







# Brutal Alpha Bully (Silverville Firefighter Wolves #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** He tortured me mercilessly and left me with a forbidden, secret baby girl.

I was from the pack's outcast family and subjected to public humiliation. Especially by him.

Except that one night, when he took my innocence and knocked me up without knowing.

Now he's back in our small town to fight the fires, and I'm offered to him as a shameful plaything.

He's always been destined to be the next Alpha, the powerful leader everyone looked up to.

But that's not who he was to me. He was my bully, the one who tormented me.

The one who rejected me, even though I loved him. But that won't happen again.

Because I've steeled my heart with my magic. He won't break it again.

They say that what you desire most shackles you forever. I can only confirm.

I'm shackled by his vicious tongue, playing with mine like a toy.

I'm shackled by his large hands, staking his claim on me like he owns me.

His eyes follow me with that possessive look that says I'm his now.

Can I let the Alpha break down my walls for good?

The Silverville Firefighter Wolves will burn down the world to possess their mates, heal the hearts they've broken, and protect what's theirs with their life. Because fires can be extinguished, but fated love will burn forever.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The sound of my breathing is loud through my mask, echoing in my ears. The heat from the fire presses in on all sides, like a too-hot hug nobody asked for.

“X?” Peter, another firefighter, asks from in front of me, his voice muffled and staticky through our coms. “You right behind me?”

“Right here!” I call back, turning and blasting water at a vent in the corner of the room, focusing on it to make sure the flames die away before turning back to the rest.

This house—a little two-story on Main Street—clearly belongs to a family. We passed them on the front lawn, our chief confirming no people or animals were left in the house before we got in.

The walls and supports are licked with flame.

A basket of folded laundry sits on the end of the couch.

One sock hanging over the side is on fire, and the basket itself melts and folds in, wilting like a flower without water.

I raise my hose and blast the basket, putting out the fire and scattering the items inside.

As we work, I can’t stop myself from thinking this fire is a hell of a lot easier to deal with than what I’m used to.

We make our way through the house, calling to one another, listening for the

collapse, and putting out the fire before the walls come down around us.

There's not much left, but when the site is cleared, the family might be allowed back in to collect the things that remain undamaged by the fire and water.

"Clear," Peter calls, turning and sloshing through the water on the floor, his boots kicking aside a floating doll. We meet with the others and push out the way we came, stumbling out onto the lawn, taking off our helmets, and breathing in the charred, smoky air.

A blond woman cries on the sidewalk, pulling her children close to her, like she's worried the fire might still try to reach out and take them.

Where I'm from, it actually might.

"Good work, Sorel," the chief says, clapping me on the back and swiping his hand over his face, which leaves a smudge of black from his eyebrow to his hairline. "Take the engine back to the station with Pete? We'll hang back and finish up here."

I nod, tuck my helmet under my arm, and turn toward the engine, heading for the driver's seat. We're all licensed to drive it, but I'm the only one who really enjoys it. The other guys won't say it, but I know they hate turning the thing.

We may just be in the suburbs of Chicago, but the roads are impossibly tight in a lot of places. In a city known for its great, historical fire, being a firefighter comes with a nod of acknowledgment from almost every person on the street.

"Rough for the first call of the day," Peter says, swinging into the seat next to me and pulling on his seat belt. Two guys climb in the back, and we head back toward the firehouse, sirens and lights off.

“Always feels weird after a call like that,” one of the guys from the back says, and though I don’t say it out loud, I agree with him. It’s hard to go back to the station and feel like everything’s normal when you’ve just faced death like that.

These guys more than me—humans are a lot more delicate when it comes to a typical fire.

The smoke will kill them before the heat or flames ever do.

I’m lucky that my lungs are stronger, and my entire body can regenerate faster than theirs.

The wolf inside me sends cues, helping me follow my instincts and avoid accidents at a site.

They continue chatting as we make our way back to the firehouse, and the moment we do, one of the guys peels off to check on the meat he’s had sitting in the cooker since this morning, making a joke about the firehouse smelling smoky.

“Hey, man, you got a second?”

I turn to find Peter waving me down, and I stuff a sigh down in my chest. Peter is the kind of guy who wants to know everyone, and I’m the kind of guy who would rather listen than talk. That, unfortunately, means that Peter is constantly trying to learn more about me.

So far, all he knows is that I’m from Colorado, and no, I am not visiting my family for the holidays. Luckily, when he tried to press more on that, we had a call, and I was able to avoid that particular topic.

Swinging around, I face Peter, meeting his eyes and waiting for him to go on.

He claps me on the shoulder and says, “I’m having a party at my place when we get off tonight.

You should come. My brother is gonna be in town—he’s a firefighter over in Galena, actually.

A lot of us guys there. What do you think?”

I think there’s no way in hell I’m going to his party.

I think even the word brother brings up unpleasant memories that I’m doing my damndest not to think about.

But even the fact that I’m halfway across the country from my family doesn’t stop the tension from leaking into my shoulders, making my muscles go rock-solid under Peter’s hand.

“Just let me know,” he says, pulling his hand back and turning in the direction of the kitchen.

Over his shoulder, I can see a TV, the words thick and black across the bottom of the screen: Colorado wildfires continue to blaze.

For a second, I want to follow Peter, get closer to that TV and see exactly what it’s saying. But I already know that watching that shit just gives me bad dreams, so I shake it out of my head and go the opposite way.

The hallway is long and lit by fluorescents, and my room is at the far back, shades already drawn.

None of the other guys are napping or in their rooms right now, so it’s fairly quiet.

Typically, I only need about four hours of sleep.

If we have some rough calls or I use a lot of energy, I'll need more, but my body usually craves it in the middle of the day as short naps rather than all at once at night.

The guys are so used to my daytime naps, they know not to bug me unless we have to go out on a call. Now, I pray the red lights don't flash as I roll into my bunk.

Instead, something buzzes against my hip, and I pull the damn thing out to find a text from Kalen, the only brother I haven't blocked.

Kalen: Hey, man, spoke to the estate lawyer today

Kalen: He said the house is going to be up for grabs if you don't communicate with him about the will

Kalen: End of the month, X

My thumbs hover over the screen, the phone above my face, blazing into my retinas. I should just block Kalen. If I want to leave Colorado—and Silverville—in the past, I need to cut off the rest of my ties back there.

But Kalen has always been different. Softer. And I've protected him—from bullies, from our brothers, from our uncle. Now, I find myself wondering how he's surviving on his own out there. How he's still asking and prodding me to come back to town, despite me making it clear that I never will.

When I'd decided to leave, I begged him to come with me. He said he had to stay. That he would wait for me to change my mind and come home.

I'm just about to shove my phone back into my pocket when another text comes

through.

Kalen: Looks like the house is going to Declan if you don't show

Something rises up inside me—the urge to protect. To come back and take care of everything, eliminate problems one at a time. To take the house, take back my father's legacy. To return to Silverville and try to pull the town out of the hell that it's descended into.

But I can't go back. I don't want to see my brothers and uncle. Don't want to face the grief over my dead parents.

And more than that, I know that the second I pass by that welcome sign, I'll be haunted by the mistakes I made as an idiot teenager. The person I hurt most. The town I've been trying my hardest to leave behind.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The moment I wake up, I recognize the sharp, metallic smell for what it is. Lightning-hot flames lick up the side of the door frame to my room, threatening to engulf the entrance.

For months, I've been having nightmares about this exact scenario. Since the new alpha supreme dismantled the warning system, I've tossed and turned with anxiety about the fact that the daemonic fire could start at any time, and none of us would have a warning until it was far too late.

Now, it takes a second for my mind to acknowledge that, yes, this is real and not just another bad dream. Despite the magical barriers I've put up around this property, and despite the numerous bouts of fire we've survived up to this point, it's finally happening.

“Nora!”

Sitting up, I throw the covers off my body, my bare feet slapping against the floor as I race toward her bedroom.

A moment before I burst through the door, it flies open to reveal my daughter standing there in an old t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts, her blond hair dark with sweat and in her face.

I'm already breathing in the smoke. We both are—I can see it from the shaking way she coughs, the tears in her eyes, the ruddy red of her cheeks. The smoke is thick and black, inky as nighttime.

“Mom,” Nora gasps, “I think it’s daemon fire—”

I’m nodding, hand on her elbow, ushering her away from the door and toward the front of the house. Something in the back of my mind screams at me to turn around, to try to save the house. To do something other than run away.

For the past ten years, every fire has been a daemon fire. At first, they tried to figure it out, tried to put a stop to it. To determine what was causing them in the first place. Then, Declan took over and seemed content to let Silverville burn.

In the hallway, we hurry past every picture, the craft from Nora’s first years of school hanging on the walls. Family heirlooms and all my books. Everything is going to disappear like flash paper in a fire like this.

None of it is as precious to me as the girl stumbling behind me, her fist tight in my shirt. Around us, the supports of the building are already starting to groan, and adrenaline clogs my throat, sour and thick.

Nora coughs again, tripping over a fallen chair and pushing into me, nearly pitching both of us into a crowd of flames in the corner of the room. The daemon fire burns randomly, moves quickly, eats at the floor, and leaves nothing but silky, fine ash in its wake.

Nora’s coughs fill the air, and I reach back for her, keeping a tight hold on her shirt and looking around desperately, trying to find the best way out of the house.

I have to get us out of here.

Something shudders, alarmingly similar to the sound of the dark laughter. It’s an echoing call you can hear sometimes, swishing through the trees in the endless mountain forests around Silverville. But this time, it’s the sound of the house

disintegrating around us, coming down in quick pieces.

“Mom!” Nora screams, pulling me back just in time to keep me from walking under a falling beam. The fire roars around us, and it hits me—my daughter and I are going to die in this house.

I won't let it happen.

Normally, I would try everything else first. But right now, I have no other choice, and it's like my body reacts of its own volition, taking action before I can really think about what I'm doing.

Magic flows from the core of me to my fingertips like a dry, sparking sweat, my body producing it at the sign of danger. I summon my mental energy, taking advantage of its presence there, using it to change the world around me.

It starts with the air around Nora and me becoming clearer, the smoke flowing away from us like a powerful fan has blown it off like a fog floating out over the mountains.

Nora looks up at me, her blue eyes tinged with red and going wide at the realization of what I'm doing. She knows about my magic, but I've made it clear that nobody else is to know about it. And after starting school, Nora knows why.

She knows that she's the girl with the freak mom. The girl whose mom played a role in the fires all those years ago.

I swallow all that down, definitely not about to think about it right now, and force myself to focus, controlling the magic until it becomes hard and rigid, forming a bubble around Nora and me.

We force our way through the burning house like hamsters in a ball, and when it gets too hot in the ball, I use what little energy I have to cool the air in our little bubble to a bearable level.

Finally, after what feels like a marathon through hell, Nora and I burst out onto the lawn, gasping for air. She coughs next to me on all fours, heaving until I'm sure her lungs are going to slide right out of her mouth.

I rub her back, trying to use a trickle of magic to help her, get the smoke out of her body.

Then, raising her head, she says, "Mom, look!"

Our street is burning all around us, the other houses in various degrees of consumption like dying stars.

One at the end of the street looks like the fire has only just begun to touch it, while just beside it is a pile of that silky ash, the finest soot, shifting in the dry wind from the blaze next door.

The results of a daemon fire, burning ten times hotter than the typical wildfire, sending the humans around here into a frenzy, trying to put it out. For weeks, they brought planes full of water, dumping it down and becoming astounded and frustrated when it just kept on burning.

But that's the thing about daemon fire—it doesn't give a shit about water. The only way to put it out is to stifle it—much like a regular fire—but in a more serious way. To stifle daemon fire, you have to take the energy from it.

My thoughts scatter and reform when, across the street, I see a little boy leaning out the top window of his house.

He opens his mouth and screams for someone to come help him. My heart drops into my stomach, pounding hard enough that I swear I can taste it.

“Stay right here,” I say to Nora, planting her on the sidewalk and maintaining that invisible bubble around her just in case. It’s drawing energy from me quickly, like a little hole has been opened just on my side and I’m leaking out.

I should retain that energy to help Nora. To keep myself safe.

But the boy screams again, and I know what I’m going to do. Running, bare feet screaming at the hot pavement pushing up against them, I sprint into the neighbor’s yard.

Even the grass is hot, sticky, and wet, almost like it belongs to a play set that’s been melting, left out on the sidewalk by a kid on a hot day. I race through it, hiking my nightgown up around my calves to run faster. I glance around quickly, blind panic filling every corner of my mind.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I acknowledge the fact that this is the first time I’ve been in this neighbor’s yard.

Despite summer after summer of living here, and barbecue after barbecue, Nora and I have never been invited.

We’ve never joined the parties. Nora has never joined the kids in playing on blow-up water slides.

I’ve never clinked a beer with the other adults, grousing about rising insurance prices.

“Help!” the boy screams, sounding strangled with fear, his voice twisting and rising to that high, grating pitch only little boys can manage. He’s not looking at me until I

come to a stop under his window and throw up my hands toward him.

“Jump!” I command, my own voice coming out haggard and raw. It’s too much for me—I know that. The strain of keeping the protection around Nora, and trying to help this boy.

But I can’t just let him burn. No matter how cruel his parents have been to me. No matter how poor the reception was when Nora and I showed up, moving into my late grandmother’s home. No matter the fact that I remember this same boy refusing to deliver a newspaper to our front door.

He shakes his head, eyes going wide at what I’m suggesting. It’s a long way, a drop that would surely break his bones without something to lighten his fall.

Doing something I almost never do, I use my magic to compel with my voice, telling him with the might of a pissed-off school principal, “ Jump !”

Looking like it’s the last thing in the world he wants to, he brings his body up into the frame of the window, the bright orange and blue of the daemon fire behind him illuminating his skinny arms and legs.

Then, standing with his arms outstretched, one hand on each side of the frame, he swallows and pushes off with his feet, gravity immediately taking over and bringing him toward the ground, toward me, toward my outstretched hands.

Using what little magic I have remaining, I fight against that gravity, mentally pushing him up, up. His body slows, his face shifting from terror to wonder when he realizes he’s not plummeting at a normal speed, but floating down with the grace of a feather.

My arms shake, and my body heaves with the effort. I feel like I’m being pinned at

the bottom of a pool, lungs desperate for air, but my body is unable to break the surface.

Then, with only an inch left to go, my magic gives out, and he hurtles down onto my body with an “oomph. ”

For a long moment, I just lay in the grass, my skin numb and tingling, my breath coming hard and fast, the weight of the little boy making it harder to breathe. But I have no strength left inside me to move him to the side.

“Mom,” Nora gasps, falling to her knees in the grass beside me. I open my eyes and see her face upside down, sweaty, sooty blond hair falling over her forehead and trembling in the breeze around us. “Are you okay?”

I blink, still coming back into myself, trying to come up with something to say to my daughter, when another noise infiltrates the little moment.

“Brandon!”

The voice is shrill, and a moment later, the boy’s sweaty skin is unpeeling from mine, the weight of him rising up and off of me. I look up blearily through the smoke to see his mother looking like she might suffocate him herself, his face pressed thoroughly into her bosom.

“Oh, my baby!” she cries.

With Nora’s help, I’m able to raise up onto my elbows so I can see the mother clearer. She’s one of the meanest on the block—something of the queen bee. Leading the charge in ensuring we’re never invited to community barbecues or included in weekend parties.

I'm not expecting her to get on her knees and thank me, though that's what I would do if someone had just saved Nora's life.

I'm not even expecting verbal gratitude, or an apology for everything she's done to us over the time we've lived on this block.

If anything, all I want is some sort of acknowledgment—a look in her eye, or a little nod to tell me that I'm not as bad as she thought.

That I've proven to her that I'm a person, and even a good one, at that.

But I don't get any of that.

I should have known better than to ever expect it in the first place.

Instead of any of that, she just curls her lip back in the way that I've come to recognize from her, a look of total disdain and disregard that makes my blood go cold.

“Don't you ever ,” she spits, taking a step toward me, close enough that she only narrowly misses stepping on my bare foot, turned black from the soot and asphalt, “touch my son—or anyone in my family again !”

“Come on, Mom,” Nora whispers, her arms snaking under my armpits to pull me to standing. I wish I could snap something back at this woman, say something to make her hurt for once. “Let's go.”

I just saved her son, and she still can't get past her hatred of me.

“Ugh,” she coughs as we walk away. “It reeks of magic out here.”

It doesn't—the only thing you can smell is the suffocating, blanketing scent of sulfur, slightly sweet and rotten. The smell of a daemonic fire burning strong.

When Nora and I make it across the street, me limping and leaning on her far too much, I manage to get a good look at our house.

The house that belonged to my grandmother before me.

The one that kept Nora and I off the streets for years, safe and with a roof over our heads, even if we weren't psychologically safe from the neighbors.

And now, all that's left of it is a considerable pile of shifting, fine, almost silken ash.

Unable to stop myself, I reach down and pinch some of it between two fingers, shivering at the slide of it, how tempting it is to bring it to my lips. Like the urge to chew on electrical wire, or eat one of those laundry pods.

“Mom?” Nora questions again, putting her hand on my back and helping me to sit in the somehow wet dew of the lawn.

I wrap my hands around my knees, feel my body hurtling toward collapse. “Yes, dear?”

All around us, the daemonic fire continues to burn, this time writhing and biting its way into the trees, dancing along the canopy with a bright blue hue that dazzles through the sky. Distantly, screams echo in the dawn.

Nora shifts from foot to foot, and in looking at her, I realize that she had the presence to grab her go-bag, while I absolutely did not grab mine. Finally, she clears her throat and finds my eyes with hers. “Where are we going to go?”

I let the truth of our homelessness settle over me. In all this time of us being alone, I have never lied to her. And I'm not about to start now.

So, I do like I always do, and tell her the truth. "I have no idea."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

When I get to the firehouse the next morning, my body is itching with the torture of confinement.

If you've ever worn a pair of shoes that were too tight, felt that infuriating squishing of your toes together, or been forced to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with a stranger on a far-too-small flight, then you know a fraction of the itch to shift.

Since moving to Chicago, this feeling is something I've become accustomed to, though it never fully fades into the back of my head.

After getting an apartment here, I only shift when I can get a long weekend away and drive out to a state park.

Get a cabin, wait for low visibility at night.

Sometimes I'll go to Starved Rock, though that park is smaller and can feel claustrophobic when families are out there on busy weekends.

Mostly, I go to Pere Marquette. It's a five-hour drive, but if I can get a few good nights out there, away from the city and with the freedom to roam, I'll feel a little more comfortable in my skin.

The nice thing about Illinois is that there are no local wolf packs, so no chance for me to accidentally upset the natural order of things with the non-shifting variety. The shit thing about that is that I have to make sure nobody sees me, especially when I'm down south near Pere Marquette.

It's one thing for a hiker to spot the occasional wolf on the northern side of the state, maybe peeking in from Michigan or Minnesota. It's another for someone near St. Louis to spot me, shit their pants, and run back to their group, claiming they saw a grizzly bear.

"Morning, X!" Peter calls to me the moment I step into the kitchen.

It's thick with the scent of cherry-smoked bacon and sausage patties sizzling away on the griddle, and Peter stands in the center of it all, wearing a Kiss the Cook apron that none of the other guys find even remotely funny. "We missed you at that party, man."

