervous that it’s not going to work,” I mutter, glancing around at all the people who are about to watch me cast. This is something more than just performance nerves—it’s the idea that my standing in this pack is tied to how and if I can pull this off.

As much as I try to tell myself that things have changed, I can’t shake the feeling that my standing is vital—that at any moment, I could be that teen girl again, so repulsive even my own mother wanted nothing to do with me.

“Hey,” Emin says, catching me under the chin and turning my face to his.

“You are amazing, Veva. Whatever you’re thinking right now, that’s not you.

And besides, you only have to make one,” Emin counters, lowering his chin and catching my gaze.

His eyes are a light brown, and they catch in the glint of the fairy light, nearly liquid.

Amber like the auroras. “Last time,” he says, “you made an entire pile.”

“With the help of a lot of other casters,” I laugh, bringing my hand up to wipe at my face, then remembering I’m wearing makeup, and I don’t want to smudge it. I lower my hand and start to worry at my dress, instead.

Emin drops his mouth to my ear. “Could I ease some of that worry with the promise of a reward later?”

Heat rushes over my cheeks as a glance up at him. “That depends,” I say, turning to him and hooking my arms around his neck, pulling our bodies together. “What exactly are you offering?”

The moment cools when Kira appears, grimacing. “Ugh, sorry guys, kissy time is over. Veva, they’re ready for you to set up the presentation.”

Cool, cutting nerves roll through me. Emin seems to sense it, running his hand the length of my arm and saying a quick, “Anything you want, baby,” into my ear before pulling back and smiling at me. “You’re going to do great.”

Kira leads me to a little stage on the far side of the roof. There’s a tiny casting table, and Dorian stands there, looking out at everyone.

“Ah, there you are.” He smiles at me. For this demonstration, Dorian is going to be the shifter I channel through, and he’s going to shift with the Amanzite when he’s finished.

Just creating a very important stone for the most important alpha in the pack. It’s not a big deal.

Normally, something like this wouldn’t get to me. But at this gathering, surrounded by all the shifters who have looked down on my family and me from the day I was born, it feels like being back in high school again.

Just wanting acceptance. Just wanting to know that I could be with Emin. Just wishing the stares and laughs and snickers didn’t hit me quite so hard.

As I turn to the casting table, I catch a flash of red hair in the front row. Kira, Emin, Sarina. My stomach turns with the resemblance between the three of them—anyone looking at Sarina with those two would know instantly that there’s a connection.

“Are you ready?” Dorian asks, and when I turn my head, meeting his gaze, it feels like he’s looking right into my soul.

I realize I've been in Ambersky long enough for him to gain authority over me as my alpha leader again. I know how it works—the alpha leader has a connection to all his shifters. Can see the things about them that others don't.

And, right now, holding his gaze, without him saying a word, I know that he knows.

He knows that Sarina belongs to Emin. He knows that I'm keeping it from him. His best friend.

Without saying anything, I communicate the truth, the thing that I've just realized.

I'm going to tell him .

Dorian nods, slightly, then holds his hand out for me to take. I pull my magic to the surface, body bubbling with a different kind of nervous energy now. Now, I just want to get through this process, make the Amanzite, and get to Emin so I can tell him the truth about his daughter.

He deserves to know. Even if he's angry with me for lying, I'll tell him.

We can work through it. I'm starting to realize that with Emin, I'll be able to work through anything.

That doing something alone just because you can doesn't make you strong—in some ways, it makes you a coward.

Because what's really hard, what's really scary, is trusting someone else to be on your team.

I close my eyes, hold Dorian's hand in mine, let him guide the spell in just the way we did with Emin.

A moment later, there's a collective gasp, and I open my eyes to find a perfectly round, perfectly smooth pebble of Amanzite sitting on the casting table, sparkling with the imbued magic it contains.

Dorian picks it up, shows it to the crowd.

“As I'm sure many of you know, this past year has been a difficult one for this pack.

Our conflict with the Grayhides has resulted in an increased demand for Amanzite, and an increased opportunity for our enemies to hinder our ability to defend ourselves and our land.

” He pauses, holding the Amanzite up so it catches the fairy lights.

“ This is the solution to that problem. Our incredible casters—including Veva Marone here—were instrumental in bolstering our abilities, improving our security, and strengthening us as a whole. This party is to celebrate this accomplishment, our future prosperity, and also the casters who made this all possible.”

There's a round of applause, and I feel more warmth move into my cheeks, the unfamiliarity of being recognized for something I've done.

“Being able to synthesize Amanzite means no more relying on trading for the stones, no more bartering. This stone works exactly as the real, natural one does, and I'll demonstrate.”

Dorian pauses, holds the stone in his hand, then shifts.

The wolf that emerges from him is massive, frighteningly big. I'm a tall woman, and I barely stand over his shoulder. Without thinking, I take a step back. Even though he's Dorian, and he's the alpha leader of this pack, my body acts automatically,

wanting me away from the potential danger.

My eyes snap to Sarina in the front row, her mouth hanging open, her eyes cast up to the stage in awe. Emin is laughing, his hand on her shoulder as Dorian shifts back, returning to his previous form.

He holds the stone up.

“Veva Marone, you have the gratitude of the Ambersky pack!” he calls, then turning to me, he says, voice lower, so only I can hear it, “ Your pack.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

The moment Veva steps off the stage, I feel her eyes on me, sense her want to get near me again, but someone stops her at the base of the stairs, catching her in a conversation.

Chuckling under my breath, I watch her try to disentangle from it multiple times, only for someone else to pull her aside.

They're probably all congratulating her on a job well done. When I get her home, I'm going to congratulate her, too. After this long, tiring week, the only thing I want to do is take her home. Wait for Sarina to fall asleep, for Veva to crawl into my bed.

I want to mark her.

Tonight.

Reaching my hand into my pocket, I brush my thumb over the velvety box I find there, thinking of the heirloom ring that's inside.

I imagine the way it's going to look on Veva's finger.

If I can, I'm going to find every way there is to claim another person.

My ring on her finger, my mating mark on her neck.

Fuck—we'll get matching tattoos if we have to.

"I'm going to do that someday," Sarina says, sliding into the seat next to me, scooting

a bit when her feet no longer hit the ground. I reach out to steady the paper plate she holds, which contains a slice of cake.

Sarina wears a simple purple dress with a matching hair ribbon, an outfit I know my sister probably drooled over. When they had their welcoming party, when the twins were named into the pack, one of the first things Kira says was, “I hope the next one is a girl.”

Mind catching back up to the current conversation, I smile and say, “You’re going to cast? Like your mom?”

Sarina slices off a thick bite of cake, stuffs it into her mouth, and says, grinning at me.

“I’m going to cast better than my mom. If you can make a little stone just that big, then imagine what else you could make!

” She lifts the hand not holding the fork, gesturing at the table. “A house? An elephant?”

I could bring up the fact that just because the Amanzite is small doesn’t mean it’s a simple thing. I could also bring up the ethical problems, and frankly, nightmarish complications that could arise if you attempted to cast a living thing into being like that.

But Sarina is silly, and thinking big thoughts. And I’m never going to discourage her from doing that.

I think of the conversation I’ve been having with Kira. Her explanations of what it’s like to grow up as an omega—what it was like for her. This strange idea that, because you might mate an alpha someday, that would determine your entire worth.

For Kira, being chubby as a kid, then plus-size as a teenager, made people assume she would never find a mate. Which was obviously untrue, and came with a whole host of its own issues.

But hearing about her experience has opened my eyes. Made me realize how I was complicit in reinforcing those ideas.

And I will never push Sarina to stop thinking her big thoughts. Maybe she grows up and finds a mate, or maybe she doesn't, but her dreams are allowed to exist outside of that. Her worth certainly does.

Dorian's grandfather already ended the tradition of fighting to the death for the alpha leader role in this pack. It could be the beginning of many changes, all pushing us to be stronger, better. To take advantage of everything each Ambersky shifter has to offer.

I realize Sarina is waiting for me to answer, and so I say, "A new canyon? A bunny?"

Sarina laughs, "I can make a bunny."

"Oh, really?"

She taps on the table, and a little scrap of paper folds into a tiny rabbit. I try to keep from looking astounded.

"Pretty cool," I say as she picks it up, hands it to me.

"Here, you keep it."

Something sticks in my throat, and I push it away, running one finger down the back of the rabbit. Then, I say, "What about extra clouds during the festival? Could you

make those?”

Her mouth drops open, and her eyes light up. “A new game for the festival! We could make a new game—something even more fun than the lassoing.”

“Yeah,” I laugh, oddly endeared by her competitive side. It’s like seeing myself as a kid reflected back at me. “We could, couldn’t we?”

“Do you have any ideas?” Sarina asks, abandoning her cake, pushing it forward so she can drum her fingers against the table. “Something to do with clouds—like cloud-shaping!”

With that, she stretches her hands, and I watch as the white frosting on her plate shifts, moving into the shape of a heart. I look up at her, eyes wide.

I’m not that familiar with casting, but that has to be impressive for her age.

“I’m not sure about it,” I laugh, trying to be nonchalant. “Not everyone can cast like that, Sarina.”

She nods, rests her chin on her hands. “Good point. Maybe we could do cloud fishing!”

I don’t point out that cloud fishing is pretty close to cloud lassoing.

Instead, I focus on the fact that she’s brought up fishing.

A few days ago, I got Veva and her out on the lake, in the boat.

Veva said it was boring—that there were much more efficient ways of catching fish, and she’d drawn one right up to her hand with her magic to prove it.

But Sarina had enjoyed the process of setting the bait, casting. Even though, after watching her with the icing, I'm starting to think she could have used magic to catch a fish, too.

"Did you like fishing?" I ask, hoping I sound as nonchalant as I'm going for. "Because we could do some real fishing again, too."

"Oh, yeah," Sarina says, nodding and leaning forward, so her coppery-blond hair catches in the light, some of it swinging out over her shoulder. Lowering her voice, like it's a secret, she says, "I'm going to ask Mom for a fishing pole when I turn ten."

That makes me laugh. "You can have a fishing pole for your next birthday, Sarina. You don't have to wait that long."

She returns to her cake, scoops up a dollop of the frosting with the tip of her finger, and shakes her head. "It's not that long. I turn ten in one month."

The first prickle of unease moves over my skin like a fever. Hot to the touch, but forces a chill through me. "...No," I laugh, feeling my face go weird. "No, Sarina, you're turning eight soon, right? Or, you're eight now, and turning nine."

"No," she laughs, shaking her head and giggling like I'm teasing her, or playing a prank.

Popping another dollop of frosting in her mouth, she says, "I'm nine right now."

And I know because this year I'm turning double-digits.

Mom says it's a big year, because then I'll have two numbers.

And she always does a little magic for me with the cake.

Last year, it was nine little lizards. This year, maybe it will be ten clouds. ”

My heart is in my throat, and I shake my head, forcing out a sound, anything so Sarina doesn't catch onto the fact that my world is imploding right now.

She's nine. Turning ten. Not eight, turning nine. Not turning eight.

She's turning ten. Which, coincidentally, lines up perfectly with the timeline of that night. The night that Veva came to me to tell me she thought she might be pregnant.

The entire thing flashes through my mind, like I'm watching the movie of what happened. Veva climbing through my window that night. Going home, packing her things, leaving the territory. Finding that camp and having our daughter, alone. Raising her there, caring for her. Doing it all without me.

Without anyone.

But then, returning. Coming back, realizing this pack could be a home. And still, keeping this information from me. Lying right to my face when I asked.

I get the first time, in the hospital. I even understand the lying before her heat. Before we had each other and held each other for nine straight days.

When I lift my head, I see Veva across the roof from me, her eyes locked on mine. There's something strange there in her expression. Ash stands in front of her, trying to have a conversation, and I watch as Veva excuses herself, starts making her way toward me.

“Oh, look,” Sarina says. “Mom is coming!”

I want to stand up out of this chair, confront Veva about this. But it's not the right

time, not the right place. This is private, and not something I want to talk about in front of half the pack. Not something I want to talk about in front of Sarina.

So I stick it out through the rest of the party, anger and disbelief churning, hot and sticky, in my stomach. I can't believe she lied to me.

I can't believe I fell for it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

Emin is silent for the entire ride home. He sits still in the driver's seat, looking straight ahead out the windshield, his lips pressed into a flat line. It mists gently outside, coating the windows and making the water run like quicksilver down the sides of the car.

It almost never rains here, the land dry and barren. When it does rain, it's usually brief. It will likely even be done by the time we pull in at home.

Sarina is asleep in the back seat, the excitement of the day having worn her out.

I chew on my lip, wanting to just come out and tell him right now. But he's already in a bad mood, and I'm not sure why. Then, I glance at Sarina in the back seat.

Maybe I'm ready to tell Emin, but I don't want to her to overhear it if she's not asleep. When we tell her, we need to plan for it. Come to her as a united front.

The last thing I'll ever do is make her feel like Emin is someone she can lose. I'll tell him first, make sure he wants to be a father to her, then move forward with telling Sarina the truth.

Up until this moment, I didn't think it was even a question—that Emin wants her.

Wants us. But when he pulls into the driveway, he barely looks at me as we climb out of the car.

I move to the back seat to gather Sarina in my arms and carry her inside, but Emin just brushes me off, reaching in and picking her up.

In her sleep, Sarina lets out a low noise and wraps her arms around Emin's neck.

It makes my chest tighten. How much she trusts him already.

Together, we move inside, getting her into her room. I tuck her into the bed, undressing her, and Emin returns when she's in her pajamas, handing me a warm cloth. I wipe off her face, and she curls into me, blinking sleepily.

I lean down and kiss her forehead. "I love you, baby. I'll come to bed soon, okay?"

She sighs, blinks again. "Okay."

When I step out into the hallway, Emin is already sitting in his room, roughly yanking off his dress shoes. Still not looking at me.