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that," I lie, rubbing my hand over the back of my neck, knowing my voice is likely too flat to even come close to convincing. "Not feeling great over the weekend. Needed some time to recover from that big job."

"Yeah," he agrees, though when he glances at me, it's with that air of suspicion I've been noticing over the past few weeks. "It'll get you. Maybe you need to stop picking up so many damn shifts, huh?"

I laugh along with him, but in all honesty, there's no reason for me not to pick up shifts. There are no friends for me here in Chicago, and if I'm not shifting as much, I need something to keep myself busy. Let all that energy out.

"Maybe," I say, wandering out of the kitchen and toward the training room.

They'll all eat breakfast, then join me in here, and we'll run through our sets for the day.

Training with all of them is my favorite part.

It's the thing that reminds me most of home.

Of what it was like to have a crew of my own.

While I'm waiting, I sit down on one of the benches and contemplate doing a few sets, until I feel the consistent buzzing in my pocket.

Even without looking, I know it's Kalen.

He's done nothing but text and call me since saying the thing about the house.

I've ignored him. I don't have the heart to tell him that I'm not coming home.

It's not that I don't care. It's that I have to draw a line in the sand. A boundary between my old life and my new one. And going back home to recover a house isn't on the correct side of that boundary.

Still, I slide the phone from my pocket and look at what he's sent me.

When I see it's a video, I glance up at the doorway and turn the volume down. The initial noise is loud, with the shifting of a phone camera near someone's shirt, then the sliding of it as it turns from vertical to horizontal, a quick zoom to the front of the room.

It's in the Silverville Pack Center—specifically, the meeting room where my father used to hold all his town halls. A space for pack members to voice their concerns, provide their feedback on his leadership.

And now, even through the grainy video, I can see the disrepair there—a water spot on the ceiling, nearly actively dripping. Several of the benches broken or wobbling enough that nobody dares sit on them. A scuffed, dirty carpet and a cracked window in the corner.

What the hell has been going on in the years since I left? What could have possibly happened in that room that would have broken the benches and cracked the windows? Was it from the fires, or something else?

The questions leave my head when the frame zooms in and I get a look at the people at the front of the room.

Declan, of course, lounging on the chair in the center of the council bench like he's a king presiding over his court.

A thrill of competition rolls through me—the thought that I could eject him from that spot, take it for myself.

I sense my wolf sizing him up and determining, confidently, that I could take him.

I stuff that down, eyes skimming over the others sitting next to him—my brothers, all with the same appearance as Dad and me, but with none of our shared internal constitution.

Dallas is at Declan's right. The oldest and largest of us, my brother, who never quite honed his fighting abilities, always relying on his size until it no longer served him.

When we were kids, he loved to dominate, would pin us down and make us squirm until he realized we could best him with skill.

His thick dark hair and blue eyes are so like my own, but his clean-shaven face and sharp jaw make him look pointed. Hard.

To Dallas's right is Tanner, his long, straight hair falling into his eyes, looking unwashed.

He's leaning like Declan, but not with the casual, authoritative nature.

Instead, he looks like he would rather be anywhere else than on the council.

In his fingers is a cigarette that he twirls and twirls.

With the state of the room, I'm surprised he hasn't just lit up.

Sitting to Declan's left and looking focused on the action is Farris.

The second youngest, older than only Kalen, he has somehow fallen the furthest from our parents' family tree.

Instead, he looks more like he could be the direct spawn of Declan.

From the slicked, well-groomed hair to the watch glinting on his wrist, his blue eyes shine with something I can only describe as hunger. Greed.

And standing before them—this long line of sneering men—is Seraphina Winward.

Seeing her again triggers that thing inside my chest, like a hook right through my left ventricle, threatening to yank my heart out through my fucking nose if I don't stand and move toward her.

But she's just a collection of pixels on the screen. I try to tell myself this, try to get it through to my dull brain, but it still yearns, pitching at the phone like a caged beast only a few feet from its dinner.

Seraphina is the same height as she was in high school, but her blond hair is longer now, falling halfway down her back in loose curls I want to cup in my hand.

From this angle, I can only catch the curve of her jaw.

She was always skinny in high school, and something relaxes inside me to see that she is—if only barely—a little thicker than skin and bones.

Her elbows and knees are not quite so knobby, and her chest has filled out.

I banish that thought—and all the illicit images that come with it—and focus on the shaky footage.

Why did Kalen send this to me?

Glancing at the door to the training room again, I turn the video up and hold the bottom of the phone to my ear, trying to make out what's being said. The first thing I hear is Seraphina's voice.

“...for just a little while, until we can get back on our feet.”

Then comes a cutting, shrill laugh I recognize as my uncle's immediately. Condescending, cold—exactly the same as I remember from being a child, when he'd taunt my brothers and me away from our father.

“Let me get this straight,” he says, and when I pull the phone away, glancing at the screen, I see him leaning forward in his makeshift throne, loathing glittering in his eyes.

Seraphina holds herself perfectly still.

“Jacqueline Smith comes to this council and tells us that you assaulted her child—”

“I saved her child!” Seraphina's voice is so quick, so solid, that it makes me jump.

The entire room goes still like rodents freezing, hoping the predator won't see them if they don't move at all.

And then, as though she doesn't notice or care about the reaction, Seraphina goes on, "I saved her son, and still the only thing you people care to see about me is—"

"Silence!" Declan booms theatrically. You can see from the way he pauses that he loves the attention.

Scowling, he says, with an undercurrent of laughter, "Your request is denied, Winward. We will not be using pack funds to help a little bitch like you. In fact, let's take this as an opportunity to make it official—you are not permitted in this pack center.

It is for dedicated pack members, of which you are not.

Step foot in here again, we will be sure to make a clear example of you for all other magic users. "

The video is shaky and grainy, but I can feel through the lens just how much Seraphina wants to say something else. Or maybe I still know her well enough to sense her discontent.

In fact, it seems like there are others in the crowd who are unhappy with this decision, shifting in their chairs uncomfortably, looking around to see if anyone else is going to say anything.

But nobody does. The group acts together, justifying their cowardice through the inaction of others.

And yet, can I blame them, from this far away? When I moved across the country to

avoid the responsibility of the pack? The crushing pressure of my and my family's mistakes?

The video ends with Seraphina turning and walking out of the room, and I stare at it for long enough that I see when the next notification from Kalen comes in.

Kalen: Declan takes the house in two days, X

Kalen: Whole west side of town was taken out by daemonic fires

Kalen: They're getting worse, and he won't disperse any aid

I grind my teeth and stare at the messages, just more in the long history of him texting me and me sending nothing in response.

But this time, it's different. It's Seraphina. Does that mean her house is gone? Where is she sleeping? Is there anyone to take care of her? I think of her family and shudder at the thought of her going to them for help, if she wasn't living with them already.

My fingers are moving before I realize what I'm doing, and seconds later, I've sealed my fate with the whoosh sound of the text flying out into the void, headed straight for my brother in Silverville.

Xeran: Leaving for FR tonight.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

“I hate coming here.”

Blinking, I tear my gaze away from the house and turn, reaching out for Nora, running a hand over her hair.

“I know, love, and I’m sorry,” I murmur, gaze swinging back to the house again, my mind only half on my daughter’s discomfort.

It makes sense—I hate coming here, too. Hate coming home to this ramshackle house on the hill, reminding myself of what it was like to grow up here.

To scrape my knees on the gravel driveway and pick out the rock chunks later, washing rubbing alcohol over the burns and gritting my teeth to keep from crying out.

Running from my brother in the backyard, first in play, then later realizing it was much more sinister.

That my ability to run was the only thing keeping me out of unsafe situations with them.

Watching him bring in unidentified substances, people, crates, and bags until my home didn’t feel like my own.

Until there were enough strange men leering at me from doorways and alcoves that I sequestered myself to my room, becoming a ghost, becoming invisible, but never quite getting away with being unseen.

“Mom?”

I jump, realizing Nora has been trying to talk to me. Turning to her, I ignore the metallic taste in my mouth. “What is it?”

“I just... I want to go.”

“I know, darling. When that car pulls away, I’ll run inside, and it will only take me a minute.”

“You’re going to talk to your mom?”

Nora is too smart for her own good, too observant. Only one other time have I done something like this—coming back here and going to my mom for help. Back then, Nora couldn’t have been more than a year or two old.

“Yes,” I say, because I’ve promised myself never to lie to her.

Once again, my eyes drift back to the house.

We’re perched behind it along a long gravel road that leads to a lifted crest in the mountains.

Far enough away that, with a little magic, they can’t see us.

But close enough that I can see the house perfectly, can watch when my brother gets in the car and leaves. Which I am very much willing him to do.

As the daylight dwindles and Nora and I wait in the humid car, I start to worry more and more that we’ll be sleeping in this car tonight. And that’s something I never wanted to make her do.

Sitting back in her car with a humph , Nora crosses her arms and looks out the opposite window. A long moment passes, and I keep on staring at the car until I'm sure it will be permanently burned into my retinas. Then Nora speaks again.

“Why don't we just leave?” she whispers, and without asking, I know what she means. Why don't we just leave Silverville? Get out of the place where nobody wants us?

I bite my tongue, knowing the reasons are dwindling.

It used to be that my grandmother was the only thing keeping me here—the one person who had ever shown affection to me, even if limited and strange.

Other people made it clear that my magic-wielding was disgusting to them, but the way my grandmother looked at me was almost like she understood.

I never asked her, but I'd always assumed I got the gift from her.

But once she was gone, it was her gift of a home that made Silverville the obvious choice.

A homeaid in full and gloriously big compared to what Nora and I were used to.

With enough space for a swing set and a garden in the back, and room for us to breathe and grow.

Nora had a bedroom and a playroom. I grew flowers.

We used homegrown tomatoes to make pasta and pizza sauce, sometimes slicing them and eating them with fresh basil and mozzarella.

Yes, our neighbors held disdain for us. But sometimes weeks could go by where we'd avoid interaction with them and things could feel somewhat normal. Nora and I were always enough for each other.

And now it's gone. My grandmother is gone, and her home—which I had imbued with my magic, doing everything I could to protect it from the daemon fire—is gone, too. Nothing more than a pile of silken ash.

“Lucian's leaving.”

When Nora says this, I realize I haven't answered her other question, but it's a relief that I have something to do instead. So I just nod, swallow, and get out of the car, leaving the question about leaving Silverville hanging between us.

When I'm out, I lock the car and cast a quick protection spell over it so I'll know if anyone—or any thing —gets too close to her.

Nora just stares out the windshield, her hair braided back in two long strands.

Without a shower, dry shampoo and braiding were the best I could do to keep it from looking greasy.

It—and everything else—still retains the stench of the daemon fire, but aside from dabbing peppermint oil on her wrists, there was nothing I could do to keep the stench at bay.

Moving quickly, using magic to speed up the walk, I cut down twenty minutes to five, arriving at the doorstep of my old home breathless and feeling dried up.

I've been using more magic since the night of the fire than I'm used to, and I can feel it behind my eyes, in my temples, pressing at the bottom of my throat.

When I climb up the few creaking stairs to the porch, I have to swallow down the memories climbing up my esophagus and threatening to make me cry.

The same weathered bench sits on the front, though it looks worse now than it ever has.

The pillow nestled in its corner looks like it's been through the worst—snow and rain and blazing heat without so much as a repositioning.

My mother must have heard me approaching because she pulls aside the curtain over the little arched window on the door before I even have the chance to knock. I hear her gasp, muffled through the wood. Then she says my name, more breath than word.

“ Seraphina ?”

Wincing, and wishing she would simply call me “Phina” like everyone else, I nod and wait for her to undo the fifteen different locking mechanisms on the inside of the house. When she's finished, she throws it open and steps forward, her arms going around me.

I'm a small, slight woman, and I know that.

Not having much to eat growing up ensured I stayed skinny, scrappy.

But that feeling goes out the door when I wrap my arms around my mother and feel her ribs grating against me.

I pull back and take in the wan, exhausted expression hanging under her eyes and around her cheeks.

Now, her shadows are more purple, more drained than I remember from childhood.

“Mom,” I say, swallowing again through a thickness in my throat, adrenaline already pulsing through my body at the sight of her, at the feeling of being in this house.

I love my mother, but the fact that she did nothing to protect me when I was younger means that she feels just as unsafe to me as the others.

“I could feel that you would come,” she whispers, though nobody else is home. She draws me inside and closes the door again, notably not locking it. I silently thank her for that—I don’t want there to be a delay if I need to leave. “And I was just waiting. It’s been so long—where is Nora?”

The last time I came, I made the mistake of bringing Nora inside with me. When she was a baby, I’d struggled with the choice of leaving her behind in the car or bringing her with. Back then, it always felt safer to have her on my hip, no matter where I was going.

But now Nora is old enough, and smart enough, that it makes more sense to leave her in the car. To hope that she knows enough to get out of that situation if she has to.

“She’s not here,” I say, feeling bad for rushing through this, knowing the specific ache I might feel if my daughter only ever came to me in a crisis. If the only time I got to see her was when she had nowhere else to go.

But I also know that I would do anything to protect Nora—and that includes leaving.

And yet, for years and years and even now, my mother chooses to stay with my father and brother rather than leave them.

Despite my brother’s treatment of me and my father’s indifference to it.

Despite knowing it would mean seeing more of Nora and me.

“How is she doing?”

“Just fine. Enjoying the book you gave her.”

My mom lights up at the sound of that, and I wish again that everything could be different.

For a wild, hopeful second, I think of pitching the idea to her—that she, Nora, and I could take her emergency fund and run off together.

Between the money and my magic, surely we could shake them, get away from the family that’s been holding us down, keeping us here.

But just as soon as I think it, I meet her eyes and know that she would never agree. More than the fear of them finding her is the fact that, somehow, my mother still loves my father. My brother.

So instead, I clear my throat, eyes darting to the hallway that leads to her sewing room, where I know for a fact she keeps an emergency fund. Since I was a teenager, she’s been squirreling away money there, a tiny bit from each round of mending she does.

Just in case.

She gave it to me the night I told her I was pregnant with Nora. And she gave me more before Grandma died. Both times, I worked my ass off to pay her back, mailing the money to her in fake birthday cards, greeting cards, magazine renewal envelopes.

“You need money,” she says, saving me from having to ask, and I balloon with relief when she stands at my nod, already moving in the direction of her sewing room.

Quietly, I sit and fidget on the couch, desperately wishing I wasn't here but grateful we have someone to come to. As I sit, I turn over Nora's question in my head. Why not leave Silverville?

I come up with no answer. No justification for staying.

As I wait, hearing the gentle shuffle of Mom looking through her things in the back room, I imagine what it will be like. Finding a cheap motel and sleeping with a hand on Nora at all times. Driving out of the mountains—would we go west, to California?

Not likely. With only a little money and nowhere to say, it would make more sense to head east. Maybe to the Midwest. We could settle in Nebraska, or Iowa.

Somewhere with a low cost of living. Find a little town where I can go back to doing laundry and making a decent paycheck.

Somewhere my father and brother would never want to follow.

Without the weight of our family name, Nora could go to middle school and then high school. I picture her going to prom, smiling up at me as I take pictures of her and her date.

Then the daydream comes crashing down when I feel the pinch and pull of magic at my stomach. Someone is nearing the car. Nearing Nora.

"Mom—" I stand up, start to tell her that I'm going and will have to come back later, but then the front door slams open, and without looking, I know that my brother is here.

"Sera phina ," Lucian says, drawing out my name like he used to when we were kids, a stupid little smile on his face as he leans against the door, which looks like it might

fall right off the hinges from too many times of being kicked open.

But I'm not paying attention to him—someone is getting close enough to the car that my ward around Nora is going crazy. If I focused on myself, I might be able to turn and run out the back door, use my magic to keep him away until I could lose him.

Of course I don't. There's only enough for me or her.

And I will always choose her.

Focusing all my energy on Nora, I locate her, surround her with protective energy, and throw my weight into moving her far, far away from here. I know she will land without injury and in a safe place. I will just have to retrieve her later, using my magic to find her again.

When I come out of the haze, Lucian is snarling, his hands landing on my shoulders as he jerks me roughly to him. Mom appears in the doorway, gasping, her hand coming to her mouth.

But, like always, she says nothing to stop him.

“Really, sis?” Lucian hisses into my ear. “You’re going to do that shit right in front of me? You know what it means. Time for a punishment.”

Fear rolls through me at the sound of that word—a callback to our childhood, when it meant he would hold me down in the dirt, tie me to a tree, and leave me there.

Then he'd force me to eat something wriggling and alive while I gagged and choked, trying to scream around the feeling of it in my mouth.

As he slaps a hand over my face and starts to drag me from the room, I get the feeling

that this time, the punishment is going to be much, much worse.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The drive into Silverville is picturesque. There are a lot of things to complain about when it comes to this place—its current leader one of the primary ones—but the beauty of the place is not one of them.

Nestled in the Rocky Mountains, the drive up is just next to Silverville Creek, which trickles merrily outside my window. Sometimes on the left, and sometimes crossing over to the right side.

The air still carries that hint of daemon fire—unidentifiable to humans, but pungent to shifters and other supernaturals who possess a strong sense of smell.

According to the newspaper I picked up on the way here, the fire happened several days ago.

But the reek lingers, and occasionally I catch a charred branch or log floating in the creek.

Halfway up the mountain, I stop at a little diner that practically hangs off the cliff for a sandwich. I catch a couple of guys in the back eyeing me, the scowls on their faces only deepening the longer I stay.

When they leave, I catch Declan's scent on them.

Of course. Not even in town yet, and I'm already worried about my damn uncle. Those goons are definitely running straight to him. They'll cook up some story about how I'm back to take his spot, and I'll have to diffuse things.

Sure enough, the second I pull into a spot at the only gas station in town forty minutes later, the lot fills with the roaring, echoing sound of engine growls.

I turn around and watch as a large black SUV, two motorcycles, and a sleek black car pull into the lot. Dallas and Tanner are on the bikes, Farris flies out of the car, and a moment later, the SUV's door opens. Declan steps out, his arms outstretched like he's going to come in for a hug.

I glance backward at my truck, a 1978 Chevy C10 Silverado.

I bought it a breath away from the junkyard and restored it on my days off from the station.

It's a burnt red color—as close to the original paint as I could get it—and it glitters in the sun.

Our vehicle choices couldn't be further apart, and only a small section of my brain wants to laugh at the fact that they've chosen all black like they're escorting the president or something.

Dallas swings his leg to stand up and get off his bike. It's some sort of classic Harley, the kind I've always thought makes the rider look a little silly with its handles up so high, like a massive trike.

Tanner doesn't even bother to get off his crotch rocket, surely something Japanese and likely ordered from a limited-edition batch. Instead, he just stands there, straddled over it, his gaze going unfocused in the distance.

“Xer- an ,” Declan says, a wide, fake smile plastered over his face like a plastic surgeon remodeled him that way. He presses the tips of his fingers together like a cult leader, eyes focused on me. “My nephew.”

“Calm the fuck down, Declan,” I say, turning and crossing my arms, leaning against my truck. Everything in me—more specifically, my wolf —bucks against the sight of him.

When I think back to the way he looked at Seraphina, the way he talked to her, I want to rip his fucking throat from his neck. I want to scatter his parts over this lot and grind his guts into the gravel with the sole of my boot.