"Emin," I start, but when I step inside, shutting the door behind me, he whips his head up to glare at me, the look full of hurt and anger.

"You lied to me."

It's only four words, but it makes my stomach drop to the floor.

"Emin," I start, shaking my head and taking a step toward him. "I was going to tell you—"

"When?" he snaps, still keeping his voice below a whisper. Even angry with me, having just found this out, he's careful not to wake her, not to frighten her. "When were you going to tell me, Veva? When she turned eighteen?"

"Tonight."

“Well, that’s awfully convenient,” he laughs, then digs his palms into his eyes, shaking his head. “You were going to tell me tonight, but only after I found out, right?”

“Was it the scent?” I ask, biting my bottom lip. “Did the scent-blocking spell wear off?”

When I look at him, his mouth is open, and he stares at me incredulously. “You...of course. If I’d smelled her, I would have known she was mine.” He pauses, rubbing his hand over his chin. “Every time, I thought there was some reason I couldn’t smell her. But it was you.”

He drops his hands, shaking his head. “You were never going to tell me, were you?”

“What?” I shake my head, holding my hands up. “Yes, Emin, I told you—I was going to tell you, but it was just about finding the right time—”

“You were hiding her scent from me!”

“I hide her scent from everyone !” I snap, breathing hard now and working hard to keep my voice from raising too high.

“From the day she was born, I’ve been casting over her to keep her safe.

And thank the gods I did, because what would have happened if you’d been able to smell her when we first got here?

If you knew that she belonged to you? I would have died fighting you, Emin. ”

He shakes his head, jaw ticking. “No— no , Veva, we would have been able to work it out—”

“Up until very recently,” I say, my voice low, rough as I stare at the polished wood flooring under Emin’s feet, “I thought you knew that I was pregnant. I thought it’s what made you freak out.

That you knew I was carrying your child, and you wanted nothing to do with me.

So, when I saw you again, it’s not exactly like I was happy to see you, Emin. ”

He stalks over to me, bringing his face close to mine. “Are you happy to see me now, Veva? Are you really trying to argue that there has been no point between then and this moment that you could have told me the truth about this?”

Stepping back, he lets out an incredulous, shaky laugh, looking to the ceiling. “I defended you, Veva. When Dorian asked if I was sure Sarina wasn’t mine, I said that you would never lie to me like that. Do you see how that makes me look?”

Now, I laugh, shaking my head and pushing my hands up into my hair.

“You can pretend that you’ve changed, Emin, but that’s what it always comes down to—how you look .

You’re not thinking about the way I feel, or the way that Sarina will feel, or what it’s been like for the two of us to leave everything we’ve ever known—every scrap of independence we had—and move in with you.

A stranger to her, a painful fucking reminder of the past for me. ”

“That’s not fair,” Emin growls, his eyes dark when he lowers his head to look at me.

“ All I think about is you, Veva. The two of you have become my entire world.”

“And that’s a very recent development,” I snap. “Ten years ago, you were pushing

the two of us out your window.”

He lets out a frustrated groan. “Is this what it is? You’ll hold that against me for the rest of my life, even though you know I didn’t know? Even though if I had known, I never would have done it? Even though we were kids, and I went looking for you the very next day?”

I suck in a breath, some of my anger cooling for a second.

No—that’s not what I want. I don’t want to hold it against him.

But over the course of the argument, it’s like I’ve lost sight of the point.

Like I’ve just been hearing the last thing he’s said, responding to that, forgetting the bigger picture.

“Of course not,” I finally manage, hands shaking, gaze planted on the dresser behind him.

“But I’m also not going to act like it never happened.

I’ve been responsible for Sarina for ten years.

Just me, alone. And I can’t just turn off the instinct to protect her from everyone—and that includes you.

You’re just going to have to be patient with me, Emin. ”

“I am her father .”

I whip my head up so fast I nearly pull the muscle, meeting his eyes, my entire body

shaking with fury.

“ Don’t. Don’t you dare, Emin, because up until you saw us in that market, the only thing you were was a sperm donor.

I was her mother and father. You can become that now, become a father to her, but you have no claim over her. ”

My chest heaves with fear and rage. I know I should push them aside, think critically about this—we want to stay in Ambersky, after all. It’s not like Emin laying claim to Sarina will change all our plans.

But the mere idea that this man might control me, might get to say when I come and go, and if I get to take my daughter with me—it terrifies me down to every cell in my body.

“You don’t trust me,” Emin says, the words so plain and outright that they feel like a slap to my face. When I meet his gaze again, there’s still anger there, but hurt, as well. So much hurt.

“I—” I try to think of some way to respond, to tell him that I don’t trust anyone, or that I’m working on it, or that I can see myself trusting him in the future, but I’m cut off by a loud pop from the hallway, and a flash that shines bright through the cracks of the door, underneath it and into Emin’s bedroom like a searchlight.

“What in the hells was that?” Emin asks, whipping around and grabbing the doorknob.

My heart thunders in my chest, mouth turning acrid as we move together in the direction of Sarina’s room.

“That,” I gasp, nearly pushing him over in my attempt to get to her, “was the warning light of Sarina’s protection spell.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

The second the door to the guest room swings open, I know that Sarina is gone.

Beside me, Veva sucks in a strangled, painful gasp, stepping into the room and falling onto the bed. She rips the covers to the side, breathing hard, pulling the duvet clean off onto the floor, like Sarina might be tangled up in the blankets.

Straight away, I glance at the window—still locked. The room shifts with the wind outside, and glows in the light of a charge plugged in on the other side of the bed. There's nothing to indicate that Sarina didn't leave of her own volition.

“Sarina!” Veva calls her daughter's name like she's in trouble, dropping down to look under the bed, then opening the closet door, her shoulders rising and falling steeply as she gasps for air as each hiding spot comes up empty.

The next time she calls her daughter's name, it comes out a sob, “ Sarina !”

Despite everything, I reach out, putting a steadying hand on Veva's shoulder, something in my chest unlocking when she leans against it, accepting my comfort.

“There's no sign that anyone got in,” I say. “Let's check around the rest of the house—maybe she's playing hide and seek.”

Veva is already walking out the door, listing her objections even as we work through the rooms. “She knows better to do that, and the protection spell wouldn't have gone off if she left on purpose. I put it together specifically...”

We make it to the living room, and I start to realize Sarina is not in this house.

While Veva checks behind the couch, I pull my phone out, calling Dorian.

It's late, and he and Kira are likely already in bed after the celebration tonight, but he picks up on the first ring, sounding a bit out of breath.

"Emin?"

"Dorian, Sarina is gone."

Veva goes to the stairs, running back up to the guest room, like Sarina might have come back. I follow her, looking more closely for clues about where she's gone.

On the other end of the phone, there's rustling, my sister's tired voice, the sound of Dorian getting out of bed quickly. "What do you mean? The Grayhides? Retaliation for the deaths at the motel?"