My vitriol for my brothers is less intense, but still there, simmering.

It’s impossible for me to look at them and not remember the day our father died.

The August after my senior year of high school. Back then, my friends and I were fighting fires daily, and only just figuring out how to deal with the daemon flames. One of the bad ones got up near the family house.

And when I stumbled through a clearing, I saw Declan crouching over my father’s body. I knew then, in the curve of his back, in the expression on his face when he turned to face me—what happened wasn’t an accident.

But I had no proof. And my brothers—maybe power-hungry, maybe just not wanting to believe it possible—sided with Declan over me. The betrayal of that was enough to put a bad taste in my mouth for this town, this pack.

My father spent his entire life serving them dutifully, and his own sons wouldn’t even put a thoughtful effort into examining his murder. And when Declan declared his intention to take over as Supreme—apparently something my father wanted—my brothers didn’t see a problem with that, either.

I could have challenged my uncle, and I would have beaten him. But we’ve been a pack of peaceful transfer since my grandfather became the Supreme. And to tarnish

that streak would be to tarnish my father's legacy.

Now, I cut my eyes to my brothers, feeling the unique sting of disloyalty from each.

They may just be Declan's little followers, but I won't underestimate their presence here.

"Calm down?" Declan laughs, stopping and holding his palms up toward me.

"I'm calm, nephew. I'm just here to welcome you back to town. "

"I'm here for the house." I turn, grab the nozzle, plug it into the truck, then lean against it and fix my gaze on them again.

First Farris, then Tanner, then Dallas, and finally Declan.

Going in the opposite order of their natural hierarchy, youngest to oldest, and I can see the way it rattles them.

We really are just dumb animals at the end of the day, driven by the beasts inside us to adhere to pack organization, natural hierarchy.

Crossing my arms again, I continue, "I'm not here to challenge you. I don't give a fuck about this place or this pack—and I'm not here to stay. But it'll be over my dead body that you take my father's house and the family home."

"Our father," Farris cuts, and when I look at him, I see him at every stage of his life. Pudgy toddler, loud kid on a hobby horse, arrogant teenager flashing his wealth every chance he got. He clearly hasn't grown out of that phase. "In case you forgot, X."

"Well, our father left me the house," I mutter, turning back to take the nozzle out

when it clicks, signaling a full tank of gas. More under my breath, I add, “Wonder why that is?”

Maybe he saw something in his other sons before I ever could.

“Nobody here was worried about a challenge,” Declan laughs in an unintentionally nervous way that tells me he was very concerned about the prospect of a challenge.

Of course he would be—I could kill him with my muzzle wired shut. It was never a question of whether I would win a challenge, just whether I would issue one in the first place.

I remind myself that I won’t be doing that right now, no matter how my wolf growls at me to take him right here and now. I’m only in town for the house.

And, if I’m honest with myself, to chase that tug inside me. Like everyone else here, I’m an animal in the way I’ve followed my instincts toward a woman I’m sure wants nothing to do with me.

“That’s why you gathered up the brigade,” I say, snatching my receipt and rolling my eyes. “And intercepted me on my way into town. Because you are so unconcerned.”

Declan growls from the back of his throat, and I glance up at him, slightly surprised at the provocation. It would be dishonorable for him and my brothers to gang up on me, for an alpha supreme to kill a potential challenger in anything but a one-on-one situation.

But maybe I shouldn’t put it past Declan to do something dishonorable. After all, it’s how he’s been operating since the day he was born. Since the day he took over as the supreme.

If he did, would my brothers really fight with him? Would they really aid him in taking out their own kin?

When I meet their eyes, I find I genuinely can't find the answer to that question.

“Listen, Xeran,” Declan says, getting control of himself.

He lets out a little laugh and runs his hands over his dark, greased hair.

When his eyes meet mine again, they're glinting, shifty, and I realize he just might be hopped up on something.

“I was under the impression that there might be some hard feelings between us. And that's why I organized to present you with a little... coming-home gift.”

I feel my walls fly up immediately at the idea of this gift . Other than my father and Kalen, we're not a family of gift-givers. Farris laughs crudely, and Dallas glances at the SUV, giving me a clue as to where the gift might be coming from.

What the hell could Declan possibly have in the back of that SUV?

For a heart-stopping second, I realize I haven't gotten a text back from Kalen. I'd shot him a message when I was at the base of the mountain and assumed poor reception was the reason the usually prompt texter hadn't said anything back.

“What—” I start, stepping forward, but then Dallas steps forward and reaches into the SUV, grabbing something roughly and pulling it forward. Considering the weight of the thing, I fully expect him to pull Kalen's body from the truck. As an example to be made.

There are a lot of things I've thought about my brothers in the years since I left this

town, but being capable of hurting Kalen wasn't one of them.

I track their expressions—Farris's giddy, sick excitement, the look of near apathy around Tanner's eyes—and wonder if it's possible.

If they could really kill their own kin like that, despite the wolf's every instinct not to.

If that's the case—if they've killed my brother—I'll murder every person standing in this gravel lot.

I'll start with Declan and work my way down the line, burying my teeth in their flesh and tasting their misery.

I'll unravel their intestines like phone cords, line them up like Christmas lights before getting strung up—

Then, the strangest thing happens.

When Dallas finally rights himself, stepping back from the door, I'm expecting to see Kalen's head of dark brown curls, wild and mussed from the fight, his body so much like mine but shorter and slighter. A graphic tee and a random flannel, his signature outfit. A pair of scuffed Vans.

But it's not Kalen that Dallas pulls from the car.

It's a woman, gagged and bound and struggling against him in a feral, desperate way, her blond hair wild and tangled around her face.

And not just any woman. It's Seraphina Winward.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

When the blindfold is ripped from my face, the bright sunshine comes blaring in, reflected off of bright white gravel.

I recognize the location instantly—the gas station right on the edge of town.

The place with the most travelers, where people might come through if they want to fill up.

A quick five minutes off the mountain road up and down to other towns.

The station is a little rundown building with overpriced snacks and stale loaves of bread. There's an attendant whose eyes drop instantly to your chest when you try to check out at the counter.

The stocky, thick Sorel brother keeps his meaty hand on my arm, laughing as I bruise myself trying to get away from him. He smells strongly of gasoline and daemon fire, though I suppose everything in this town smells like that lately. The aftermath of consistently being ablaze.

Did they bring me here to sell me off to some out-of-towner? To finally get me out of Silverville? My heart picks up its pace at the idea of being stuffed into the back of a car, hitting the highway, and being miles away in just hours.

I should have left a long time ago. I shouldn't have let my ties to this place keep me here. And what's going to happen to Nora if they sell me off? Will they find her? How long would it take me to get back to her?

Declan Sorel laughs to my right. I could just spit at him. Of course, my brother called him first, asked if he had any use for me. And of course, the horrible pack leader said yes. He didn't like the way I spoke to him during that town hall.

“Like I said,” Declan says, walking over and gesturing to me like I'm a fruit basket or a nice box of cigars, “we wanted to bring a little peace-keeping offer. Something to keep you entertained. Comfortable while you're in town.”

I'm finally able to see past the glaring sunlight and the reflection of it on the gravel, and my eyes land on the person—the man—I am apparently a gift for.

“I want nothing to do with this,” he says, and I'd know that voice anywhere.

The air leaves my body when I realize who it is standing there next to the gas pump, looking like he'd much rather have a fruit basket. Acting like he's disgusted at the very idea of me. Of the fact that I'm standing here, ten feet away from him.

“Fine,” his brother laughs, pulling me roughly to his side. “We'll use her for something else.”

Xeran's eyes flash in a warning, then they skip right over me and land on his brother. “Get your hands off her.”

It's a command to the brother, an effort to show that though he's younger, Xeran is still the one in charge.

His brother—Dallas, I'm just now remembering—reacts instantly, his body obeying the command before his brain can reroute. His iron grip turns loose for only a second.

Then, as though in retaliation, he tightens it twice as hard.

“ Oomph ,” I let out a strangled cry of pain through the gag—a noise I don’t mean to let happen, but that bursts through me at the prodding of bruises that are already deep in my bones.

My body still hasn’t recovered from the night of the fire, from that great draw of power, and my skeleton feels soft to the touch, almost malleable.

Xeran takes a single step forward, and I feel the flinch of the man beside me, the way his body urges him to step back.

If my feet weren’t tied together, I’d be stepping back, too.

If it weren’t for the chance of staying near Nora, I might almost wish for some random traveler over Xeran Sorel.

My heart is already twisting itself in palpitations, yearning toward him, begging me to seek his touch.

As though I haven’t already been there. As if he hasn’t already made it perfectly clear that I was mistaken in my feelings for him, and that he certainly did not reciprocate them.

“Let her go,” Declan orders, his eyes sliding to me for just a moment before they snap back to Xeran. He wouldn’t like this description, but Declan watches his nephew like a bunny in the bushes, twitching, praying the predator before him doesn’t see him.

It’s been years since Xeran was here in town, and it’s almost laughable how quickly the alphas around me recognize his strength, their bodies wanting to bend toward him as their alpha supreme.

Everyone has always known it would be him.

That is, until he surprised the entire pack by renouncing the position and disappearing.

Dallas lets out a low, angry sound but pushes me roughly forward. My left foot catches behind my right foot, and the ground flies toward my face. To my shock, Xeran steps forward, too, intercepting me before I can fall to the gravel, his hands grabbing me roughly but not painfully.

He hauls me to my feet, and the simple fact of his touch rushes through my body.

Last year, I watched a documentary about humans and heroin. This must be like what it feels like for them when they inject that drug and it rushes directly into their bloodstream.

The interesting thing about Xeran is that he has always smelled a little smoky, a little charred, just like this place. But more like the sweet, puckered exterior of a marshmallow thrust directly into a campfire. Something delicious and dark, all at once.

“Get in the truck,” Xeran orders, not looking at me as he opens the door to the vehicle and swings his arm around, gesturing for me to get inside.

It only takes a second for me to do what he says—my body, after all, is already responding to his orders. Something in the DNA of my cells that wants to obey.

And besides, if my options are Xeran or Declan, there’s only one real choice.

I climb into the truck carefully, using my bound wrists to anchor on the leather and hoist myself inside. His truck smells like leather, cedar, and clean clothes. I’m breathing hard when I scoot over the bench, flip my hair out of my face, and look up just in time to hear Xeran speak.

“I’m only here to deal with the house,” he says, that low tenor mirrored among his brothers’ voices, but none of theirs quite so low as his. “Not interested in a challenge, Declan. But ride up on me like that again? I’ll rip you to pieces.”

A shiver rolls over my skin at the weight of those words and the expressions crossing over their faces. Declan, despite clearly attempting to hide it, looks like he might be sick.

Then, as though he’s just said hi to a friend in a grocery store, Xeran turns and hoists himself into the truck, which rocks with the addition of his weight. Without looking at me, he puts the truck into drive and says, “Put on your seat belt.”

I do what he says—not because I have to, but because I always stress the importance of seat belts to Nora, and I’d be a hypocrite not to wear one now.

Xeran pulls out of the gas station without giving his brothers or uncle a chance to leave first, so they’re caught in the dust of his tires as they stand, staring after us. I swallow, glancing at him. I catch the strong profile of his jaw and throat, then look back out the windshield.

A moment later, I find that I’m able to speak. “You can drop me off just up here.”

For the first time since I was yanked out of that SUV, Xeran looks at me, eyebrows raised like he’s amused by what I’ve said.

“No.”

A beat passes, and my indignation takes over my surprise and natural instinct to be quiet around him. “No?”

He glances at me again, flips on his turn signal, and says, “No.”

“Well, I’m not coming with you!”

“Yes, you are.”

“Are—are you kidnapping me?”

I’d always known Xeran was an asshole, but I thought he was different than the others here. Declan and his gang have been backsliding into old pack ideologies—treating the omegas as property, shirking tradition.

Maybe Xeran isn’t different. Maybe he’s just been gone for long enough that I managed to forget what he’s really like.

“No,” he says low and rough, like he can’t be bothered to clear his throat. Or maybe it wouldn’t matter if he did. Maybe it’s permanently like that from all the time he spent around fires when he was a kid. “You have somewhere else to go, Seraphina?”

The sound of my name on his lips makes a full-body shudder roll through me, and it takes a second for me to compose myself again. I hate this stupid body, the pull it feels to him, the automatic way I yearn to do everything he says.

“I already told you,” I growl, hands tightening to fists. “You can drop me—”

“I’m not letting you out of this goddamn truck, and that’s final .”

His words are biting, and he stares resolutely through the windshield.

I shake with frustration and, annoyingly, something else.

I want to reach out and push him, hit him, take his jaw into my hands like I did once.

Cradle him there, run my hands through his hair, feel the soft pressure of his body against mine.

My mind flashes back to what Xeran's uncle and brothers were saying in the SUV. That they could offer me up as a plaything for Xeran. That it might subdue him enough to keep him from trying to mess with them.

It was fate that my brother snatched me when he did. Declan is still pissed about the way I spoke to him in front of that council, and he jumped at the chance to make me pay for it.

But Declan clearly doesn't know his nephew that well.

If his assumption was that Xeran would have his way with me, then he's wrong. First, Xeran isn't some Neanderthal alpha from the Appalachians who believes a woman is his property.

And second, even if he was, he'd have no interest in touching me, even just for some fun.

Like they always do, images of him rise to my mind, and I have to swallow them down, force them away before they threaten to take over completely. I can't be staring at his hands, thinking about what they might feel like on the inside of my thighs, or remembering the devouring way he kisses—

“You'll stay with me,” Xeran says simply, like it makes all the sense in the world.

My first instinct is to ask why, if he doesn't give a shit about me, he would say such a thing.

And my second instinct, which wrestles its way into existence, is to fight back.

“Absolutely not. I am not staying with you. Let me out of the car.”

We’re climbing higher into the mountains now, further from the town, and I feel my hand rise to the handle, a question in my mind about whether or not I can use magic to unlock it, magic to cushion my fall, magic to move fast enough that Xeran—shifted—would not be able to catch up to me.

But if I use all that magic, I might not be able to locate and recover my daughter, who is in our car somewhere in the mountains, waiting for me.

“No.”

“I can take care of myself .”

“If that was true, he wouldn’t have had you in the first place.”

It’s the longest sentence Xeran has spoken to me since I climbed into this truck, and I get the sense when he shuts his mouth that there isn’t more where that came from. He’s done explaining himself.

I open my mouth to tell him that it wasn’t Declan who got me—it was my brother who dragged me out of there, gagged me, and threw me in the back of his car while my mother weakly tried to protest. But the last thing I want to do right now is offer Xeran information unprompted, so I snap my mouth shut and watch as the landscape passes us by.

We’re climbing into the thick of the forest now, the road rocky and unkempt from nearly a decade of abandonment. When we finally reach its end, a large, log-cabin-style house towers into view.

Xeran climbs out of the truck and circles around to my side while I’m still staring up

at the place in awe. His father's house—his family's house. One I never visited. Not once during high school.

Of all the times Xeran and I met up, it was never, ever here.

“Come on,” he says, opening my door and blocking me in, his eyes serious on me. “Don't make me carry you.”

The traitorous voice in the back of my head—the voice more omega than logic—wants to give into that idea, knowing it would be one of the few situations in which we might feel his hands on us again.

But luckily, I maintain control over myself, and I steel my expression, nodding once to show him that I'm not going to run.

Though I want to, I don't. I walk up the path with him to his house, my mind already reassessing the situation.

I have to get Nora. It's been hours since I cast her away from my family's home, and while I can sense that she's safe, I'm sure she doesn't want to be left stranded like that.

When we reach the porch, I stop. Xeran turns, fixing me with a pinning gaze that makes me feel like Declan must have earlier—the bunny in the bush, caught in the gaze of the predator.

“If you're going to insist that I stay here,” I say, swallowing thickly, my throat somehow dry and like tar at the same time, “then I'll need to bring my daughter, too.”

For the first time since I've seen him again, Xeran blinks, and some of that rock-solid composure shifts, exposing him for a moment. Surprise at the fact that I have a kid.

Trepidation at the idea of bringing her here.

And maybe... jealousy?

No, there's no way. I push the thought from my mind as he opens his mouth, eyes darting out to the forest where daylight is fading.

"Fine," he says, shaking his head. "Where is she?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Ever since seeing Seraphina come out of that SUV, my hands have been in tight fists. First, at the sight of Dallas's hands on her, and once I had her, with the effort of keeping my fucking hands to myself.

It took everything in my power not to touch her once we were alone in the truck. While she was accusing me of kidnapping her.

It's not kidnapping. It's witness protection.

If I drop her off now, leave her on the side of the road, it's only a matter of time before Declan catches her scent and scoops her up again. Something about the look on his face told me that he wanted to hurt her. He thought, for some reason, I might help in doing that.

I would never hurt her.

Well, not more than I already have.

Everything about her is just the same. Everything about her is entirely different.

That blond hair is the exact same shade, but flows down her back.

Long enough that when she pushes it over her shoulder, it rests on her chest, rising and falling with her breath.

I want to twist it around my fingers, grip it in the palm of my hand.

Her scent is exactly what I remember—sweet, subtle, light. Something you have to chase, to immerse yourself in. I remember wrapping it around my body back then, when we were in the secret, quiet glow of one another.

As I could see in the video, she's not quite as skinny as she used to be. Her form is more filled out, her hips and chest fuller. There's a supple quality to her skin that makes me want to take a bite out of her, swallow her whole.

If she were any other woman, and if I were any other man, I would be picking her up right now, begging her to let me take her to bed.

But she's not just any woman. And apparently, she's moved on.

Of course, I know the way we left things wasn't right. But with the way my mind lingered on her, with the way she's filled my thoughts, I'd assumed she wouldn't be able to think about another man, much the same way I haven't been able to really think about another woman.

But clearly, she has. She moved on with someone else. Had his child.

That makes a thought occur to me for the first time: if she was with another shifter—with another alpha, especially—then where the hell is he? Why wasn't he protecting her? How the fuck did he allow Declan to get his hands on her?

Glancing at her again, I wonder if her partner may have died in the fire that took her home. But I don't see the etchings of grief on her face. Only determination.

So, I ask again, "Where is your daughter, Seraphina?"

"I can bring her here," she says, eyes flicking up to mine. A challenge there, and I realize why. She means she can bring her here using magic .

“Absolutely not,” I snap, shaking my head and turning on my heel back toward the truck. Curiosity and jealousy are raging inside me, but more than that, I just want to make sure her daughter is okay. “Just tell me where she is.”

“I’m not exactly sure where she is,” Seraphina says, crossing her arms and popping out a hip in a way that reminds me of what she was like in high school, so flippant all the time. “And if we take your truck, it will take days to find her. Days to bring her back.”

My mouth goes dry at the sound of that—the realization of just how powerful Seraphina is with her magic. I’d pushed it out of my mind, not wanting to think about it, and everything that happened all those years ago.

But of course, the moment I’m back in Silverville, the town just has to shove it right back into my face.

I clench my jaw hard enough that pain shoots up into my temple, giving me an instant headache. “Fine,” I relent, stepping back from her and holding my hands up. “This is the only time, Seraphina. And don’t start any fucking fires.”