I circle the room, look out the window, breathe in deeply. There is no smell in here. None at all—which Veva made sure of. Another ripple of frustration rises inside me, reminding me of her scent-blocking. That I'm blind to Sarina, and without a scent, the girl is going to be impossible to track.

It's a good reason why shifter children don't normally run away, or sneak out. It's ridiculously easy for parents to find them, track them down. Your nose is especially attuned to that of your offspring—even more than it is to other wolves.

"I'm not sure," I finally say, when I realize Dorian is still waiting on the other end of the line.

Veva pushes out of the room, taking the stairs two at a time, still calling for her daughter. She looks in every closet, under every piece of furniture, telling her that she'd better come out and that it is not funny to hide .

“You’re not sure?” There’s a jingling sound, and I realize Dorian has grabbed his keys. The man moves quickly in a crisis, that’s for sure.

“Veva has been casting scent-blocking spells on Sarina, I don’t know if that would have covered any Grayhide scents. I couldn’t smell a thing in her room, so I’m not sure—”

“They wouldn’t.”

I stop, realizing Veva has turned around and is looking at me. Her entire body shakes as she roughly yanks on a jacket. When I look outside, I realize it’s not just drizzling anymore—the rain is coming down in droves.

It almost never rains here, and certainly not like this.

“Veva—”

“It wouldn’t cover the smell of other shifters,” Veva says, shaking her head. “You can smell me, right?”

I stop, realizing yes, I can smell her, and she goes on, “The spell specifically only covers Sarina. If there was someone else in that room with her, we would know. The scent would still be there.”

“Is it possible that it messed up? Why would—”

“Emin,” Veva snaps, stepping toward me, her eyes murderous. “She must have heard the two of us arguing. She must have run away in this ,” Veva swings her arm out, indicating the weather outside. In the distance, a streak of lightning cleaves the sky, and I’m rendered breathless for a moment.

“I’m coming,” Dorian says. “I’ll have to focus on driving to get into town, but—call the guys. As many of them as you can. We’ll assemble a task force and start looking for her.”

Veva slams out the front door, the sound of my calling after her swallowed by the wind.

Everything has gone wrong tonight. My brain itches at me to talk to her, to right this, for us just to be able to admit that we’ve both hurt each other and move on, but the most important thing is to find Sarina.

Once we find Sarina, we can work through everything else.

Together, Veva and I move along the property line. I make call after call.

“Hello?”

When Aidan answers, he sounds like I’ve pulled him from a centuries-long sleep.

“Sarina is missing,” I start without preamble, wanting to be as efficient as possible. “We need guys to look—”

“You got anyone on the border?” Aidan asks.

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll go south, to the border.”

“Okay.”

Together, as we make our way down the street—Veva hollering for her daughter

loudly and without shame—the neighborhood starts to wake up.

People stand on their porches, peering out into the night, realizing it's Veva Marone, walking through the town in the middle of the night, searching for her daughter.

I stand tall beside her. No. Searching for our daughter.

Raising a hand to the onlookers, I signal to them that everything is okay. I expect them to go back inside their homes, get out of the rain, but we're surprised when they only disappear briefly before re-emerging, coming to walk out our sides.

"Hey," a man says, and I turn to see Brock, the general store owner, and his wife, Alecia. "What's going on?"

"Sarina is missing," Veva shouts, turning to him only for a moment, before facing the street again, cupping her hands around her mouth and calling into the rain, "Sarina!"

"Oh no," Alecia says, shaking her head and pulling out her phone. "I'll call my pickleball club. They'll come out and help."

"Let me get the small business association on the line," Brock says, clapping his hand down on my shoulder. "We'll fill the streets with people looking until we find your little girl."

My throat swells, and I nod.

Within twenty minutes, the entire town is flooded with people looking. Every park bounces with flashlights, and shifters from the pack turn up in their rain coats, umbrellas held aloft, all of them calling out Sarina's name again and again.

After an hour of searching, Beth appears, and Veva practically runs to her.

“Can you find her?” Veva asks, breathless.

“I can do my best,” Beth says. “Do you have something that belongs to her? Something I can touch.”

Veva starts to panic, sucking in a breath, but I reach into my pocket—I’m still wearing the dress pants from earlier—and pull out the little folded bunny she made for me.

“Will this work? She made it for me earlier.” I shield it from the rain, holding it up for Beth to see. Veva’s eyes skip from the bunny and back to me, and Beth nods, a strange look on her face as she takes it, cupping it in her hand like a precious thing.

“No promises,” Beth says, before meeting my gaze. “But let’s see what we can do with this little thing.”

“Veva!” Kira comes running down the street, looking like she’s just barely managed to throw something on, her hair tied up. When she reaches Veva, my sister wraps her into a hug. I expect Veva to push her away, but, to my surprise, she melts into it.

Kira hugs her for a long moment, then pulls back, holding her at arms-length.

“We’ll find her, love.” Kira says, sounding for all the world like that’s a promise she can make. “We’ll work together, and we’ll find her.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

My fear is all-consuming, and my body feels like it's going to fly apart at the seams, my organs combusting from the nerves coursing through me.

For the past ten years, the only thing I've focused on is keeping Sarina safe. Building her future. Sleeping with one eye open.

And now, I've looked away from her—thought about myself—for just a minute, and she's gone. My vision feels blurred with TV static, my heart beating so fast it's blurred into just one long sound, convulsions.

Beth is still holding the little paper rabbit, and after a brief moment of silence, she looks up at us, eyes darting between Emin and me.

“Where was Sarina, before she disappeared?”

“Back at the house,” Emin says, “in the guest bedroom.”

“Let's go.” Beth is already walking up the street, past the other people shining their lights through the rain and calling Sarina's name. “I need to see it.”

Dorian appears, breathing hard, his hand immediately going to Kira's back.

Everyone is soaked, and the rain continues to come down hard, the occasional clap of thunder drowning out our voices, our words.

Logically, I know that I should thank him for calling everyone out. I should thank everyone in the street, helping me to look for my daughter. But I can't think about

anything except the next step forward, the next thing that might get her back into my arms.

Together, Dorian, Kira, Beth, and I walk back to the house. When we push inside, it feels completely different. The rain is muted against the roof, sounding hollow, and all the lights are off. Were they off when we left, or has the power gone out in town?

Not bothering to remove our dripping clothing or muddy shoes, we move up the stairs and into the hallway. When Beth steps into the guest room, she immediately moves to the bed, touching the duvet on the floor, then the mattress. The last place I saw Sarina before she disappeared.

Besides the sound of water dripping and thunder crashing distantly beyond the window, we're quiet, all watching as Beth goes quiet. When she speaks, her voice is low, careful, and she keeps her eyes shut.

"I figured as much," she says, opening her eyes and looking to me. "The good news is that nobody has taken Sarina."

Neither Emin nor I relax—without Sarina here in front of me, that feels like nothing. Especially with the way the storm rages on outside. Just picturing her out there, alone, is too much.

"Where is she?" I ask, eyes darting to the window when a streak of lightning divides the sky.