Her gaze blares, and she raises her hands at me. It’s not even threatening, but for some reason, it makes a thrill run up my spine. Half adrenaline, half morbid curiosity.

Magic is not allowed. My father—and my grandfather—made that perfectly clear in their tenets for the pack. And what happened nearly more than a decade ago with Seraphina and the other girls is a perfect example of why banning it was the right call.

Seraphina glowers at me, then turns and takes a deep breath, looking out into the driveway and raising her hands as though she’s conducting an orchestra only she can see.

Then a car blinks into the driveway. Gone one second, and there the next. Summoned into being as though it has always existed in that space.

I try not to show on my face how impressed I am, how much her show of power affects me. I'd only seen it once, back when we were kids, and it was enough to make me feel small and powerless beside her.

Something I am definitely not used to feeling.

“Mom!”

A little form pops open the passenger seat and comes running toward Seraphina, who is already moving in the direction of the car. They collide in the middle, throwing their arms around each other.

The girl is older than I thought, or maybe just big for her age. She's wearing a pair of dark denim shorts and a striped shirt, her sneakers smudged with what I recognize as daemonic ash—all that's left after a daemonic fire. Her blond hair is a mirror of Seraphina's.

In fact, everything about her is a mirror of Seraphina, from her posture to the way her eyes slide suspiciously over her mother's shoulder and onto me. Her assessment begins immediately, and I feel her scrutiny like something palpable. Something I try to swat away.

“Who is that?” she whispers, pulling back from her mother.

“He's... an old friend of mine.” Seraphina turns and looks over her shoulder at me, and I see the lie settle there. She and I were a lot of things, but I'm not sure friend ever quite fit. “And we're going to stay here for a while.”

Her daughter looks skeptical, glancing back at the car like it might be a better place to sleep than a stranger's house. Seraphina reaches out and touches her daughter's shoulder in a way that feels like a signal. She pulls her closer to her side.

For a moment, we just stand there, looking at one another.

“Come inside.” The words are gruff as they come out of me, landing with the grace of a belly flop. But it's too late to draw them back in now, so I just turn and walk up the porch, relieved when I hear them following along behind me.

From her scent, I can tell that Seraphina's daughter isn't an omega, like her, but an alpha. The curiosity and jealousy rise up in me again—that means Seraphina has been with an alpha. But who? Do I know him? And what happened to him? Where the hell is he now?

“Wow,” the daughter says, walking into the foyer ahead of me. “This place is massive!”

“Seraphina, wait.” I grab her arm and tug her back, keeping her from following her daughter into the house. I mean to ask her about this whole situation—her daughter's name, her age, her paternity.

Instead, I hear myself asking, “Seraphina... what happened?”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes dart between me and the house, where her daughter has stopped, watching us.

Staring at Seraphina, I realize that, for some reason, I want the answer to this right now. “What exactly happened back in high school? With the fire?”

She blinks at me in surprise. Then, just as quickly, a laugh bubbles up from her

throat, and she leans in close. So close, that flighty scent of hers dances around me.

“Let’s get this straight, Xeran,” she whispers. “No matter what lie we make up to my daughter, you and I are not friends.”

With that, she turns on her heel and walks into the house, and I wonder what the hell I’m getting myself into.

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The house is a real fucking mess.

Embarrassed by the state of it, I spent the next hour making sure one of the bedrooms is in good shape for them to stay in.

Seraphina tells me multiple times that she can clean it herself, that she doesn’t need the help, but I ignore her, shoving boxes out of the way, pushing a broom along the floors, and scalding my hands with boiling water to mop them.

When it’s up to my standards and the girls are both inside, I step into the hallway, heart hammering in my chest.

What the hell am I doing?

Asking—or more accurately, telling —Seraphina and her kid to stay with me? I’m only here to deal with the house. And yet here I am, willingly taking on roommates.

But the idea of turning her out, of just waiting for Declan to get his hands on her again? Not an option.

I’ll have to figure out what to do with her. What to do about that entire situation.

But while cleaning, I couldn't stop my eyes from drifting to the shimmering, almost silver ash on the girl's—Nora, I've learned—shoes.

Couldn't stop thinking about what the two of them must have gone through to get out of a fire that size.

What it must have been like to lose everything in one fell swoop.

The town felt that grief once more than a decade ago, when the first of the daemonic fires swept through the western portion, taking out everything in its path.

It wasn't like other fires, leaving chunks and frames, the skeletons of what used to be.

That fire crushed Silverville in the palm of its hand, ground it beneath its heel, until the only thing left was that fine, shifting ash.

The stuff clogged up our throats and swirled through the air, making you feel stuck in a hellish snow globe until it eventually drifted into the forest, dusting itself over the trees and turning the leaves yellow from lack of sunlight.

I pull my phone from my pocket, turning it over in my hand and thinking.

I'm only here to deal with the house.

But what if another fire comes through, and there was something I could do to stop it? What if the other guys are ready to get back on a squad?

As though he's sensed my thoughts, my phone lights up with a call from Kalen.

"Hey," he says the second I answer. "Why didn't you text me back? You're back in town? Someone said they saw you at the gas station."

“Yeah,” I say, voice low so the girls won’t hear me. “Long story. You think the other guys would want to get the squad back together?”

Kalen laughs. “I think the other guys are going to shit bricks when they hear you’re back in town.”

I should laugh, but something in my stomach turns over at the thought of it.

I’m not staying. I should tell him that, and I’ll have to be clear with the guys about it, too.

We’re just getting the squad together to fight fires if they happen.

There’s no way in hell I’ll be able to sit idly by while they sweep through and destroy the town.

“I’ll let them know,” Kalen says, already sounding like he’s dressing, getting to his feet, taking action. “What time should we be at your place?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

“Was everything in your bag?”

“What?” Nora looks up at me from her place on the floor where she sits with her back against the wall, her legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. “Oh, yeah.”

“Good.” I tap my finger against my knee, straining to hear Xeran’s voice through the walls. It’s low, and he only speaks a few words at a time so I can’t catch or hold on to any of what he’s saying. “So, you took your pills?”

“Like I do every morning,” she says, nodding, eyes on me as though she’s more worried about me than I am about her. Only ten, and she acts like she knows exactly what it is to carry the world on her shoulders.

And maybe she does.

There are a million things running through my mind right now. Getting Nora more of her medicine, finding some clothes, whether or not it would be safe to take a shower here.

How soon we can get away from this house without Xeran finding out.

He won’t hurt us, I know that. But there’s nothing I want less than to be trapped in this house with him. I already feel like I’m itching out of my skin, and the growing, aching want in my lower belly is getting warmer, more insistent.

If I’m around him for too long, it’s going to bring on a heat. And I can’t think of anything more embarrassing than that.

I haven't had a heat since the night I got pregnant with Nora. In the entire time that I've cared for her, she's never known me to have one. And she's a smart girl. I don't want her putting the pieces together about what that might mean.

In fact, I don't want Nora around Xeran at all, if I can help it. She's always been incredibly perceptive, and she just might start to put the pieces together. The slope of her nose, her cheekbones.

Her hair might be a carbon copy of my own, but those blue eyes are Xeran's. They practically scream Sorel. When his brother Dallas looked at me, it reminded me with a startling clarity that in another world, he might have acted as my daughter's uncle.

In a world with a nicer pack, with a better alpha supreme than Declan, without the devastation from the fires... we might have all been a happy family.

Instead, my hands shake as I try to figure out if I could magic her eyes to appear a different color. If I want to risk casting something onto her body like that. Xeran might look too closely at her and see the truth there in the sapphire of her irises.

Maybe I could try it on myself first. But would Xeran notice if the color of my eyes changed?

That thought almost makes me laugh out loud—of course he wouldn't. I'd be surprised to learn that he ever even knew what color they were in the first place.

Back in high school, when we were alone, he made it seem like he might be the kind of man to care about the color of a woman's eyes. Like he might put some thought into finding the right word for mine—chocolate or amber, cinnamon or cedar.

But that was all clearly a lie.

I push away the familiar swell of embarrassment that chokes my throat and force myself to focus on the matter at hand.

I need to figure out how to get Nora and me out of here as quickly as possible.

For her sake, I'll be cordial to him. Act like this is all part of the plan.

But the second we can leave, we'll get in the car and go.

"Mom?" Nora asks, her eyes cutting to the door. "Maybe we could go to the—"

"I think we should try to get some rest," I say, cutting her off and clearing my throat.

I meet her eyes. They're suspicious, wheels turning in her mind. If she were any other kid, she might protest. Instead, she goes to the en suite bathroom, brushes her teeth, and climbs into the bed next to me a moment later, her body slotting against mine.

In a few years, when she grows up more, Nora will need less sleep than me. If let go, I could sleep a full ten hours every night. After puberty—and her first shift—she'll move into an alpha's sleeping pattern.

But for right now, we're more alike than different, and she falls asleep with her back to me. I watch her shoulders rise and fall, knowing I won't be able to follow suit.

I'll stay awake, listen for the sound of Xeran retiring to wherever he plans to sleep. Then I'm getting my daughter and me out of here.

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When Xeran has been asleep for an hour, I rouse Nora at my side.

She blinks, still deep in sleep. But the moment she opens her eyes and registers my face, she must know to keep quiet, because she does.

I hold my finger to my mouth, and we slide out of bed silently.

I grab her backpack and pull it over my shoulders, and together, we move to the balcony off the room.

At first, the sliding door sticks. I hold my breath, eyes shut, praying that Xeran didn't hear the noise, that it wouldn't wake him up in the middle of his sleep.

Alphas may sleep less, but they sleep harder.

When he doesn't come barreling through the door, Nora and I work together, jimmying the door from either side so we can move it along the track and create a space just wide enough for us to slip through.

I have to take her backpack off again, set it down on the porch and go after it, but it works.

Nora looks to me, and I hold a finger up to her, then climb over the side of the railing. It's harder to control my own body like this. I manage to lessen the pull of gravity and lower down a little slower, but I still hit the ground harder than I intended, and I feel the shock of it in my ankles.

When I'm standing on the ground, wet grass tickling my ankles, Nora holds her backpack over the side of the balcony and lets it drop. I use my magic to stop it a foot before it hits the ground and grab it.

Already, I can feel the drain of this expenditure. But hopefully, once we get far enough away, I'll be able to rest and recover.

Nora climbs over the side of the balcony and finds my eyes in the dark again. And this time, unlike with the little boy, I see nothing but full trust on her face. She slides off rather than jumping, and doesn't even close her eyes as I exert my full force of magic to help her to the ground gently.

Nora hits the ground lightly, hovering for a moment before her toes touch the grass.

Together, we move through the lawn and toward the car, but Nora touches my arm, jerking her head toward the trees. I look to the car, then to her, but she seems adamant that we should go the opposite way.

Just like she trusted me, I trust her, and we move through the grass until we break through the tree line. It finally feels like we're far enough away from Xeran—and his excellent hearing—to talk.

"I saw him do something to the car," Nora says, reaching out and taking her backpack from me. I try to protect it by holding on to it, but I'm weary from the use of magic and allow her to take it just for a little while. "We should go through the woods."

"Leave the car?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder at it. "What do you think he did?"

"Probably a tracker," Nora says. In the low light of the moon filtering in through the canopy, her blue eyes look almost black. "What kind of old friend is he, Mom?"

I bite my tongue. From the time she was a baby, my one rule in raising her has always been that I would never lie to her. That I would tell her the truth and show her the world as it really is, so she would never be hit with a reality that she hadn't come to expect.

But now, there's nothing I want more in the world than to keep the truth about Xeran and me to myself.

I tell myself that it's not a lie. That I'm allowed to have things that are private. That I'm not telling her, not because I'm fabricating something, but because it belongs to me.

Trying to find a middle ground, I settle for, "I can tell you later. But for now, we have to move."

Nora doesn't look satisfied with this answer, but she nods, reaching back and tying up her hair before tightening the straps of her backpack and pivoting to face the dense forest around us.

For the majority of her life, Nora has lived a comfortable—though not exactly socially rich—existence on the street where my grandmother lived.

But that didn't stop me from keeping her ready.

With the threat of fires, and the looming fear of an unhinged supreme, I made it a point to ensure Nora was ready for anything.

That included having a go-bag, teaching her survival skills, and impressing on her the importance of a strong will.

Now, here we are, me taking a moment to breathe while my daughter thinks.

"He wouldn't expect us to go further into the mountains," Nora says, her chin tilting up toward the north, further from town and deeper into the dense blanket of trees falling over the mountainside. "And if we go that way, we can walk through the creek. And hopefully, obscure some of our scent."

Maybe it's not good form to follow your ten-year-old daughter's advice for escape, but my brain feels fuzzy from the magic draw, so I just nod, figuring we can always

reroute if I come to my senses and want to go a different way.

If I'm being honest, I hadn't thought much further than getting to the car, getting on the road, and getting the hell out of Silverville.

We move quickly and quietly, stepping among the pine needles on the ground.

I use what magic I have left to further muffle the sound of our footsteps.

As we go, we might be getting further and further from Xeran, but that doesn't mean the threat has stopped.

There are still plenty of things in the woods to get us.

Plenty of terrors hiding around the corner, just waiting for a moment to pounce.

In recent years, these woods have become known for the rampant daemonic fire ravaging through them, but before that, there were plenty of other things to fear. I grew up with the tales of Colorado cryptids, our own versions of the bogeyman.

Except, unlike what humans tend to believe, they are real.

Maybe extinct—or in hiding now, from all the flame and soot—but definitely very real.

Nora and I creep along, and I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising as I think about nymphs in the water, grabbing your hair and pulling you in to drown. Men with faces like tree knots, stepping away from the bark and turning you to wood, too.

So when we step into a small clearing and something appears in our path, I'm ready, raising my hands and saying loudly, "We cause you no harm. We are only passing

through.”

It’s what my grandmother always told us to say if we came across a cryptid of the wood. They’re natural protectors and might let you go if you make it clear that you’re not a logger, not a poacher.

“Oh, isn’t that rich ?” a deep voice rolls through the little space, and I look up to find Dallas Sorel—all three hundred lumbering pounds of him—staring down at us.

He might as well be licking his lips. The big bad wolf.

“She thinks we’re cryptids,” another voice says, a little higher, more nasally.

I put my arm around Nora, turning to see Farris Sorel emerging from the other side of the clearing. I realize the strange smell I caught earlier wasn’t the woods at all. It was the thick, minty scent of his hair gel.

“It’s a lot worse than that,” Dallas says, grinning when another figure emerges, and Tanner—looking more bored than anything—appears, sighing and leaning against a tree, crossing his arms like he’s ready to get this over with.

“Just let me go,” I say, voice small. Why did I use all that magic to get out of there? We could have tried to sneak through the front door, or made a rope from sheets. Then I would have more power available now to fight off these assholes.

“While that’s very convincing,” Farris says, his eyes glinting like the knife in his hand as he circles around us, “we are under strict orders not to let you go.”

“You don’t have to do what he says,” I try, thinking I might just be able to appeal to them. “Think about your father—”

“You don’t know shit about our father!” Tanner surprises me by slamming his fist into a tree, which shakes the thing so violently that daemonic ash shifts around us, twinkling through the air. It would be beautiful if it weren’t so chilling.

“He’s right,” Farris shrugs, looking pleased that Tanner has joined in on the fun. Farris opens his mouth to say something else, but at that moment, Tanner lunges forward, reaching for Nora.

A scream rips out of her when he catches her around the wrist and yanks, and when I turn toward him, I don’t see anything. I don’t see him, or the trees, or the sky, or even my daughter.

Only a swirling rage of red and black as I reach into the stores of magic I have left, scooping at the very bottom of the barrel and drawing some life from myself, bottling up that anger, condensing it, and firing it at the man who has dared to try taking Nora from me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I come around the corner just in time to see Seraphina blast Tanner back into a tree.

Her magic sparks and snarls, singing through the air with the might of a lightning bolt as it stretches out from her fingertips and zips through the night, hitting him in the center of his chest and hurtling his body.

Nora is untouched, but Seraphina crumples to the ground.

Her daughter steps in front of her, looking impossibly small with her hands out. From the back, I can't see her face, only hear her voice when she says, "Stay back !"

Farris laughs, "Oh, are you going to stop us?"

When Dallas lunges toward her, it sends my wolf into a frenzy. Hurling toward them, I kick up pine needles and dust, snarling and sliding over the ground in front of Seraphina and Nora just in time to keep Dallas from reaching toward her.

He jumps back, startled. Maybe he was too invested in the exchange, too single-minded to keep his nose up for scents.

If he had, he would have noticed me heading this way.

Would have caught the signs of me shifting and running through the woods for the past five minutes, just after I woke up and realized the girls were gone.

I should have thought to do more than stick one of those little trackers on Seraphina's car. If I'm being honest, I didn't think she would do anything but climb in and start to

drive. I thought that the notification coming through my phone would wake me up quick enough.

If I was in my human form like the rest of them, I might respond to Farris's question with, "No, I am."

But I can't speak—can only snarl at them. Through the eyes of my wolf, I have to lower my head to see their faces, which are brimming with barely contained fear, a thin veneer of anger slapped over it.

I could rip them to pieces right now, just for deigning to threaten my... what?

What right do I have over the woman and girl behind me right now, except for Declan "giving" Seraphina to me?

Tension grows taut between us, the air sharp with the sense that a single wrong move could send blood spattering over the dirt. Deep down, I know the truth of why I haven't already sunk my teeth into their necks.

Because when I look at Dallas, I see him as he was ten years ago, fifteen years ago. I see him as the cool teenager I looked up to, the guy driving the black Mustang that I thought was so awesome. The guy who'd bring back little treats after a weekend of hunting with Dad.

I see Farris as the snotty kid we'd all make fun of, but still the kid I protected on the playground like my own life was in the balance.

And maybe they still feel some resemblance of brotherhood, too, because when Tanner gasps and groans, writhing on the ground by the tree he slammed into, both Dallas and Farris turn to him, their gazes showing the worry behind their eyes.

“Fuck,” Dallas snaps, glancing at me, then to Farris, then back to the brother with steam rising from the scorch mark in the center of his chest.

I have a feeling that if Seraphina had put just a fraction more juice into her blow, Tanner wouldn't be moaning in pain right now.

Quickly, Dallas steps back and shifts, his tail down and his head lowered, though I can sense how his wolf wants to challenge me.

He moves to the side, and Farris hefts Tanner up, sliding him over Dallas's broad shoulders.

With one backward glance at me, Farris must only barely keep himself from saying something like This isn't over before he, too, shifts, and they disappear into the woods in the direction of town.

Likely to report back to Declan.

There are a lot of questions to answer about this—how did they know Seraphina was going to leave? Were they waiting for her? What was their plan once they had her, and Nora?

But there's no time to answer them.

Eyes on Seraphina's body on the ground, I shift back just as Nora kneels down, putting her fingers to her mother's neck in a move that would make me laugh if I wasn't so concerned. She doesn't act like any other kid I've met.

As a firefighter, I came across all sorts of kids.

Boys and girls her age, sticking things in electrical sockets, falling off the top bunk,

starting dumpster fires behind their apartments.

Children who seemed to have the single goal of stressing out their parents—and emergency services—as much as possible.

And here she is, doing something as grown-up as checking for her own mother's pulse.

“She's alive,” Nora says, and when she looks at me, our eyes meeting perhaps for the first time, I see myself reflected in them.