"I can't say." Beth shakes her head, then stands, still clutching the edge of the duvet in one hand. "But there's a lot of energy left here. Just before she left, she was feeling a lot. I imagine that surge of emotion pushed her to develop a new power unexpectedly."

“A new power?” My heart is in my throat.

“Yes.” Beth sucks in a breath. “I told you that she had a lot of power inside her—she will likely continue manifesting different outlets for that power. This one, I’m guessing, is replanting.”

When we’re quiet, Beth amends, “Teleporting. She has, through the sheer will of her mind, moved her body through space. It can be very dangerous, but I sense that she’s still alive, wherever she is. Because she is untrained, she could reappear anywhere.”

All the blood in my body rushes to my head when I realize what Beth is saying. Replanting is dangerous, because when Sarina comes back, she might appear in a wall, or too high in the sky. It could kill her.

“What if we just track her?” Dorian asks. “Instead of waiting for her to come back, we follow her scent like we would for any runaway kid.”

I’m already shaking my head. “I-I’ve been blocking her true scent since before we came here.”

“Can you take the scent-blocking off her from here?” Emin asks, turning to me, nothing but concern shining in his eyes now. I blink in surprise—he’s not blaming me for doing it. There’s no confrontation in his expression, and he reaches out, placing his hand on my arm.

A sob worms its way out of my throat. “No. It’s too far. Even if I knew where she was, it would be too difficult. The magic just doesn’t reach that far.”

He clenches his jaw, turns to Beth, and asks, “So, what do we do? How do we keep Sarina safe right now?”

Beth worries her lip, looks around the room, runs a hand through her gray hair.

Finally, she says, “We can prepare some areas for her to reappear. Collect her favorite things and favorite people into an area. In some ways, we are already doing that, being in this room where she left. It’s likely that will be the easiest place for her to return to. ”

“Do you mind if I try?” Kira asks, stepping forward, her eyes meeting mine. “See if I can trigger a premonition? Or if I can hear her?”

I nod, and Kira moves forward, sitting on the bed, her wet clothes seeping into the sheets. We all watch her, and I feel something rise up in me, something pressing at the back of my mind.

Shifting, I move into the hallway to try and think, to figure out what it is that I’m missing.

“Veva.” It’s Emin, stepping into the hallway with me until his scent—damp from the rain—fills the hallway, making my head go a bit fuzzy.

Steeling his gaze, he says, “Listen. I need to say this now—I’m still hurt that you didn’t tell me, but I—I’m going to put it behind me.

I understand why you did it. To protect her.

And with this...protecting her, protecting you—those are the most important things to me.

I want you, Veva. I want you in my life, and I want you to stay.

I want to know that we can work through anything life throws at us, from now on. ”

My breath catches in my throat when he steps forward and takes my hands in his, squeezing. When I meet his gaze, I realize I can't do this right now—my mind is too scrambled to have this conversation.

I glance away from him, sucking in a breath, and that's when my eyes land on Kira again, still sitting on the bed, willing herself to have a premonition about my daughter.

A premonition.

The realization is like ice water dousing me.

My memory speeds through everything that's happened to us, everything I've learned, and takes me back to that first day going to the group of psychics.

It takes me back to Beth saying, "Clairsentients don't often have explicit premonitions.

If anything, truth comes to you in your dreams."

Understanding rocks through me with a certainty.

"I know where she is."

Emin drops my hands, and I wish I could say something to him, but my entire focus is on Sarina. Deep down, I know that he'll understand. Kira's eyes fly open. "You know where she is?"

I'm already turning, running into the hallway, hand moving to the stone around my neck. I haven't shifted in a long time, but I need to now. It's the only way I'm going to move fast enough to get to my daughter.

Bursting through the back door, I shift mid-air, leaving the ground on my feet and returning to it with my paws.

Instantly, Dorian and Emin are on either side of me, Dorian's wolf blocking out the meager lights from the storm sirens, flashing around us, and Emin sending to me, Where are we going ?

The border , I send, already gasping. It's been too long since the last time I ran in this form. It feels freeing, lighting up a part of myself that I've kept tucked away, but it's also like a skill I haven't used in far too long.

The guys are faster than me, anyway.

Go , I send. Straight through the canyon and to the southern border. That's where she is.

Without another word, they take off, running faster than I could even in my physical prime. I can only hope that they make it in time.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

The canyon is an entirely different beast in the rain. My paws slide out from under me, slick with mud, and the water funnels down into the crevice. The rain pounds into my eyes, instantly soaking my fur.

I can't remember the last time it rained like this. Likely, it was when there was still a river cutting through this rock, the influx of rain helping it to cut through rock and earth and creating the canyon we're racing through.

Veva is somewhere behind us. My mind flashes with the look on her face in that hallway. Not closed off, but distracted. No matter what happens with Sarina, I needed her to know.

Normally, Dorian is faster than I, but the fear of losing Sarina courses through me, pushing me faster, my paws hitting the ground with a rhythm that sends an itch through my bones.

When we emerge from the canyon, I skid around the corner, blinking fast to keep the rain from my eyes. The entire area is drowning in the scent of the Grayhides, the smell of it as strong as if it were in the rain itself, washing down over the muddy ground.

There's a brief break in the rain, and I see her.

A small, copper-colored wolf, her fur glinting through the rain. It's Sarina. Even through the rain, and even with the fact that she's shifted, I know it's her.

Because, for the first time since seeing her in the market, I catch her scent.

It nearly knocks me over, the realization that Sarina's scent truly is a mixture of mine and Veva's. Before, when Sarina said she was turning ten, I'd known. I'd known that Veva was lying to me about the truth.

But knowing then is not like knowing now. This knowing, of smelling my scent on that girl, knowing I'm half of the fabric of her—it settles into me. My family. My daughter.

And she is in the hands of another man.

Someone crouches, holding her body over his knees, cradling her, and fury rises up in the back of my throat, propelling me forward.

My daughter .

I'm flying toward her, ready to rip the man to pieces, until I see another shifter coming in from the left. And another from the right. The shifter with Sarina in his lap grabs her and stands, readying himself to fight.

Aidan , Dorian sends, flying up beside me, heading for the Grayhide on the right. You take left!

There's no time to think, so I do what he says. I fly to the left, knocking into the shifter with all my force. His head slams against the rock, and he shifts back to man.

I make quick work of him, the warm, coppery taste of his blood like bile in my mouth when I clamp my teeth around his jaw and rip, pulling his throat clear from his body. I drop the pile of loose flesh to the rock with a smack and turn to my daughter again.

On the other side of Aidan and Sarina, Dorian is pinning the other wolf to the ground. He also gets his maw on the wolf's neck, but he whips, hard, until there's a faint

crack and the wolf drops, spine splintered, lifeless on the ground.

Aidan is soaked, covered in blood, but I can smell that it's his own, and not Sarina's. I shift, fall to my knees beside him, and he hands Sarina over to me. I clutch her to my chest, the tension in my body unfurling when I realize she's okay. Her heart beats steadily, her body warm against mine.