It hits me with such a shock, such a shove to the chest, that I am genuinely breathless for a moment. My lungs feel flat, useless.

Those blue eyes are my blue eyes. My father's blue eyes. The blue eyes that I looked into just a moment ago, when my brothers tucked tails and ran away from me.

As a reflex, I suck in a breath of air and try to catch her scent. And when I do, it smells unfamiliar. Nothing like me. Nothing like anyone in my family, and only very faintly of Seraphina.

Why does that feel so crushing? I'd known from the moment I smelled the girl that she couldn't belong to me. A scent like mine would be strong in my offspring. That's how our family has always been.

“It's because she used too much of her magic,” Nora says cautiously, breaking me out of my thoughts.

From the tone of her voice, she's not sure what my reaction might be to that.

Surely she knows that magic isn't allowed here.

That I would never condone her mother using it, especially to the extent she clearly has been.

“We need to cool her off, get her something to eat. A lot to eat.”

“This has happened before?”

Nora stares at me, and it feels as though I can practically see her considering what to say. Whether or not she should admit to her mother’s extreme use of magic in a place where it’s prohibited.

Finally, instead of answering the question, she says, looking down at her mother, “If you won’t help me, I can carry her myself.”

I’m not quite sure that’s true, not with how small Nora is. But based on the sheer determination on her face, she might kill herself trying. I nod, pushing aside my curiosity and the still lingering shock from the color of her eyes, staring right back at me.

“I’ll help you,” I offer.

She nods, and I shift back to my wolf, bowing down so Nora can heft her mother up onto my back, much in the same way Farris did with Tanner.

Seraphina is strong, and Nora moves with a surprising strength—even for an alpha child.

And a moment later, we are making our way back down the side of the mountain toward my family home.

Questions itch in the back of my throat, trapped by this form I’m in. I want to ask

Nora everything—what it’s been like for her growing up. If her mother has used magic like this around her before.

If she knows who her father is.

But I ask nothing. Instead, I walk with her at my side, her hand on her mother but also slightly on me, as the birds start to sing and the night insects buzz around us.

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Seraphina wakes up intermittently through the next ten hours, only to eat soup from the spoon Nora offers and fall right back into her coma-like sleep.

At first, Nora seems suspicious of the fact that I want to sit with her and her mother. Then, as the hours pass, she seems to relax around me.

Finally, when the sun is high in the sky and my body is starting to grow heavy from lack of sleep the night before, Nora clears her throat, opens her mouth, and begins to talk to me.

“Why did those wolves run away from you?” she asks, turning to look at me. “You weren’t bigger than the large one. At least, not when he shifted.”

I bite my tongue, glance at Seraphina, then shift in my chair. “Size isn’t everything.”

“So you’re a better fighter.”

“Yes.”

“Are they your family?” Nora asks, tilting her head. “They smelled like you.”

Her words are a punch to the gut. It used to be that I was proud to carry the Sorel scent. Now it feels like a heavy mantle around my shoulders. Like a mark of shame.

Again, I glance at Seraphina. She hasn't told me a thing, hasn't answered any of my questions. So why should I be candid with her daughter?

Though I tell myself to say nothing, I confirm, "Yes. My brothers."

For the next hour, Nora continues to talk to me, asking questions that I tell myself I won't answer, only to find myself giving in.

She asks about when my wolf grew, and if I did anything to help it get bigger.

If I trained with my brothers, and what that was like.

How I managed to increase my alpha control to the point where even my brothers—other alphas—seemed to want to listen to me, to follow the natural order of things.

"It's always been like that," I answer. It's the truth—I have always had slightly more weight to my voice than the others. It's why many in town always thought I would take over as the alpha supreme. It's why Declan is so threatened that I'm back in Silverville.

Nora is in the middle of asking another question when Seraphina wakes up again, using one shaking hand to try to push herself to a sitting position.

"Nora," she whispers, her voice hoarse like she's been screaming for hours, "don't—"

She coughs, cutting herself off, but her hand flutters in my direction, and her meaning

comes across.

Nora hands her a glass of water, whispering, “Sorry, Mom.”

Seraphina is alive. Nora seems capable of taking care of her, and Seraphina clearly doesn’t want me around.

I stand and leave, coming down the steps into the living room just in time to hear a knock at the door. My brain catches up to the moment—to the time—and I realize the guys are all going to be showing up.

When I open the door, Lachlan Cambias struts into the room, wearing a fine leather jacket and smelling of expensive, foreign cologne. He’s the kind of man who wouldn’t look out of place on the cover of a magazine, far more polished and perfect than I could ever be.

The last time I saw him, he was clean-shaven, but now he sports a beard along his jaw that makes him look older. His outline is thicker than it was before.

How long will it be before I stop being astounded at the ways Silverville has continued marching through time without me? My high school friends, somehow aging up from teenagers and into men, just like I did?

“Alright,” Lachlan says, turning and flashing his perfectly white teeth at me. “Are you going to get this party started or what?”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Slowly, over the next few days, my strength comes back to me. Though I tell Nora not to talk to Xeran again, I get the sense that she wants to. That she might talk to him while she's out, fetching me a glass of water or making more soup.

One day, she arrives with a book I've never seen before, but I don't ask about it. Mostly because I don't want to know where it came from, and whether or not Xeran gave it to her.

Sometimes, when I sleep, my dreams morph into nightmares. Replays of that day in high school when everything went wrong.

“Sera!” I hear Aurela's shrill voice piercing through the air as she tries to find me. Valerie's scream of fury. Maeve somewhere, her sobs quiet and heart-shattering.

It's too dark to see anything but a faint crackle, the spark of light around the fifth member of our group, engulfed by flame.

When I startle awake, it's to Nora already petting my arm, trying to calm me down, just like I used to do for her when she was a little girl.

Occasionally, I hear other voices in the house, muffled and male.

It sends a thrill of anxiety through me, even as I know Xeran would never do anything to hurt us, and wouldn't let anyone in the house to hurt us.

He would just keep us here against our will.

On the fourth day after our encounter in the woods, I'm back on my feet, shuffling down the hallway to stretch out my aching, stiff legs.

I stand at the top of the stairs, staring down into the house, wondering if Xeran is here.

It's quiet, and Nora is napping in our room, so I slowly creep down the stairs myself, holding tightly to the railing when my knees threaten to give way to the weight of my body.

The living room is dusty, only a single chair cleared of the grime.

The dust floats through the air—likely a combination of regular house dust and daemonic ash creeping in through the cracks of the house over the years.

The windows are streaked with gray, like someone tried to wipe them off quickly, realized it was harder than they thought, and left them worse than they were before.

Without ever having come here in high school, I can still look around the living room with its high ceilings, leather furniture, and massive stone fireplace and know what this place could look like.

I feel the potential here, along with the weight of the past, as I imagine the Sorels lounging in the living room.

Maybe Xeran sat on this rug once, reading in front of the fire.

“Should I tell Xeran you're skulking around in his living room?”

I jump so hard, I nearly fall over the coffee table. When I right myself, Lachlan Cambias is laughing in that posh, collected way he does, like he's the only person in

on the universe's inside joke.

He's tall and athletic, just like he was in high school, with a head of sandy blond hair that screams summers in Cape Cod, or wherever it is rich people go.

I know from social media that he skis fanatically in the winter, and his body shows it.

He's a little slimmer and leaner than Xeran, a little shorter, but no less physically capable.

While Xeran is from a classic, long-running family name in this town, the Cambiases are a little newer, but somehow manage to carry just as much weight.

Their ridiculous amount of wealth might just have something to do with it.

"Say whatever you want," I finally snap back at him, knowing I've already taken too long to respond. The truth is that the sight of him is unnerving. Xeran and I were a secret in high school. I was, in no way, ever involved with his friends.

Which always made them more like specters than real people to me.

Lachlan gives me a look that says he knows something he shouldn't, then shrugs and disappears back into the kitchen. For some reason, I follow after him, watching as he tips a matte black water bottle up under the kitchen sink, his brow wrinkling when he watches the water coming out.

Looking back at me, he asks jokingly, "Is this water going to give me cancer, Winward?"

I hate the sound of my last name, and I know that Lachlan is dropping it on purpose. To remind me of who he is, and who I am. What does he think about Xeran keeping

Nora and me here?

For years, I've wondered if anyone has wondered about Nora's parentage. But the pills have worked to make her scent strange and unknowable, other than its connection to me, and nobody has even cared to ask, likely assuming her father was some random man moving through town.

That's what people think of me.

"Probably," I answer after he takes his first sip.

He spits the water up onto his shirt, laughs, and looks at me in surprise. Not the quiet girl he remembers from high school. Not the behavior he'd expect from a girl coming from the most notorious family in town.

He probably expected me to get on my knees and grovel to him, or to go speechless at the sight of such a rich man. But for reasons I can't explain, Lachlan has always put a bad taste in my mouth.

And I'm not a teenager anymore.

"Funny," he says, wiping the water from his chin with the back of his hand. Just as he opens his mouth to say something else, the door opens, and Xeran steps through, his blue eyes shifting between Lachlan and me with a dark, serious intensity.

"Is he bothering you?"

It takes me a moment to register what Xeran asks. It's so far from what I expect that my brain lags, bouncing between the two men, trying to reconcile everything—the memories of high school, them as teenagers, them now. The fact that they're friends.

The way Xeran is looking at me.

Finding my voice stuck somewhere in my throat, I don't answer him. Instead, I turn and climb the steps, heart thundering in my chest, recalling first the look on Lachlan's face, then the look on Xeran's.

Those blue eyes, so like my daughter's, locked on me.

And the terrifying truth that somewhere, in the furthest reaches of my mind, I liked feeling his gaze on me.

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By the time we hit the end of the week, I realize Xeran has been buying things.

Clothes appear outside our door—simple shirts and shorts in roughly the right sizes.

Towels materialize to replace the old, moth-eaten ones in the bathrooms. The grimy, squeaky cabinets in the kitchen host a variety of standard children's snacks, most of which Nora has never eaten and has no interest in trying.

Still, the first time I open the door and see the colorful boxes with the cute characters, it does something to my heart—the idea of Xeran ordering the groceries, picking out snacks he thought Nora might like.

I avoid him as much as possible as I heal.

Xeran has been bringing the other guys around—one of his brothers, Lachlan, and two other guys we went to high school with. The second time I see them all together, out in the yard, training together, I realize what he's doing.

He's getting his firefighting squad back together.

Most normal parents wouldn't have let their teenagers fight fires, but Xeran's father, Holden Sorel, had assisted his son in the process of putting together a wildfire-fighting unit within the pack.

Wildfires were ravaging the entire West Coast, unrelated to the daemon fire, and Xeran wanted to do something to help.

So he and some of his friends got professional firefighting training, worked out together on the weekends, and deployed to the fires near us.

Sometimes in California, sometimes north.

The idea of sending Nora to fight a wildfire as an adult makes me shudder, let alone shipping her off as a teenager. But there is truth to the fact that as shifters, Xeran and his squad were much more equipped against the daemon fires than the humans desperately trying to fight them.

On the first day that I can make it up and down the stairs without completely losing my breath, I peek into what must be a laundry room and see a pile of towels, washed and dried but unfolded.

There are several baskets of clothes like that, and I realize Xeran has been so busy lately that he probably didn't have time to do anything more than pull them out of the dryer.

Without thinking, I step inside, shoving a basket of shirts into the dryer to fluff. When Nora and I lived in the suburbs, I did laundry for some clients to help us get by. It was something I could do while at home and that, for the most part, the other people in the pack seemed to find acceptable.

I used to spend a considerable amount of time working with other people's laundry, washing and drying, ironing, folding. So when I pull the clothes out and swap them with towels, beginning to fold, the motion is almost therapeutic.

As I fold, I think about how long it will be until I'm feeling well enough to come up with another way to get out of here.

The car is out. Walking through the woods won't work. But maybe I could magic us away? I was able to move Nora when I was scared back at my parents' house. Maybe if I got my magic strong enough, worked on my control, I could move both of us at once.

It would be a risky plan, but it could work. Maybe I could even move Nora first, wait a few hours, and then send myself after her.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

I jump, snapping away from the towel in my hand and turning to face Xeran, his hands braced on the doorway. For a second, I almost believe he knows what was going on inside my head. Could hear my scheming.

But that's not possible.

“Seraphina?” he presses, but I'm caught up in the sight of him standing there.

It does something to me. He's wearing a drenched black tank and a pair of athletic-fitting shorts, his hair sweaty and pushed back from his face.

There's a tattoo on the inside of his left arm, but I can't make it out from here.

Above all else, he looks strong . He looks like the kind of man who could carry you

from a burning building. And something inside me aches to be carried for once.

“What?” I ask, finally finding my voice, glancing between him and the towel. “We needed some towels—”

“Not that. You were using—” he lowers his voice, as though someone might hear him “— magic .”

I blink, then glance at the towels below me. I was casting without really even trying, the energy flowing through my fingers. Giving the towels a clean line, folding them faster. Setting them down and flicking my wrist to manipulate them rather than going through the motions myself.

Just like I used to do when I did laundry for money. Just like I grew up doing, to help my mother with her mending and household chores.

“It’s faster,” I finally manage, shrugging one shoulder, trying to be nonchalant about it. The truth is that I didn’t mean to do it, or for Xeran to see it, but I’m so tired of constantly being told I’m disgusting just because I’m different. “It doesn’t hurt anyone—”

“Have you learned nothing ?” Xeran explodes, taking another step toward me, his eyes darkening as he looks down at me.

Everything about him is frenetic, his chest rising and falling, his jaw working like he can barely keep himself from attacking.

My heart picks up—a reaction to the threat of him, and nothing else.

“We all know you were casting back then—”

“You know nothing about what happened,” I snap back, taking my turn to interrupt him, to step toward him and poke a finger into his chest. His eyes flick down quickly, and for a second, I can picture him grabbing my wrist. Yanking me toward him. Making our chests collide.

And I almost crave it. A sick, twisted part of me wants the contact, wants to feel the strength of his fingers on my arm. A touch that I’ve been starved of for nearly a decade.

“So why don’t you tell me, then?” he asks, and if it weren’t for the growl in the back of his throat, I might actually think he was in earnest.

But he’s not. There’s a certain demand there. The haughty command of a man who was once on the path to being the leader of the pack.

“It’s none of your business,” I whisper, shaking my head at him. Somewhere in the pit of my belly, I feel the familiar warm tug, a swirl and a pull, and realize what it is.

The omega inside me reacting to him. To the man I believe to be my mate.

Panicking, I go on, the words flying out of me, “In case you forgot, you made it perfectly clear that you wanted nothing to do with me, Xeran. You ran away. Don’t walk around here like you’re the alpha supreme, demanding answers and rattling off commands, when you fucked off and let Declan take the position.”

The second the words are out of my mouth, I know I’ve gone too far. It’s a gross oversimplification of a situation that I’m not even sure I fully understand. But the lingering hurt is there, the sense of betrayal that not only did he leave the pack, but he left me .

He hurt me .

And he made sure every single person in our school—in the community—knew that I wasn't enough for him. That nothing would ever happen between us. And I was stupid enough to think that I might have had a chance.

“Seraphina—” he starts, the corners of his mouth turning down, but there's another tug low in my belly, and I know that all I really need is to get some space.

So, I do what I've just accused him of.

I run away.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

“X, you up there?”

Soren’s voice floats back to me through the trees and the smoke, and it brings back a million times that the two of us have been in this situation before. Fighting fires together as teenagers, making our fathers proud.

We got the call about the fire this morning, and though we’ve only had a week to train, I called the guys together. I needed something to do so I could stop thinking about Seraphina.

About the look on her face when she talked about me leaving.

Like she was talking about me leaving more than the town—like it was more personal for her. It was personal back then—I hurt her. In front of everyone. Coming from a family like hers, she’d never had an easy time, but my rejection surely only made it worse.

So wouldn’t she be happy that I’d gone? Would it have been better for her that I left?

That’s what I’d always assumed.

“Xeran?” Soren calls again, and I realize I’ve been too caught up in my own head to answer him. Clearing my throat of the smoke and heat, I call out to answer him, “I’m on your six!”

I grit my teeth as I move forward, trying to see him through the thick black cloud of smoke around us.

That's one way we can tell it's daemon fire—the smoke is inky black, swirling, making even the brightest day feel like night.

Normal fires burn with a lighter gray smoke, and sometimes you can occasionally even see right through them—but not with the daemon fire.

Humans often get disoriented, trip over themselves, and end up hurting their squad mates in the din.

We've even heard stories of them having panic attacks or mental breaks because the darkness in the smoke was so deep.

But it's easier for us to make our way through the woods now—I can feel the heat of my squad mates, sense them, hear the crunch of their feet. All things humans can't do, which leads them to lose one another and walk right into the clutches of the fire.

“Fuck, man,” Soren groans, stumbling into me. I get an arm around him, helping him to step out of the shit on the ground.

Each of us carries a canister on our backs, but it's not filled with water.

Instead, it's filled with a thick, pulsing goo, similar to the stuff that comes out of a fire extinguisher.

While fighting the first round of daemon fires in high school, we realized that the leftover ash from the fires—a substance devoid of energy or life—could be used to smother the flames.

Mix it with some holy water, and you create a silvery, tar-like substance that sticks to surfaces and kills the flames.

“Over here!” Lachlan calls, swinging around wildly and plastering the trees near him with the stuff. Soren and I move toward him, watching as the bright, electric blue of the fires blinks out of existence.

Through the trees, I can only barely make out the stuff he’s sprayed sliding down the trunks of the trees, coating the bark in its slimy, greasy residue.

“Sor, watch out for that crest up there.” Maybe I don’t need to remind him—he knows these woods just as well as I do. His family has a cabin somewhere up in the mountains, and they’d disappear up there for long bouts of shifting and hunting together.

“Thanks, X,” Soren calls back, and I can hear in the labor of his breathing how long it’s been since he’s done this.

Since any of them have done this.

When I left, Declan made it perfectly clear that firefighting was no longer one of the priorities for the pack, dissolving my old squad and disabling the old warning system. Now I’m the only one of us who’s been keeping in firefighting shape.

We’ve been out here for hours and have only just started to get this fire under control. It came to life in the hills northeast of the town just before dawn. My goal was to stifle it before it could make its way to the town, and it seems like we might actually manage it.

“Oi!” Felix’s voice rings out to our left, sounding strange and echoing. “Guys, come check this out!”

There’s a bit of laughter to his tone, like there always is, and together, Lachlan, Soren, and I push toward him, lifting our knees high to get through the muck.

With any luck, there will be a good, heavy rain to wash this all away—the ash off the trees and the extinguisher off the ground.

If these remnants stay for too long, they can start to trap animals and insects, swallowing up the local wildlife.

To my right, Lachlan moves faster toward his friend, already shaking his head.

Felix is always on the verge of laughter, even when he's in serious trouble.

Once, when we were kids, we responded to a call like this, only to find him facing up against a wild boar, his hands raised, a wicked smile on his face.

“Think I can take him?” he'd asked, glancing at us. The moment he took his eyes off the thing, it charged.

Now, in the trek to find him, we stumble forward through something of a wall—the smoke disappearing like we've walked through a door into another room.

“What the fuck?” Lachlan asks, blinking and reaching up to take his helmet off. His face is smudged with soot and ash, silver streaks running along his temples where it's mixed with his sweat and dripped in a solid, shining line.

We stumble and stop, glancing at one another, confused. Usually, the smoke will linger for days, stay thick and heavy in the forest. But right now, we've emerged into a patch of grass with crystal-clear air, right in the center of the burn. Like we're in some sort of eye of the storm.

And in the center of the clearing stands Felix, his arms held up in question toward us.

“Be honest with me,” he calls across the field, “am I dead?”

“If you’re dead,” Lachlan returns, “that means we’re all dead.”

Soren starts to cough—the result of sudden clean air after two hours of nothing but that thick, choking black smoke. Lachlan shifts to the side, patting him on the back, but I’m focused on the scene.

Felix with his helmet under his arm, his gear sooty and covered in muck, his boots thick with the extinguishing goop. Blades of bright green grass stick to that goop.

The sun is shining right here. It feels like a completely different world.

When Soren straightens up from his coughing fit, he pulls his bottle of water from his side and chugs it, then turns in a circle, shaking his head.

“What the fuck is this, X?”

They’re all looking at me. Maybe because I’m the one who spent the past decade working as a firefighter. Or maybe because my dad had always made it a point to look for answers, and that’s what they expect of me now.

Or maybe because, no matter how hard I try to ignore it, to fight it, I still end up commanding a leadership position. The wolf inside me yearns to take charge, to lead the group, to be the one giving them the information they’re looking for.

That’s part of what it means to be a leader.

Something I saw my dad embody in his work every single day.

Not just living in the glory of being the supreme, but identifying the needs of your people and meeting them.

Whether that was information, food, water, shelter, or safety, my dad was always looking for a way to make sure the shifters in our pack had the things they needed.

“No idea,” I finally answer, hearing how gravelly my voice comes out. I reach for my water bottle to assuage the burn there. When I squirt the water into my mouth, it’s warm from the fire, but it still feels like a blessing on my scorched throat.

It’s the truth. I have no idea what the hell is going on in this little piece of the woods, completely untouched. But as we stand there, catching our breaths, I look around, noticing the lines in the dirt around the perimeter and the faint etchings on the outskirts of the clearing.

Just as the guys and I turn to go, I notice something else. Something barely perceptible, floating on the breeze. Something that smells like mint and gasoline.

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“Xeran?”

“Oh, fuck!”

I jump and turn as I walk into the house, heart thudding when I see Nora standing there in the living room, shadows nearly shrouding her, even from where she stands by the window, her hand resting lightly on the windowsill.

In what world do I allow a little girl to sneak up on me? How the fuck is she so quiet? And how is her scent so weak? Surely her father must have had feeble genes. I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse about this whole thing.

Her blond hair is braided to the side, a hairstyle I recognize with a start from Seraphina. From high school. The thought of her braiding her daughter’s hair in the

same way does something strange to my chest.

Nora stares at me with those wide blue eyes—the ones that look so much like mine—but says nothing, almost like she’s waiting for me to make the first move in this interaction.

There’s something about her that’s not quite like any other kid I’ve met before.

The sense that she has an old soul, already understands the world in a way that most kids her age wouldn’t.

She reminds me of myself.

“What are you doing out here?” I can smell Seraphina, hear her steady heartbeat upstairs—she’s asleep.

It’s nearing nightfall now, and the guys and I have just finished cleaning up our gear after checking the surrounding area for any other potential fires.

Daemonic fires are usually spontaneous, but sometimes you can sense the energy in an area where one is about to start.

“I wanted to ask you some questions,” Nora says, turning fully away from the window and clasping her hands in front of herself. She’s wearing a pair of linen shorts and a t-shirt, and I recognize the outfit as one that I picked up from the department store.

For some reason, that gives me the same feeling as thinking about her hairstyle. Something soft and unbidden, a pride that she actually wore what I picked out for her.

After Seraphina got better, I’d thought about the problem of them not having much,

of her washing the same clothes in the sink day after day.

But the idea of taking them out to a store seemed like too much of a risk.

Especially after my brothers were bold enough to go after them like that, and so close to our father's house.

So close to territory that is technically, legally, and naturally mine.

"Your mom doesn't want you down here," I say to her, pushing past, realizing I'm avoiding her not just for her sake but mine.

My wolf is telling me that there might be something dangerous about this girl. Like I might end up caring about her more than I should. And the last thing I need right now is another tie to Silverville, another thing making me feel like I should stay here for longer than I planned.

"You were fighting a daemonic fire," she says, which is not a question but a lead-in that gets me to stop, turn back, and meet her eye.

"We stopped it in the foothills," I say.

"How do you stop it?"

"Extinguishers."

"What's that?"

"Made from the ash."

"Ash from daemonic fires?" she asks, a lilt to her voice telling me that she already

sees how it might work. The cyclical nature of the thing, its aftermath being the thing to stop it.

“Yes.”

“How old were you when you started?”

“Fighting fires?”

“Fighting daemon fire.”

“Sixteen,” I say, then, almost in defense of my father, “I was a mature teenager.”

“I’m mature,” she returns, tilting her head at me. “Maybe I could come with you next time.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“Well, first, because it’s dangerous. And second, because your mother—”

“Nora .”

Nora and I both jump at the sound of Seraphina’s voice from the stairwell, and I realize I was so invested in talking to Nora that I didn’t notice her getting out of bed and coming down the stairs.

She’s healing well, moving better than she did after that night. I’m still angry with her about that night. About the magic. And yet, when I turn and see her there, anger isn’t the first feeling that rises to the top of my chest.

Not meeting my eye, Seraphina repeats herself, mouth tight, “Nora, it’s bedtime .”

“Right, sorry,” Nora says. With a quick glance between her mother and me, she says, almost cheekily, “Good night, Xeran.”

Seraphina bristles almost visibly, and I can’t help it—I let out a little chuckle as I say, “Good night, Nora.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The adrenaline pulsing through me is almost greater than it was the night I woke up to find my house on fire. Because this can't be happening. This is my greatest fear—Xeran finding out about Nora. I've been able to keep it a secret for this long, and I'm not going to let it all come out now.

He's made it clear multiple times he's only here to fix up his father's house—deal with it. And he's keeping Nora and me here for... some reason. A sense of obligation, maybe. Because his uncle and brothers are the ones trying to come after us.

"Maybe I didn't communicate myself clearly enough," I say, using magic to muffle my voice so hopefully Xeran won't be able to hear it as I pull my daughter through the door to our room and fix her with a look. "You are not to talk to him. You're not to leave this room without me, actually."

"But why?" Nora asks, turning and crossing her arms—a move that I've never seen from her before, but which feels like the start of a teenage phase I am not ready for.

"Because it might not be safe if we're not together—"

"No, why can't I talk to him?"

"Nora," I breathe, blinking at her and shaking my head. "Are you forgetting the fact that he's keeping us here against our will? We tried to escape, and—"

"And he saved us! I don't see any bars on the windows, and he doesn't lock the door."

I gasp. “Have you been outside ?”

Nora looks away, petulant. I have never seen her like this before. “Now, who’s the one keeping me here against my will?”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“But you won’t tell me why . And you won’t tell me who he really is, you won’t tell me why you don’t like him. All of this is happening all at once, and it’s like—it’s like you just...” She mimes zipping her mouth shut.

And it’s true. I’ve always kept her in the loop. Always been upfront and honest with her about the things going on. When people on our block didn’t like us, I told her as much. I made it clear what would happen if she mentioned magic at school. All of that was clear.

So it must be frustrating for her now to not know what’s going on with Xeran. To not understand why I don’t trust him.

But of all the truths I’ve shared with her, none of them have ever been about what happened back then. With the girls, my friends. With Xeran.

With Nora herself.

And I still can’t bring myself to tell her the truth now, so I decide to settle on something else I know to be true. Sitting down heavily on the bed, I look up at her through my sleepy eyes.

“Nora, everything about this situation is temporary. Xeran is going back to—well, wherever he went when he left. We’ll make our plan to get out of Silverville, too. I don’t want you to get attached to him, to this place, because nothing about this is

going to last. Okay?"

"What do you mean, when he left ? Why did he leave?"

I bite my tongue. "Let's talk about it tomorrow."

She opens her mouth, sucking in a sharp breath, and I expect her to call me out on that, to point out that I've said it before as a way of pushing the conversation to another time, never picking it up again.

But she doesn't. Instead, she snaps her mouth shut, takes a deep breath, and turns to change into her pajamas.

I sit on the edge of the bed and try to calm my racing heart. Try to forget about the way Xeran looked at me when he turned around and saw me standing there on the stairs.

Nora crawls into the opposite side of the bed, careful not to touch me as she curls into the blankets. I lie down, mind filled with thoughts of Xeran.

Thoughts of him then. Thoughts of him now.

Thoughts of how much he wants to know about what happened back then.

Sometimes, no matter how hard I try to keep them at bay, the details come back, anyway. I see Xeran back then, his teenage self a little softer. Standing alone in that hallway, just him and me.

For a stupid, stupid moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

"I told you not to talk to me at school," he hissed, his head tipped down, his voice not

unkind but not gentle, either. Even as he said it, the only thing I could focus on was his other hand, pinning my hip against the locker, the sparks running through my body at the frisson of it.

“Sorry,” I’d murmured, but my eyes had closed of their own accord, giving into the way my body melted for him.

It had been exactly three weeks since we first started meeting up.

Always somewhere secret, and always on his terms. I understood why—it’s not like Xeran was the first person who didn’t want to be seen with me at school.

I was decidedly devoid of friendships. If my family name and affiliation weren’t bad enough, thanks to my brother only recently making a name for himself in the drug-dealing game, the fact that I accidentally cast a spell during a school assembly had sealed the deal.

I’d gotten suspension and then detention for weeks and weeks. My mother wept silently in the car on the way home the day it happened, imploring me to never do something like that again.

Today was the first time in my life that I directly disobeyed her.

“Fuck, Phina,” Xeran said, and when he spoke, the breath of his words fluttered over my face. I was so gone for him, so astounded by the fact that this amazing boy from this amazing family would want anything to do with me. That his eyes could linger on me the way they did.

That he had chosen me. That somehow, the body I existed in seemed to serve him well.

It was also the first time I was starting to appreciate that body, focusing more on feeding it, making sure I didn't skip meals, even when it was harder to find something at a home that couldn't care less about nourishing me.

A door slamming at the end of the hall had him springing back from me, his eyes blazing like I was the one who had snagged his wrist, pulled him around, kept him back.

"Don't fucking follow me," he spat, shaking his head and backing up, even as his eyes lingered, falling to the hem of my skirt. Loving the feeling of his eyes on me, I curled my fingers only slightly, creating a breeze from nowhere that ruffled it upward to show off more thigh, more skin.

Xeran swallowed hard, those blue eyes locked on me for a moment longer before he forced himself to turn and walk away.

As always, after seeing him at school, my heart was pounding in confusion. Alone, he was tender, sweet. Anywhere near the school grounds, he could be a little rough with me, pushing me against the lockers.

Not to mention bullying me.

Xeran was never loud, but quiet with his ruthlessness. A muttered comment to his friends that I couldn't hear, though I always felt the pain from their laughter. The way their eyes would swing to me, assessing.

Even then, I knew Xeran hated that he was interested in me, even just physically. And he took it out on both of us.

And that day, when I was still reeling from another interaction with him, a voice rang out from the end of the hallway, sharp and sure, laughing.

“I saw that,” she said, sauntering down the hallway, a lollipop dangling from the corner of her mouth as she looked me up and down.

Her short, choppy hair was dyed several shades of blue, starting with the darkest shade at her roots, then fading out toward the tips.

She wore shorts that were far too short for school.

I couldn't believe she hadn't been dress-coded yet, forced to put on a pair of baggy sweatpants over the top of them.

My blood turned to ice at what she said. I saw that.

She saw me and Xeran. What did that mean? What would she do about it?

I answered, like some sort of mob boss, “No, you didn't see anything.”

“Relax,” she laughed, coming closer to me and popping the sucker from her mouth. “I'm not going to tell on you, Phina.”

Then she reached up and twirled a lock of my hair around her finger, almost absent-mindedly. Like it was her own hair and not mine that she slid between her thumb and pointer finger.

It was the most surreal moment of my life—a total stranger touching me, and yet, I couldn't pull away. She smelled like strawberries and something bubbly, acidic. Champagne?

“You can't tell on me because I didn't do anything wrong,” I protested a little breathlessly, eyes skipping back and forth between hers. She was the first person I ever met with blue eyes so pale that they were practically gray, basically silver.

“Uh, I’m pretty sure doing magic is against the rules.”

Her voice was so soft, it was like she was humming instead of talking. She had seen that. Xeran—who hated magic like his father and grandfather—hadn’t even noticed my little trick. But this girl did.

“Do we have a class together?” I asked, ducking out from under her arm and trying to get my beating heart under control. “Or did we?”

“Sure,” she said, brow wrinkling as she shook her head, a little laugh rising up out of her. “Are you kidding, Phina? Wait—what, you forgot my name or something?”

Her easygoing attitude made me feel like an idiot. If she went to the school—if she lived in Silverville—that meant that I’d known her basically all my life. Unless she’d moved in recently.

But she knew my name. And I didn’t know hers.

Before I could ask, she said, “I’m starting a little club. Wanna check it out?”

Then I was following her down the hallway, turning into a little back room—more closet than room, actually—and finding Aurela Cambias, of all people, sitting at the table. Lachlan’s twin sister.

She looked up, her eyes widening when she saw me. Likely, she was under the same instructions from her parents as Xeran. Stay the hell away from the Winwards.

But instead of scoffing or telling me to get out, her eyes went to the girl with the blue hair next to me, already pulling out two more chairs at the table.

“You were telling the truth,” Aurela said, looking dumbfounded.

The girl nodded and laughed, throwing her arm around my neck merrily. “Yes,” she said. “I always tell the truth, so you can trust me. This club is going to be lit.”

For the rest of the night, I dream about that first club meeting, the three of us cautiously casting little spells together, the spark of the moment too infectious to not let it touch us.

It was the first time in my life that practicing magic felt like flexing a muscle, rather than shoving my foot into a too-small shoe.

And the next morning, when I wake up and open the door to our bedroom, I nearly trip over a little pile of stuff in the hallway.

Xeran is gone—I can feel it in the cool breeze of the hallway, in the way that his scent only lingers instead of pulsing. He’s either training with the guys or off fighting another fire.

“Woah,” Nora says, appearing next to me, leaning down and picking up the books without another thought. I see the first one in her hand—something weighty, a paranormal science book about daemoniac fire.

It’s what the two of them were talking about last night.

I’d heard her asking him questions about fighting fires before I cut them off.

They had a discussion about it, and Xeran went out of his way to bring Nora books on the subject.

When I turn and look at her, I see the admiration growing in her eyes.

“This is sick,” she says, turning one of the books over in her hand. Then her gaze

skitters up to me for the first time, as though remembering I exist. “Can I read these, Mom?”

I have never told her she couldn't read a book before. Now, I stand in the doorway, desperately wanting to tell her to drop it like a dog holding rotten meat in its maw.

But the book itself isn't bad. It's what it symbolizes, what it shows about Xeran.

His thoughtfulness. It's the exact kind of thing he used to do back in high school, leaving a single flower on my windowsill in the middle of the night.

Little acts I could never prove came from him, but I knew were from him all the same.

But what good are the little acts without being there? Without staying? What good is any of this with the weight of our history between us?

I can't tell Nora to put the books back, to leave them outside his room instead. It will break her heart, and besides, it might be good to have something for her to do. So instead, I just sigh and nod.

“Yes, you can read them.”

She hugs them to her chest, whispering something I can't quite make out. Maybe I can't tell her to put them back, but I can do something to make sure we're even. That the good deed tally doesn't go to Xeran this time.

Stepping out into the hallway, I roll up my sleeves, take a deep breath, and get to work.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

When I come home from fighting another wildfire on the west side of the town, I think that I've stepped into the wrong house.

I actually turn around and look at the front door, through the little window on it, to make sure I'm staring out at the same view I saw as a little boy.

To confirm that this is, in fact, the same childhood home that raised me and my brothers.

There are a lot of reasons to think I'm trespassing. Or that I've stepped through a wormhole into an alternate dimension—if one were to believe in that sort of thing.

For one, it smells good . Not like cobwebs or dust bunnies, but faintly of cleaner, and strongly of lilacs. I see why that is when I turn around and spot a fresh vase of them in the entryway. The flowers are sitting in clear water, their blooms letting off the gentle scent of June in Colorado.

The further I walk, the more I discover about the things that have changed.

A hole in the hallway—which I distantly remember being put there by Dallas just before our dad died—has been completely repaired.

It looks like it never existed in the first place, the hole plastered over and matching perfectly with the paint around it.

What used to be a loose railing on the stairs leading to the second story has been screwed more securely into the drywall and... re-stained , from the looks of it.

The floors are shining, mopped and polished. The walls no longer contain a draping, layered swath of cobwebs. Even the tallest corners are free from dust and spiders. When I flip on the various lights, I find that the light bulbs have been swapped out, so they all turn on.

“What...?” I whisper to myself, thinking back to my dad’s stories about Colorado cryptids. Did he ever mention one that would come and repair your home for you? Like a Home Depot tooth fairy?

Even the drapes are clean and pulled open, the windows no longer smeared with the gray soot of a dozen daemonic wildfires. Instead, they’re crystal-clear, the setting sun over the mountains breathtaking in the distance.

As I move toward the back of the house, I smell more than cleaner and lilacs. I smell tomato, mozzarella, oregano, and it makes my mouth water.

And in the kitchen, laughing together, are Seraphina and Nora standing by the stove. On the kitchen table is one of the books I lent Nora, a little piece of paper sticking out in the middle, presumably a bookmark.

The sight of them laughing in this kitchen that for so many years didn’t get any use aside from teenage boys throwing open the fridge to take a swig of milk directly from the jug—it does something strange to me. Like taking me back in time and pushing me forward, all at once.

“Xeran,” Seraphina says, and when she turns around, I catch the glint of a challenge in her eyes.

It’s at this moment that I realize she did all this.

“You...” I clear my throat and stand up taller in the doorway, my eyes darting

between her and Nora, who is looking at her mother intently. “You did all this?”

“Nora helped,” Seraphina says dismissively, as though Nora being involved could explain the sheer amount of tasks they completed today. “As a thank you for the books.”

I swallow, thinking about whatever had come over me last night as I gathered them up, depositing them at her door. For some reason, there was something about Nora that reminded me of myself at that age. Always wanting to know more, seeking information. Even pressing at the adults in my life.

My father always used to say that was one of the ways he knew I would be the one to take over the pack.

Because as a child, I’d asked him things, pressured him to give me answers to questions he’d never considered before.

I never let him get away with a “because I said so,” which seemed to me like an idiot’s excuse for not thinking things through, or not having a decent justification.

“Dinner is almost ready,” Seraphina says, glancing at me quickly and wrinkling her nose. “Go wash up. You smell foul.”

Nora laughs loudly, then claps her hand over her mouth. I look between the two of them, mind racing. What in the world is going on here?

I thought Seraphina hated me. Last night, she made it very clear that she didn’t want me anywhere near her daughter. And now, here she is, making me dinner?