"Sarina !" the scream that rips from Veva's throat as she runs toward us is so full of emotion it mangles our daughter's name, and she falls to her knees, hitting the ground so hard it makes me wince.

Veva has shifted back, and I move forward toward her, so we can hold Sarina between us.

"She's alive," I say, voice quiet, and I realize the rain is letting up, moving to a light drizzle. "She's okay, Veva."

"Oh, gods ," Veva gasps, clutching the little wolf to her chest. She buries her face in the wet copper fur and cries for a moment, and I realize it's the first time I've ever seen Veva cry like this.

Dorian is still in his wolf form, and he crouches down in front of us, his eyes meeting mine. Blue and serious, I know what he's saying.

"Come on," I say, lifting Sarina, watching as Veva's hands still grasp for her. "Let Dorian take her back, she'll get to the healers sooner that way."

Together, we work to secure Sarina to Dorian's back, then he's off, making his way back toward the town. Even with Sarina on his back, he can move faster than us.

Veva and I are about to shift back when Aidan makes a small noise, and I turn to him,

catching the wound on his side.

“Oh, shit,” I hiss, and Veva turns, her mouth dropping open when she sees the large, basketball-sized chunk of flesh that’s missing from Aidan’s side, the puncture points of teeth clear as day with the way he’s lifted his arm.

He winces, drops his arm, shaking his head. “It’s...nothing.”

“You can’t shift back, can you?” I ask, when Aidan starts limping in the general direction of the town.

“It’s fine,” he grinds out. “I’ve been wanting a nice walk.”

“No way,” Veva reaches out, grabs my arm, gestures to him. We’re both thinking the same thing—Aidan might not even make it back to town, with how much he’s bleeding.

I catch Aidan by his healthy arm and keep him from walking away, and when he turns to me, I see just how pale his face is.

“Get him on the ground,” Veva says, rubbing her hands together. We’re still in the mud, but Aidan lowers to the ground with my help, not complaining about the suck of the mud against his back.

“I’m not a healer,” Veva says, shaking her head as she crouches down. “But I think I can patch this up...enough.”

“You don’t have to—”

Veva shakes her head, already raising her hands, and I feel the hum of magic in the air around us.

“Aidan,” she chokes, briefly lifting her eyes to the horizon. “You saved our daughter. I’m saving you . Got it?”

He laughs, then winces, even more color draining from his face.

“Trust me,” I joke, “it’s not worth it to go up against her.”

“Okay,” Aidan laugh-sighs, letting his eyes drift to the sky. He smiles slightly, looking like he might fall asleep. “I won’t.”

“He’s going to be just fine,” the healer says, wiping her hands with a cloth as I walk into the room. “Nasty bite, but your mending saved him. Even if it wasn’t pretty.”

“Oh, thank the gods,” Veva sighs, dropping her head into her hands. She sitting at Sarina’s bedside, watching our daughter sleep.

Sarina shifted back when the healers got her, going through the excruciating pain of her first shift after the whole ordeal. According to the healers, she’s going to be just fine. One of them said she’ll have a pretty interesting story to tell.

When the healer leaves, I take a seat on the other side of Sarina’s bed, staring at her. At once, I’m hit with the grief of the years I’ve missed. Seeing her as a chubby toddler, watching her eat solid foods. Teaching her to read, seeing her climb and run.

“I’m sorry, Emin,” Veva says, surprising me by being the first to speak. When I meet her gaze, she’s staring at me intently. “I should have responded to you earlier, I was just so...”

I wave a hand, “It’s okay. It was a lot. It was just important to me that you knew.”

Veva nods, reaching out and taking one of Sarina's hands in hers. She sucks in a breath, then meets my eyes.

"And you...still mean it?"

"Veva," I let out a little laugh, something between a breath and a sigh. "I will always mean it."

"You will?"

Holding her gaze, I reach into my pocket, finding the velvet box, which is slightly matted from all the rain. I pull it out, open it, and set it on the bedspread facing her.

She stares at it for a long moment, then lifts her head, finding my eyes.

"Is that...?"

"Yes." I swallow, glance at the ring. "I've been wanting to ask you since the moment I first saw you at that market, Veva. Even if Sarina...even if she wasn't mine, I'd want her, because she's a part of you. And I want every part of you."

A tear slips down her face, and she reaches across the bed, taking my hand in hers, so she's holding Sarina in one palm and me in the other.

"I want that, too," Veva says. "Every part of you. I want us to stay, to be a family together. I never thought I would say it, but...Ambersky is my home. And I love being here with you."

"Okay, then." My words are soft, and I glance at the ring again. "Veva Marone, will you marry me?"

She lets out a little choked sound, burying her face in her shoulder for a moment. Then she whirls around, looking at her other hand. I see Sarina squeeze it in a pattern—one-two, one-two.

“ Sarina ,” Veva gasps, turning and cupping Sarina’s face in her hands. “Oh, hey baby. Do you want some water—?”

“ Mom ,” Sarina laughs, looking over at me with an eyeroll that says can you believe this woman ? “I want you to say yes to Emin’s question.”

I bite my tongue, bite back the impulse to ask her to call me something else. Not Emin—Dad. But I know that will come later.

“Oh,” Veva laughs, her hands shaking as she runs them down her shirt. “Okay. I mean—of course it’s a yes. It’s a yes , Emin.”

Smiling, I take the ring, lift her hand, and slide the ring onto one shaking finger. Time pauses, and we stay like that for a moment, our hands together, our gazes locked.

“Okay,” Sarina rasps. “Great job. Now, actually, I do want some water.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

It's dark, and I am absolutely drowning in the scent of Emin Argent.

Usually, this is a nightmare. But not this time. This time, his scent is more comforting to me than ever. I know how this is going to go, and it's not the way it did all those years ago. I feel my intuition inside me, that guiding force that I'm finally able to give a name.

I turn my head side to side, taking in the brush of the fabric against my face, the smooth scrape of the cotton. I close my eyes, open them, let myself exist in the moment. Remember what it was like to be the teenager hiding in this closet. Think about just how far I've come since that moment.

There's no fear. Only a faint gratitude for everything I've gone through, and how strong it has made me.

Only a second later, the door opens, letting in the low light of the moon through the window. Emin stands in front of me—no longer a teenager, but his full, adult self.

So handsome, that red-gold hair loose and wavy on his head. He smiles at me, and even in the dark I can make out the glint of his eyes, that honey golden color I could pick out of a line-up. Sarina got so much from him—so much strawberry and light, glittering rose gold.

Holding one hand, he reaches out to me. I grasp his hand, and he pulls me to my feet.

“Come on,” he whispers, tugging me up and into him, so our chests press together. Holding my gaze, he says, “I'm not hiding you, Veva. Not any more.”

His father is in the doorway, and he smiles at me. Kellen Argent, making small talk with me, thanking me for coming over. Kira and I laugh together, and for a moment, I feel the pang of what it could have been like—Kira and I being there for one another in high school.

Instead we went through everything alone.

But it's okay, because I have Sarina, and Kira has her twins.