“Hello? Xeran?” She raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Do you remember how to take a shower?”

“Yes,” I say, voice rough, and when I meet her eyes, I know she’s thinking the same thing as I am.

About the time we’d gone to the hot springs together and slipped into one of the curtained showers, when she’d wrapped her body around mine and I’d held her in my arms under the water. “I remember how to shower,” I add.

“Then go do it,” Seraphina says, brushing a lock of blond hair from her face, the blush on her cheeks giving her away. “So we can eat.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m soot-free and sitting down at the table with them, still not sure what’s going on, and why she’s being so nice to me. How can she go from accusing me of keeping her here against her will to being a contractor, cleaner, and cook all in one?

Nora asks me more questions about the fires, and Seraphina watches the conversation with a close eye, like I might poison her daughter’s thinking quickly without her knowing.

The longer we sit at the table, and as the lasagna disappears from our plates, I start to think that I should apologize to Seraphina. For the things that were my fault—being a dick to her. Taking advantage of her.

When Seraphina sends Nora up to clean up from supper and get ready for bed, I join her at the sink, insisting that I help her with the dishes. She looks exhausted, and I can only imagine how the work from the day would have worn her out.

Rather than jump right into the apology, I clear my throat and decide to ease into it with something else, something I’ve been thinking about, “You know,” I say, clearing my throat again, “when my father passed, he left me some money.”

Seraphina laughs, glancing up at me. “Yeah, I can imagine.”

Are my cheeks getting hot? Am I embarrassed? What the fuck is happening to me right now?

“That’s not the point,” I say through my teeth, trying to steer the conversation back, make it go the way I want.

I’ve never been great at talking like this, and Seraphina knows it.

“The point is that—with the fire stuff—I just don’t have time to deal with the house.

So, if you want to keep doing this stuff, I could pay you. ”

“Pay me?” she asks, and when I glance at her, I realize she’s set her dish down in the sink, staring up at me as the water and suds glisten on her wrists.

“Yeah.” Why do I keep clearing my throat? “I mean, when the house is done, and when I head back to Chicago, you’re going to need some money, right?”

Seraphina looks away quickly, shaking her head as she picks up the dish again. “I thought you were going to be mad.”

“Be... mad? That you cleaned? And fixed things in the house?”

When she looks at me again, I understand, and that familiar flavor of dread and anger rolls through me. Something primal, ancient, passed down to me from my grandfather and father before me.

A fear of magic.

“ Dammit , Seraphina,” I snap, dropping a bowl into the water a little too hard, making the water rises up and sloshes over the sides. “What the fuck ? To my house? With your daughter here?”

“ Don’t you dare comment on how I choose to raise my daughter,” she hisses, pointing her finger at me.

For a second, I want to focus on that comment, unravel it and look inside. Because there’s something there. But I’m too focused on the fact that this woman was in my house all day, casting . Using magic. If my father knew about it, he’d be rolling over in his grave.

“You cannot use magic in this house.”

“Then we’re leaving.”

“You are not,” I growl, stepping closer to her, and there’s that familiar tug in my chest, the acknowledgment from my wolf that in every way that matters—every natural, important way—this woman belongs to me.

No matter how many times I deny it to her, or to myself, it’s true. And that means the wolf inside me is going to protect her. Even if that means telling her not to use magic. Even if that means keeping her here in this house. Even if it means suffering under the weight of her angry stare.

“So, you admit that you’re keeping us here against our will.”

“I’ll admit that I’m protecting you. Seraphina, what’s your plan? And what do you think is going to happen the second you try to leave here? Declan is still pissed at you, and my brothers are clearly under his command to get you, and Nora.”

“Well, you could help us get away, then.”

“Believe it or not, I’m busy with other stuff.”

It has nothing to do with the fact that I don’t want her to leave. That when I think about leaving Silverville again and not seeing her—or Nora—after that, something tightens in my chest.

“Your grandfather outlawed magic because he was scared of it,” Seraphina says, taking a step closer to me, tipping her chin up at me in a way that’s far too familiar. “And you’re blindly following in your footsteps for the exact same reason.”

“I am not afraid of magic.”

“Oh, really?” She raises her hand in demonstration, and I flinch back without thinking, glowering at her when she smirks at me. Stepping closer to her, I scowl right back at her.

“You’d flinch, too, if I raised my hand to you.”

“Then do it,” she dares.

“I would never raise my hand to a woman.”

“Which is why I’d never flinch!” she hurls back at me like it’s an insult, rising up on her tiptoes so her face is closer to mine, and my hands itch to find the small of her back, to haul her body up against mine, to explore all the ways she’s changed since we were in high school together.

“You need to get out of my face, Seraphina,” I warn, looking back and forth between her eyes, then letting my gaze drop to her lips. When I find her eyes again, they’re

focused on my mouth, and it takes everything in me not to lift her in my arms, slam her against the wall, and take her right here.

There's something about her—that rough, solid countenance—that makes me want to see how far she can bend for me while making sure she never breaks.

“Make me,” she whispers back.

With each passing second, my resolve continues to waver. Standing right here, with her scent starting to wrap around me, the flighty thing gaining more weight with every second we stand together, I realize I can see a future in which I give Seraphina Winward everything she wants.

I see a future in which I'd give in.

And I can't let that future happen.

Fortunately, I don't have to break the moment because Nora's voice comes floating down the stairs, forcing us apart. “Mom?”

Seraphina blinks at me, like she can't fathom how she got into this situation. I clear my throat and cross my arms, looking away from her and forcing my body to behave.

“Coming,” she says, her voice only slightly shaky as she turns and leaves the kitchen, abandoning me to finish the dishes on my own.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I almost kissed Xeran last night.

And I wanted to. God, how I wanted to.

And how incredibly stupid it was to make a meal for him like that. To sit around the table with him and Nora. To imagine what evenings could be like with the three of us, just like that, going forward.

It would be so easy to slip into a life with him. To wait for him to come home. To watch him and Nora talk through every question she has.

I can feel the effect it's having on my body to be near him. He might not be my mate like I assumed back in high school, but he has a strong alpha pull, and my traitorous omega body responds to it as if he were my mate, pulling me into his orbit and insisting that I stay there.

At night, when I climb into bed, I have to take deep breaths to calm myself, to remind my body of the hurt and heartache I went through the last time I allowed myself to get near Xeran Sorel.

I play through every insult, every laugh, every time he and his friends would pass me in the hallway, their eyes lingering on me for a moment too long. Always the butt of his jokes.

When I woke up this morning, I realized something—I need to get out of this fucking house. I'm constantly wrapped in his scent, smelling him, feeling the weight of his presence. Going to sleep each night with the knowledge that Xeran would be

stripping and sliding into bed at the end of the hall.

Thinking about how easy it would be for me to wait for Nora to fall asleep, walk down to his room, and climb into his bed with him.

I'm even starting to convince myself that it would be worth it, just to have him one more time.

If he's going to wrap things up here and go back to Chicago, and Nora and I are going to figure out a way to get out of here, then this might be my last chance.

These are the thoughts that run through my mind when it's late and the omega tug in my gut grows stronger and stronger. And I think that getting out of the house might help lessen it, even make it go away just for a few hours.

And I desperately need the reprieve.

I decide that I'll go into town. Let his brothers come after me—my powers are back to full strength, and, if anything, my magic has been sparking under my skin, begging to come out. Blasting another one of them might be kind of therapeutic.

But the moment I throw open the front door to leave, there's someone standing on the porch.

"Uh, hi," Soren Riggs says, running a hand through his curly red hair and peering past me into the house. "Is Xeran here?"

"Nope," I say, breezing past him and heading toward my car. I can magic off the tracker that Xeran installed and kill the thing. He left early this morning—maybe wanting to avoid another encounter like the one we had last night. I'm trying to tell myself that I don't care.

“Hold on a second,” Soren says, glancing nervously between me and the house, skipping along at my side like the puppy I didn’t ask for.

Nora is inside, reading in our room, and I’ve warded the hell out of it. I’m confident that nobody would dare to mess with Xeran’s house, but just in case that’s not true, Nora will be protected.

“No, thank you,” I say to Soren, getting to the car and flicking my wrist. A second later, the little tag falls to the gravel, and I kick it off into the grass. Soren watches with an open mouth, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head as he puts this together.

“Xeran doesn’t want you to leave, does he?” Soren asks, reaching out like he might touch me, then drawing his hand back at the last second.

“I don’t see why that matters,” I say, unlocking the car and reaching for the driver’s seat.

I can taste the freedom a little drive into town will bring me.

After all, Xeran leaves us in the house every day.

How much different will it be if I just head into town for a bit?

The people in this pack may not respect me, but I’m hoping they wouldn’t just allow me to be abducted by the Sorels in broad daylight.

Once I think the thought, however, I realize that they might just let that happen.

“Okay, okay,” Soren says, shaking his head and running a hand over his face.

“I’ll—uh—”

Then, to my surprise, he slides over the hood of the car and to the other side, where he slips into the passenger seat at the last moment before I throw the car into reverse and the doors lock.

I hit the brakes and look at him. “What are you doing?”

“Coming with you,” he says. “Xeran told us about his brothers. That they cornered you.”

“So what?”

“So, I’m coming to protect you.”

“I can protect myself,” I snap, glaring at him. “Get out of my car.”

“Respectfully, no. I don’t think Xeran would like that.”

“Oh, for all the gods ,” I growl, reaching forward and grabbing the gearshift, throwing the car into reverse. Soren curses and grabs the dash as I whip out of there, rolling down the windows and cranking the music.

If he’s going to insist on coming with me, I’m not going to make it a good time for him.

By the time we get into town and I whip into the parking lot outside the market, Soren’s curls have been whipped into a tangled mess on his head, and his freckled face looks green. He gets out of the car with one hand gripping it, like he’s getting off a spinning ride at an amusement park.

I hurry into the market, not concerned about whether or not he’s following along behind me. I realize he is when I start to get some strange looks. People aren’t used to

me having a man with me.

It's not like Soren is very high-standing in the pack. As far as families go, his is rather in the middle, though Soren himself gets a boost from being friends with Lachlan and Xeran.

It's enough that, for the first time in my life, I walk through the store without anyone "accidentally" bumping into my cart. There are no dirty stares thrown my way. Not even a single whispered comment under someone's breath.

When he stops to look at the cookies, I continue on, turning the corner. I nearly run into someone heading my way.

"Seraphina?"

The name rockets through me. When I look up, I see my mother standing there, a box of pasta held loosely in her hand, her mouth dropped slightly open.

"Where is Nora?" she asks, lowering her voice and quickly shoving the pasta back on the shelf. "How are you? I heard—well, I heard that they took you to... that Sorel boy. The one who left."

As pissed as I am at Xeran, I bristle at those words coming from my mother's mouth. What would she know about showing up for people?

"Nora is safe," is all I tell her, because for the first time in my life, I have the startling realization that it may not be a good idea to share everything with her, especially not when it comes to my daughter. "And yes. Lucian brought me to Declan."

I see her flinch at the mention of my brother and wonder if she's remembering how he dragged me out of our house. How I called for her, begging for her to help me. For

her not to let him take me.

“Well,” she says, shaking her head and raising her hands to push the hair from her face. “You shouldn’t be... staying with that man. You should come home.”

That makes me laugh, as does my sudden bravado. I thought she and I were on the same page, that she had no right to tell me how to live my life.

“If I was, there would be nothing wrong about staying with him—”

“Do you think it’s going to help matters if the town thinks you’re playing the alpha’s whore?” she hisses, loud enough that someone passing by us turns to stare, her eyes widening when she sees who we are.

My blood runs hot, flushing my face. Something worse than embarrassment shudders through me—shame. Shame at my mother, shame at myself. Shame at the fact that this is what my life looks like now.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

We both jump a little when Soren comes around the corner, the expression on his face thunderous as he glares at my mother.

She stammers, “N-nothing—”

“You should be grateful Xeran didn’t hear that, Winward. If I were you, I’d take stock of Seraphina’s friends and make sure you don’t get on their bad side. You got that?”

My mother’s mouth drops open, and she looks between Soren and me, clearly trying to understand this situation.

I hardly understand it myself. After all, Soren happily played along with bullying me in high school, laughing at all the jokes and cutting his eyes to me gleefully to see my embarrassment.

And now here he is, defending me in the middle of the grocery store.

Did Xeran tell him to keep an eye out for me? What did Xeran say to make Soren behave like this? My heart skips in my chest when I think about that conversation, about how the guys have been training up at the house.

They know I'm there. Lachlan and Felix, too. What has Xeran been telling them?

"Understood," my mother says, lowering her eyes and nodding once before pushing the cart away quickly. My heart squeezes like it always does, wanting to apologize, to reach out to her and make her feel better.

Another sign of how it was so often me taking care of her, instead of the other way around.

"Come on," I mutter, only thinking of Nora at home now and feeling silly for ever wanting to leave the house, leave her there. "Let's go."

"You got everything you needed?" Soren asks, his gaze flitting between the cart and me.

I only nod, and we head for the front where I make quick work at the self-checkout and zip to the car.

"Here," I say, tossing him the keys, suddenly feeling sorry for what I put him through on the way down here. "You can drive."

I hear him mutter something that may or may not sound like, “Thank the gods.”

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“Where the fuck were you?”

Xeran is there the second I walk through the door, the rage on his face quickly turning to confusion when he sees Soren walk in after me, shouldering all the shopping bags.

After that interaction with my mother, I feel empty. Hollow.

“She wanted to go to the store,” Soren says. “Asked me to come with her since you weren’t here.”

Xeran’s shoulders relax. “Oh. Well, next time, I’ll come with you.”

“Okay,” I say, bending down to empty the bags, not meeting his eyes. The room goes silent, and I can only imagine the two men exchanging a look.

“I’ll see you later,” Soren says, and a moment later, I hear the door close.

I’m putting a container of oatmeal in the cabinet when I feel Xeran’s presence behind me.

Closing my eyes, I resist the urge to rest my heated forehead against the cool wood of the cupboard door.

My entire body pulls toward him, yearns for his touch, and at this point, it’s starting to be overwhelming.

“Seraphina, what’s going on?”

There’s not a part of me that actually thinks I’m going to tell him the truth, but then I do, the words falling out of me like dominoes. I turn around and face him, hands bracing on the counter behind me, and when I meet his eyes, I’m horrified to discover there are tears welling in mine.

I tell him about my mother calling me a whore in the grocery store. About the novel experience of not being mocked, followed, or harassed while getting my groceries. I tell him about my brother being the one to drag me from the house, and my mother doing nothing to stop it.

For the next half hour, I tell him about what it was like to live on that street with Nora, to know that everyone treated her differently because of me . How living with that made me feel like absolute scum. How the only thing I’ve ever wanted for her was to live free of the weight of her family.

And finally, when all the words are out of me, I’m left heaving, my chest rising and falling as he and I stare at each other in the kitchen.

Then Xeran does something I don’t expect.

He steps forward, wraps his arms around me, and pulls me into a hug.

The moment he touches me, the sadness inside me rises to the surface, and I cry into his shirt, my body shaking as he holds me against him. I realize I’ve never been held like this before. Not when I was a kid, and certainly not after I became a single mother.

And that realization only makes me cry harder.

“Hey,” Xeran says, pulling back and looking at me when I finally start to calm down. Grabbing his shirt, he uses it to wipe the tears from my face, like he doesn’t care at all that I’ve made a mess of the thing. “Hey, it’s—it’s okay.”

I suck in a breath and nod, even though I’m not quite sure I believe it’s true.

Xeran stares at me, and for a second, I think I might get the apology I always dreamed about after high school. That he might acknowledge the bullying, realize how much it hurt me.

Instead, he clears his throat and says softly, thoughtfully, “As long as it stays in the house.”

I blink at him. “What?”

He nods, working his lips together and looking at the floor. “Yeah—as long as you only do it in here, and you tell nobody about it... we’ll do it.”

“Do... what?”

He raises his gaze to meet mine. I see fear there, along with something else. Something like newly burgeoning trust.

“Magic,” he clarifies. “Keep it in the house, and it’s fine by me.”

It’s not the apology I was hoping for, but it still feels impossibly tender. Like he’s seen right to the center of me and plucked up a tiny piece of my soul, turning it over and showing it to me. Proof that I’m seen.

“Okay,” I say, sucking in a breath, realizing that this new agreement actually is helping me keep the shame from talking to my mother at bay. “Okay, deal.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Every night, I dream about Seraphina.

About going to her room, picking her up from her bed, bringing her back to mine. I dream about shifting at night, running through the woods, running into her wolf there. I dream about being in high school again, sneaking away to be with the girl I knew I was forbidden to have.

Then every morning, I wake up to the reality that she doesn't want me. That I closed that door a long time ago, and there's no chance of me opening it again.

Even though I know I have no chance with her, it doesn't stop my wolf from pacing in anger, howling inside me to do something about her family. That her brother would dare to put his hands on her, that her mother would stand by and do nothing as the abuse continued.

That her mother would dare to call Seraphina a whore.

Even thinking about it, imagining it, makes my blood start to boil, my instincts gnawing at me, wanting me to sink my teeth into the neck of anything that hurts her.

Ironically, that would apply to me, too.

For a week after her return from the market, Seraphina and Nora are in good spirits. Seraphina uses her magic each day to bring more life to the house, painting rooms, cleaning out pests, and shining the floors until they sparkle.

Nora runs through the books I give her at record speed, asking for more and more.

And each time, I have to slip into my father's study, feeling like a kid again as I run my finger along the spines and find what she's looking for, make a pile, and leave it for her outside her door.

Each morning, I leave before they wake up. It's easier that way for me, when I wake up turned on to the point of pain, my dreams of Seraphina working their way into my bloodstream.

It's not good for me, to have her around like this. My body is getting used to her scent, to the pull, and wants only for me to get closer.

Exactly one week after Soren went with Seraphina to the grocery store, he and I are out in the woods on the eastern side of town, walking through the remnants of the fire we fought out here.

"Do you think something about these fires has been different?" Soren asks, stepping over a glob of the extinguisher and looking to me, eyebrows raised.

I stop, turning to him, watching his face carefully to see if he's been following the same line of thinking as me. At both the fires we responded to this past week, there were three similarities.

First, they were next to housing developments, relatively nice neighborhoods, just like where Seraphina's house was before it burnt.

Second, each of the other fires had a similar eye-of-the-storm area, where nothing was burnt, right in the center of the carnage.

And third, I caught the scent of gasoline wafting in the air.

So light that I might have been imagining it, or conflating it with the scent of the

daemon fire.

Faint enough that I almost didn't trust my own nose, wanted to wait until the other guys spoke up about it.

I didn't want to taint their judgment by coming out and asking, "Does anyone smell gasoline?"

Now Soren laughs, shaking his head. "Okay, the look on your face is telling me that you agree with me, but you're not going to tell me why."

And that makes me laugh, because he's right. And even after all this time, somehow he knows me better than anyone else.

"Yeah," I say, scrubbing my hand over my face. "Something like that."

For the next hour, the two of us walk through the gnarled trees and burnt roots, looking for anything that might point to a more obvious reason for the recent patterns in daemon fire.

Because the thing about these fires, usually, is that they're random.

No pattern—just whichever place in the earth gets weak enough to let the daemonic energy through.