And, given the choice to go back and change, I'm sure neither of us would have done a thing differently.

I love Sarina for the strong, independent girl she is, and I love that I know I'm capable of taking care of her and myself, if I ever need to.

Dream Emin glances at me, raising an eyebrow, clearly reading my thoughts and saying, You will never need to again, Veva.

We go to the dining room, eat dinner with his sister and his dad. The food is fantastic, my mind bringing Kira's current cooking talents into this dream. After, we walk through the door together, hand in hand.

Like always, in this dream, it's a sweet summer night, the fresh scent of the lilacs floating in the air around us as we walk. We move through town, in and out of street lights, watching as the buildings fall away and the landscape opens up for us.

The mesas rise in the distance, towering giants bathed in the light of the moon.

Once we're far enough out of town, Emin grabs my hand, spins me around, and presses me against the small trunk of a tree. His lips crash into mine, his hands rising up to my hips, his breath hot and fast.

“I love you,” he whispers, dragging his nose up the line of my jaw.

I pull back, smile at him, twine our fingers together. “I know.”

“Veva,” his voice comes again, but this time, it comes from above, dissolving the night around me and delivering me to our bed. I smile, feeling Emin curled all around me, his hand gripping at my waist tightly.

“Emin,” I murmur back, and he scoots in closer. I can feel him hard against me, the way he pulls my hips back into his, the way he breathes at the nape of my neck.

Sarina has been home for two days. The first night, we all slept together in the living room, but she announced tonight that she couldn’t deal with Emin’s snoring, and wanted to sleep in the guest room. Alone.

“Are you dreaming about me?” he asks, his voice low, his breath fanning out over the back of my neck. “You’re clearly dreaming about someone—it had better be me.”

“I’m always dreaming about you.”

He lets out a low sigh and buries his face in my neck, breathing in my scent. I can feel him now, growing harder and harder against me as I move my hips, grinding back into him.

Words and thoughts fall away as we move together, him pulling at my pajama shorts and panties, me arching my back into him, grabbing a fistful of his hair and drawing him in closer. He grabs my thigh, lifting my leg and propping it up on his hip, then slides the length of his cock against me.

I’m wet for him, and he glides through my folds, the head of his cock brushing against my clit. When I let out a low sound, he reaches around, covering my mouth

with his hand.

I know that it's just to muffle me, to keep from waking Sarina across the hall, but it sends a shock of lust through me, a surprise reaction to the move. From anyone else, I'd recoil. But I trust Emin with my life. I trust him with my body, with my family, with my future.

And with his hand over my mouth, I feel the dangerous thrill of walking the line with someone you love.

I arch into him, moaning again and biting my teeth gently into the soft part of his palm, and he growls in response, his other hand flying to my hip, gripping it and pulling it back sharply so my ass hits his lap.

Then, sliding his hand down so it's wrapped around my throat ever so lightly, he hitches, finds my entrance, and slides inside me.

I take him so much easier than the first time—that first time of having him again, adjusting to that length. Now, he's in after two thrusts, filling me completely, the pressure of it so intense and satisfying that I feel it in my chest, behind my throat, on the backs of my eyelids.

Emin and me, together. His body against mine. Skin on skin.

“Fuck, Veva,” he hisses through his teeth, drawing out and pushing into me again. I keep one hand wound into the curls at the back of his head, but slide the other down my body, touching myself in time to his thrusts, the pleasure of it almost too much.

He growls when he realizes what I'm doing, his pace increasing, his cock starting to grow inside me. I feel the knot forming, except this time—maybe due to the angle, or our position—it hits my g-spot.

When I cry out, he brings his hand back to my mouth, brushing my hair away from my face gently and covering my lips, holding me as my body writhes against him.

His grunts are soft and hot against my ear, and I give into the pleasure, my fingers going still as the g-spot orgasm rocks through my body.

There's nothing but the sound of us breathing and moving, then, when he lowers his hand to my throat again, I pull my hair to the side with shaking fingers, body still in the aftershocks of my orgasm, and tip my head to the side.

“Veva?”

“Do it,” I rasp, wanting nothing more than to feel this man's mark on my body. To know that I am, officially, his. That's he's mine, that our scents are coming together. We'll belong to one another, a family.

“Are you sure?”

“Emin.” I let out a noise that's caught somewhere between a laugh and a sob, the cool air on my neck sending shivers down my back that compound with the shaking of my body. “Do it. Now.”

I don't have to tell him twice—he lowers his head, sinking his teeth into my skin.

At first, it hurts—stinging like the first time I had him inside me, that gentle tearing, too much stretching at once—but then, it eases into a low, warm pressure, like pressing a hot rag against your skin and relaxing into it.

Emin gives his final thrust as I come down from the high, my body loose, wrung-out, completely spent. It's the first time since coming together again that I've only had a single orgasm, but that orgasm is still ricocheting through my body, bolstered by the

pleasure of the marking bite.

“Come here,” Emin commands, taking me by my hips and pulling me so I’m straddling him.

Whimpering, I rock my hips against his, still feeling the after-effects of the orgasm inside me, like it’s afraid to let me go.

Tipping his head back, Emin puts a hand on the back of my neck and brings me down. “Mark me, Veva.”

And so I do, biting into his neck, savoring the feeling, feeling the way our bodies are already changing. My skin lights with new sensation, each nerve ending more receptive to him, and him alone.

When it’s finished, Emin stands from the bed, picks me up, and carries me into the bathroom. He turns on the water, steps into the shower still with me wrapped around him.

He soaps us, rinses us, then when we step out, he cleans my wound. I tend to his, feeling the weight of the tradition. Mark one another, then care for the wounds.

Once we’re scrubbed and tended to, Emin picks me back up again—apparently believing I can’t walk for myself—and carries me to the bed.

The hands that were rough and needy just an hour ago are gentle, soothing. He tucks me under the blankets, situates his body beside mine, pulls me onto his chest and holds me there.

“I love you,” I murmur, my lips against his bare chest.

He squeezes me. “I love you, too, Veva.”

I start to drift off, but I can tell that he’s still awake.

“Emin?” I ask, clearing my throat, trying to keep my eyes open. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he says, leaning over and pressing a kiss to my forehead.

A moment later, maybe when he thinks I’ve fallen asleep, he whispers, “I never thought I would be this content.”

Sleep washes over me, but not before I smile into his chest, realizing that after everything, we made it through to the happy ending.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:01 pm

“This way!” Aidan calls, directing a group of shifters to the right, his arm out. “If you’d like to camp, come this way!”

Beside me, Veva is green with nerves, shifting her weight back and forth again and again. She looks lovely today, wearing a pair of long gray overalls, her hair pushed back from her face.

It’s a bright spring day, the scent of lilacs thick in the air. It’s crisp, but not cold, and the flower garden across the street blooms with tulips in planter boxes, shades ranging from ruby red to a deep, cobalt blue.

I’ve just come from a council meeting, in which we ultimately decided that we would use Oren Blacklock to help kill his father—all while keeping a very close eye on him. We’ve had several casters—including Veva—test him and come out with the results that he was telling the truth.

“Hey.” I reach over now, pulling my mate into my side. I breathe in her scent and relish the way she melts into me, letting me comfort her. “Everything is going to work out just fine, okay, love?”

Sarina goes traipsing by, holding a single lamp in her hand, distracting Veva from me.

Today, she’s wearing a little romper from Kira. It’s a soft purple, with a matching hair ribbon. Sarina’s eyes shine brightly, and I think of her pride this morning when she caught her first rabbit, during our first father-daughter hunt.

“Sarina,” Veva says, forgetting my comfort and stepping forward, stopping our daughter in her tracks. “I thought you were going to help Willow move her things?”

“I am!” Sarina insists, holding up the single lamp as her response. “See!”

Dorian has granted all the inhabitants of the Grayhide pack a spot among Ambersky shifters, should they want it. Some of them prefer to camp, so we’ve allotted a space for them just outside of town, while others are overjoyed at the idea of getting their own townhouse or apartment.

“I think you can carry more than a lamp,” Veva frowns, but Willow comes by, holding a single pillow, grinning at us.

“Don’t you worry,” Willow says, “we’re the brains, not the brawns.”

A moment later, a couch comes hovering along the sidewalk, carried by nobody, and Willow and Sarina break out into laughter.

Veva sighs, shaking her head, “I told her to be careful with her magic.”

“Maybe this is her being careful,” I say, trying not to show that I’m impressed. Veva has told me, on multiple occasions, that I shouldn’t look impressed when Sarina messes around with magic, because it only encourages her more.

It’s been six months since her disappearing act, and she hasn’t been able to replant again, despite Beth and Claire working with her and trying to harness the ability. They say that, with time, and as she grows, it will come to her more naturally.

Winter came and went, and after all these months, Veva was able to convince the people and shifters in the encampment to come to Ambersky.

She assured them they would be treated better, and Dorian was convinced by the list

of skills—including casting, carpentry, welding, and defense—that the various camp members boasted.

For the winter holidays, I gifted Sarina a ring from my family, one that belonged to my great-aunt. Veva synthesized Amanzite for her to set in the ring, and we watched as Sarina imbued it herself, looking up at her mother for approval.

Veva was proud, but there's always a lingering sense of worry any time Sarina uses her magic.

I know Veva worries about the strength of Sarina's power, of her hurting herself by using too much at once. She should only be practicing in a safe room, under the supervision of experienced casters, according to her mother.

This time, Veva gives in, realizing it's a good idea to move with magic.

Day turns into night as we help move the shifters in, finding their assigned apartments and spaces, helping them find what they need, giving them little tours of town.

I'm just returning with Dorian when we find a huge man named Herold setting up a grill outside his apartment building. To the left, Aidan and another shifter are assembling a massive white screen.

"It's Friday," Herold says, grinning at us as he twists the knob and turns the grill to high. "Movie night. I'll grill up some food, pop up some popcorn, and we'll hunker down to watch something good."

Sarina comes dancing over, her hands in the air. "Just wait, Dad," she says, twirling. "Herold makes the best grill chili you've ever had. Mom loves it. Too bad we let that rabbit go, you could have added it in!"

“Nah,” Herold says, “rabbit ain’t in the recipe, kid.”

To my left, Willow laughs and says something, but I’m still buzzing from Sarina’s casual Dad . I swear, I will never get used to hearing it.

After the incident, Veva and I sat her down and had a conversation with her about everything.

She had overheard us that night, but just enough to know we were fighting.

When we explained that I’m her dad, she was surprised, then, oddly, embarrassed.

We went from having an easy rapport to her being somewhat shy around me.

It took about a month, then, one morning, she just walked into the kitchen and said, “Can we have pancakes today, Dad?”

I damn near fell over onto the floor. Veva had sidled up beside me, wrapping her arm around mine and squeezing hard to offer me support. As casually as I could, I answered, “Of course.”

Now, Veva comes walking up, an expression of exhaustion and satisfaction on her face. We’ve been preparing for this—move-in day—for a long time, and she’s put everything onto her plate.

“What are we talking about over here?” Veva asks, grinning, but the grin falls from her face when she looks over and sees Herold stirring a pot on the grill. Frowning, she takes a step back, covering her mouth and nose with her hand.

“Mom?” Sarina asks, but Veva ignores her, turning around and promptly vomiting into a trash can a few steps away.

“Shit.” I move to her, hold her hair, rub her back, until she finally stops and lifts her head, gasping for air. “I thought you loved the chili.”

“I do, normally,” she moans, wiping the back of her hand over her mouth. A second later, she conjures a small paper cup of mouthwash, swishes it, spits it into the trash can, too. “I just don’t know what’s going on with me today. I’ve been feeling so queasy, but the smell of the chili...”

Willow sucks in a breath, and we all turn to look at her. Her eyes are wide and focused on Veva, whose brow wrinkles.

“What?” she asks, rubbing her forearm with her hand.

“It’s just...” Willow pauses, her eyes jumping from mine, to Veva’s, to Sarina’s. “I remember the last time the smell of Herold’s chili made you queasy.”

Willow waggles her eyebrows, but I’m still lost. I turn to Veva just as Herold says, his voice booming, “Oh, that’s right, Veva! When you were carrying that one.”

He points at Sarina, and I finally realize what they’re saying.

I turn to look at Veva, and she turns to look at me. Suddenly, a lot of things click into place, making a whole lot of sense.

Her nausea, the aches and pains she’s had the last few nights. Yesterday, just before we were falling asleep, she told me she had a gut-feeling that everything was about to change, like a new chapter of our lives was about to begin.

Before she can say anything else, I step forward, scooping her into my arms and spinning her, holding her tight.

A baby. My baby.

“Woah,” she laughs, pushing against me until I set her down. She’s trying to play it cool, but I can see the excitement behind her eyes. “Slow down,” she laughs, “I’ll need to make sure, I haven’t even—”

“Maybe you are, maybe you aren’t,” I say, unable to keep the grin from my face. “All I know is I can’t wait to start this next chapter with you, Veva.”

Her face softens, and she steps into me. I tip her head up, kiss her, savor the feeling of having my mate in my arms.

“Yuck!” Sarina says, breaking us apart. Stepping forward, she grabs one of my hands and one of Veva’s.

“Come on,” she says, tugging us toward the big white screen.

As we move, she turns her head, looking up at the two of us, the smile on her face practically effervescent.

“If I’m going to have a sibling, I need to pick as many movies for movie night as I can.”

Veva laughs, Sarina finds a movie and slots it into the projector, and food is passed around by the people sitting out on the lawn, the grill chili specifically skipping Veva.

Kira and Dorian arrive, and Aidan tousles with a little shifter pup in the front row. When the movie finally starts, Veva nestles into me on the right, and Sarina leans her head on my arm on the left.

I can’t wait for the rest of my life and movie nights with all my favorite people, my pack, all beneath the clear, amber sky.

THE END