"So," Soren says after a long stretch of nothing but the silence of us and the charred woods. "Are we going to talk about the Seraphina thing?"

I straighten up, eyeing him. "What is there to talk about?"

He presses his lips together, raising his eyebrows. "I mean, other than the fact that

you hated her in high school and now the two of you are roommates?”

So maybe there are some things Soren still doesn't know about me. Some secrets that I've managed to keep well.

“I did not hate her in high school,” I say, though I know that's not what he's getting at.

“Okay. Whatever you say, man.” He stops, reaching out to touch one of the trees.

“I'm just saying, you skip town and only come home for your old man's house, and now that you're here, it just feels like...

I don't know. Getting the squad back together feels like you're staying.

Letting her and that little girl stay there, keeping them safe from Declan—that feels like staying to me. ”

What he's not saying is that it feels like there's something more between Seraphina and me, but he's not spelling out the implication. I don't need him to.

Even if I was honest with him, there would be nothing to tell him about this time around her.

She'd thought so little of me, she'd assumed that I would take Declan up on his disgusting offer, or that I would kidnap her when I was trying to do what was best. She hates the idea of her daughter talking to me.

And I can see in her eyes that she still resents me for the way I treated her in high school. The fact that I've never apologized for the way I treated her.

Beyond all that, there's still the glaring fact that I rejected her. She claimed me as her mate, and I told her plainly, in front of Soren and everyone else, that I didn't feel it.

It's far too late now to turn around and admit that I was lying about something as sacred as the mating bond. The most ancient, natural, and inherent of our traditions.

As a teenager, when I realized why I was so drawn to Seraphina, I'd gone to my father with the question of what to do. Naively, perhaps, I thought that he might counsel me to honor that bond. That nature, and the gods, knew far more than I did about which pairing would be right for me.

But the look on his face was nowhere near accepting or understanding.

"Tell nobody about this , " he hissed, taking me aside and closing the door to his office. "The last thing we need is for whispers to move about the pack that you won't have a strong luna at your side."

He was worried. Worried about my brothers, and their increasingly selfish behavior. Worried about my uncle, my father's adopted brother, who had just returned to town without warning.

I didn't like what my father had said about Seraphina, about keeping the knowledge of the bond to myself. And I didn't obey his direction to stay as far away from her as I could. Maybe if I had done that, all this could have been avoided.

Instead, the bond developed, and Seraphina realized it, too. Maybe she didn't mean to try to claim me that day the way she did. But I'd had no choice. I had to follow my father's orders and make sure nobody in the town thought she was telling the truth.

To be a good alpha supreme, I would need to have a good luna. And according to the pack, Seraphina Winward was not that. Nature and the gods and all their divine

knowledge be damned.

Now, as Soren and I pick our way back through the wreckage of the forest to my father's house, my mind turns over with thoughts of Seraphina and Nora. How much I've enjoyed having them live with me. What it's been like to come home to them every day.

Maybe when I leave Silverville, I could bring them back with me to Chicago. Declan wouldn't follow Seraphina there, certainly not if he knew I was with them. We wouldn't have to worry about what people in Silverville thought.

If I took Seraphina with me back to Illinois, maybe I could broach the subject of us again. Apologize.

Or maybe it wouldn't matter where we were.

Maybe Seraphina is smart enough to carry the past with her, to use it as a shield to make sure a man like me could never hurt her again.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Once I get the go-ahead from Xeran to use magic on the house, I wake up each morning with a renewed sense of purpose.

I clean the rooms efficiently, fixing holes and patching things up, sweeping dirt right out the windows, then cleaning the windows until they shine and let in all the beautiful natural light.

Out back, I discover a decrepit, overgrown garden and realize it looks like it's been dead for much longer than the house has been empty.

It must have belonged to Xeran's mother.

Gently, I bag up the husks of the old plants and find new seeds in a garden shed to plant, not using my magic to encourage their growth but using it to ensure the soil is rich with nutrients and that they're watered properly.

Nora joins me for most of the projects, and I realize she's getting the same sense of satisfaction I am. It reminds me of when my grandmother first died and we moved into her place, going through it room by room, slowly making it our own.

In the garden, we end up using the same plotting as we did for our own, planting tomatoes, peppers, strawberries, watermelon, and pumpkins. I eye the edge of the property and wonder about planting cherry and apple trees. We never had room for fruit-bearing trees at my grandmother's house.

The garden takes us several days to finish, and when a heat wave comes, we move our work inside again.

“Look at all these books ,” Nora whispers when we push open the door to the next room on our list. Xeran has been calling this one his father’s study, but I’d argue that it’s more like a library, with several large shelves of books towering into the high ceiling, where skylights let in the bright, orange afternoon sun.

There have to be at least a thousand books in here—books on pack law, wolf biology and natural inclination, leadership and development.

Say what you want about the Xeran’s father, but he was dedicated to being a good alpha supreme.

He studied for the role like he might have to do an interview for it someday, or have to prove his qualifications.

“Yeah,” I cough when some of the dust in the air finds its way into my throat. “And a lot of cleaning to be done.”

Together, we wipe down the impressive mahogany desk, finding that the drawers inside are empty.

Most of this house is empty, actually, like someone came through and cleared the rooms of their personal belongings just after Xeran’s father died.

There are no old coats hanging in guest room closets, no discarded notes in the drawers of this desk.

Nothing but the books to show the personality of the man who once made this room his home.

We take all the books off the shelves, and Nora insists on sorting them alphabetically by author. After dusting each shelf, I polish them off, and we return them to their

spots. Mostly, we're quiet, but while we're finishing up the last shelf, Nora turns to me, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Mom," she says matter-of-factly, "this place is a lot nicer than our old house."

I laugh from my place on the ladder, where I'm magicking my rag into the back corner of the farthest shelf. "Yeah, well, the Sorels have a lot more money than Grandma ever did."

"No, I mean, it's bigger and stuff, but I like... I like that we're out here."

When I glance down at her, I understand what she means. She likes that there are no nosy neighbors to peek over our fence and watch what we're doing. She likes that there are no block parties happening in the street that we certainly don't have permission to attend.

"Yeah," I agree reluctantly, not wanting to let myself think about what it would be like to stay since that's never going to happen. "It's definitely a lot better than being in the suburbs."

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I don't mean to take a nap after we finish with the library, but I've been pushing my magic harder and harder since the day of the fire, and I need the rest.

When I wake up, it's with that slightly fuzzy, disoriented feeling. The sun is already down at the horizon, the sunset almost over, and it casts the room in a soft purple light that will soon disappear into nightfall.

At first, I expect to see my room at home, then I remember that the house is gone. Following that, I look around and realize Nora isn't with me. I sit up, heart pounding

as I go look for her.

Hearing her voice at the end of the hallway, I follow my ears to her and peek around the corner into the study.

It looks completely different than it did this morning.

This morning, with the layer of dust, cobwebs in the corner, and streaks on the windows, it all looked gray.

Now, it's washed with golden light, several of the candle sconces on the walls lit, their flames dancing and casting lovely shadows over the walls and shelves, glinting off the golden words on many of the books.

Nora and Xeran sit in the back of the room near the large bay window that overlooks the mountains in the distance. Their heads are craned down as they study the chessboard between them.

"I could see how you might think that the right move," Xeran says, leaning forward, his voice low and calm as he points to the board for her, "but part of the game is thinking several moves ahead. So try and tell me what you think I might do next."

"Well..." She pauses, tilts her head. "If I move my queen, then you might move your horse—"

"Knight."

"— knight. And if you move him over here, then you—oh. You'd have check."

"I'd have check mate . See the bishop here?"

Nora laughs, shaking her head and dropping it into her hands. “I’m never going to be good at this.”

When Xeran laughs, too, reaching across the table and touching her shoulder gently, the sight of it twists my chest, and I have to swallow through the lump in my throat.

“Hey,” he says, a chuckle coming from his throat as Nora raises her head. “I was just like that as a kid. This is the first time you’ve ever played—you don’t have to be perfect right away. You’re already picking it up a lot faster than other kids.”

“Really?”

“Well, that’s an educated guess. I don’t know a lot of kids, but I don’t think many of them are even playing chess.”

“Hmm,” Nora says, working her jaw and staring down at the game. “Let’s go again.”

“Okay,” Xeran laughs. “You take white. But I’m telling you right now, it’s going to be a long time before you ever beat me, kid.”

“I’ll accept that challenge.”

As I stand in the doorway quietly and watch Xeran coach her through another game, it almost feels like my brain is lifting from my body.

Without meaning to, I’m thinking about the moment, all those years ago, when I knew I was pregnant.

My first instinct was to call Xeran and tell him.

To ask him to come back and take care of me.

But I wasn't sure if he would.

Actually, I knew that he would have come back—out of obligation. Out of duty. But I wasn't sure if he would ever love our child.

Ever love me.

And if we're not mates, that means that Xeran could have a real mate out there somewhere. And I could never subject my child to the reality of watching their father have another family. A family that he naturally, biologically, would have loved much more.

So I said nothing, and I had Nora take her pills, and I still haven't told Xeran the truth.

I think about the way he pulled me into his arms after the incident with my mother. How he'd comforted me. What would it have been like if I reached out to him back then and asked for his help? Would he have returned and taken care of me? Fallen in love with our baby?

Just as quickly, my brain provides me with the memory of the day he rejected me publicly in front of basically every single student at our school. When he made it perfectly clear that we were not mates, and that it was laughable I would think so. A Sorel would never be mates with a Winward.

So maybe even seeing him like this, with Nora, was still a good call. Maybe I can't handle one more painful, crushing rejection from Xeran Sorel.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Terrifyingly, Nora Winward did come close to beating me in one of the matches we played. She didn't notice—thank the gods—but when I saw it there on the table, it made my heart jump with something surprising. Something I wasn't expecting to feel. Something like pride.

Like I had anything to do with her aptitude, her intelligence.

Sure, I taught her the rules of the game, but within ten minutes, she fully understood them and started crafting her own strategies, coming up with different ways to play against me.

She was already starting to analyze my weaknesses, look for ways to exploit them. A strategic thinker.

Seraphina surprises us by bringing us hot chocolate, and for a second, I let myself sit in what it would be like if this was my life.

Playing games with Nora. Enjoying a warm drink with them as a summer thunderstorm rolled in over the trees to the east. What it would be like to keep these two in my life.

Maybe that would be my strategy now. Endless delay. Just keep talking about going back to Illinois, then never do it. Keep talking about Nora and Seraphina leaving Silverville together, and never let that happen.

When it's time to go to bed, I wish I could stay up with Nora, keep playing together. But the guys and I are training first thing in the morning, and Nora is yawning.

As I get ready for bed, stripping down into my underwear and brushing my teeth, I find my thoughts going back to her. To Nora. To those blue eyes that are so much like mine. Her bright mind.

I need to ask her how old she is. It can't be long before she'll have her first shift, and her sleeping patterns will move toward an alpha's.

She'll no longer go to bed and wake up with her mother.

And it would be nice for her to have another alpha around so she wouldn't have to spend the free hours of the night alone, sitting in a quiet, dark room and waiting for the morning to come.

Luckily, it was never like that for me, growing up with two older alpha brothers.

By the time my first shift came and I realized I wasn't sleepy at ten anymore, Tanner and Dallas were already bursting into my room, grabbing me by the limbs as I laughed and writhed, dragging me out with them to go hunting.

In the morning, Farris and Kalen would stare wide-mouthed at whatever we managed to catch the night before. Our mother would sigh, roll up her sleeves, and pull out the dehydrators to start making elk jerky.

That was back when there was still light in the Sorel house. Before she passed.

Now, I slide into bed, letting my head hit the pillow, forcing my body to relax, to let go of the tension in each part of me. Like every night, two things swirl through my head.

First, the knowledge that Seraphina is just down the hall from me, in her own bed.

The pull in my body toward her only gets stronger with each passing day.

I'm thankful for Nora's presence, because if she wasn't in that room with her mother, I probably already would have given in and gone to her in the middle of the night.

And second, I think about the strange circumstances around the fires. Etchings in the trees, the little clearings left behind. Something is ringing in the back of my mind, some familiarity that I should hold on to but can't quite seem to grab.

I'm caught between thinking about the fires and falling into a dream about fighting one when the first ear-splitting wail rings out through the house.

The alarms.

The wildfire alarms that Declan had dismantled. The ones that the squad and I went around and fixed the second day we were here. If they're going off here and now, that means the fire is close to the house and only getting closer.

I fly out of bed and down the hallway, sprinting toward the room Nora and Seraphina share. The door flies open before I reach them, and Seraphina stands there, her mouth slightly open, the panic and fear flashing over her face in waves.

"Come with me!" I yell, though they can't hear me over the loud, insistent whining of the sirens. It's enough to wake even a tired alpha from the deepest of sleeps.

We fly through the house together, the sound of our feet heavy on the stairs, but just before I pull them through the door, Seraphina puts out a hand to stop me.

"Xeran," she says, her chest heaving as her eyes dart to the windows, where we can see the orange and blue glow of the daemon fire getting closer. "I can protect the house."

“What?” I ask, shaking my head and grabbing her arm. There is no protecting the house. There’s only getting away from here as fast as we possibly can. Come on—”

She raises her hands in front of her, and I feel the kinetic spark of the magic rising from her skin. “I can keep the house from burning,” she says, her feet planted like she might fight me to stay here.

I want to tell her that it’s stupid, that it doesn’t matter, but there’s something in her expression that tells me she wants to stay. That the house surviving this fire matters to her, too.

“I’ll stay with my mom,” Nora says like that was ever a question, and I don’t have any more time to think. I have to get my gear, get out there, and stop this thing before it can get any closer to the other houses up here in the mountains.

“Okay,” I finally manage, realizing this means I’m putting my trust in magic—in Seraphina’s magic—to keep her safe. To keep her and Nora alive against the deadliest threat in Silverville. “Okay.”

With that, I turn and race through the door, moving toward the shed, dialing the guys as I go. I already have texts from several of them, but there’s no time to read them as I yank on my pants and coat and grab my helmet from the wall.

“X, you good?” Soren picks up, the first to speak, his voice grainy and breathless like he’s getting dressed.

“Yes, fine. Fire is east of here, headed down the mountains quick—”

“Xeran,” Kalen says, and even though I know he’s an adult now, his voice will always sound to me like my little brother. It makes a protective nature rise up inside me. “I had a bad feeling about this. I was already on my way to the house. I have a

theory about what those clearings mean—”

There’s a staticky interjection, and his voice cuts out for a second.

“Kalen?” Lachlan asks, then to us, “What was he saying about the clearings?”

Kalen’s voice comes again, choppy and strange, likely cutting out because of the daemonic energy around us.

“—near the house—”

The blood rushes from my body as I stop, picking up the phone like I’m grabbing my brother by the shoulders. “Kalen, are you near the house? Is that what you’re saying? Where are you?”

But there’s nothing on the other end of the line from him.

Something is wrong.

“Meet me up here,” I say to the others, then I end the call and sprint out into the grass, heart pounding as I try to think about what to do.

I’m only half-dressed in my firefighting gear, and the wolf is demanding that I shift, that I go find my brother, even if that means I can’t bring the extinguisher with me. Even if it means I’m a little less impervious to the flames licking up the trees around me.

The wolf hasn’t steered me wrong in the past.

Dropping the pants and coat, I start running, allowing the shift to take over my body, rolling through me like running through a waterfall. A moment later, I’m on all fours,

and I catch my brother's scent easily. It really is astounding, the differences between our senses from one form to another.

Five minutes later, I'm rounding the bend, where I find Kalen's car driven off the road, the door hanging open and abandoned.

I follow his scent into the woods, where I find him geared up, spraying at a writhing, spitting strain of daemon fire that clings to a patch of trees and twists up into the sky like some sort of reverse tornado.

I can't call to him, can't get his attention. Something screams in the back of my mind that this isn't a good idea—that something bad is going to happen. That none of us should fight these fires until the entire squad is together and we can protect one another.

And sure enough, the moment I get close enough to him that he can sense me nearing, that tendril of fire reaches down from the sky, turning with the might of a living thing and swinging directly for my brother.

I don't think. I don't pause to consider the best course of action.

Instead, I just launch myself at him, my wolf colliding with him just in time to throw him to the side and take the daemonic blow myself.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

“Watch out!”

Nora and I stumble to the side as the front door of the house flies open and Kalen Sorel comes barreling through, Xeran limp over his shoulders.

“Oh my gods,” Nora says, her voice going shrill. I turn to her, using my most commanding voice.

“Go to the bathroom,” I say, voice hard, even as it’s tinged with exhaustion from keeping wards up around the house. “Fill the bathtub and sink with water. Don’t come out of there until I come get you.”

She hesitates but does what I say, her eyes lingering on Xeran’s limp body for a moment before she turns and runs down the hallway.

“What happened?” I ask Kalen, who shakes as he sets his brother down on the couch.

Xeran is coated in ash, and when Kalen rolls up his brother’s shirt, there’s a singed mark down the center of his chest. I suck in a breath at the sight of it—charred and already oozing pus.

“He took a strike from the fire for me,” Kalen says, speaking as though in a trance. “I didn’t even see it coming.”

“Watch out.” I’ve never spoken to another alpha like this—with, perhaps, the exception of Xeran—but Kalen listens to me, immediately moving to the side.

Healing magic has never been my strong point as I haven't had a lot of chances to practice, but I raise my hands over him and take a deep breath, trying to remember what the other girls said about using the energy to mend.

Kalen watches, seemingly fascinated, as the skin around the wound becomes less puckered, less red. Then he stands, his fingers working anxiously on his helmet under his arm.

“Do you think he's going to be okay?” Kalen asks, apparently not bothered by my use of magic on his brother. “Can you fix it?”

“I can do my best,” I say through gritted teeth. “But he might have one hell of a scar.”

“The other guys are out there.” Kalen is already lifting his helmet, pulling it back on over his head. “I have to help them. Don't let my brother die, okay?”

“Okay.”

With that, he turns and runs out the door, and I focus all my attention, all my magic and energy, on the man in front of me. It takes longer than it should, but eventually I manage to get the daemonic energy out of the wound, manage to seal it shut and ensure it won't get infected.

I'm working on speeding up the healing process and taking away the pain when Xeran opens an eye and turns, blinking slowly when he sees me.

“Seraphina?”

“Oh, thank the gods,” I mutter, and, without meaning to, I slump forward onto him, overcome with relief that he's okay, that my healing didn't make everything worse. Then I remember he's injured and might still be in pain. “Shit, sorry—”

But when I try to sit up, to pull away from him, he holds tight to me, keeping me there, pressed against him. The smell of his skin, his scent wrapping around me—it's intoxicating, making that tug in the bottom of my stomach stronger than I've ever felt before.

"I'm sorry, Seraphina," he murmurs, his voice low and gentle, like a song.

"What?" I ask, my voice muffled into his chest. Is he sorry for being injured? For saving his brother's life so I would have to heal him?

But then he says, "I'm sorry for everything I did to you in high school. For the way I treated you. It wasn't okay."

Something inside me clicks into place. I've been holding on to what happened back then—the way he treated me—as a way to convince myself that he's not a good person. Not a good man. And here he is, holding me, apologizing without prompting.

"It was right after you rejected me," I say, voice shaking, and when Xeran pulls back from me, his eyes look a little clearer than before.

"What?"

"When the... when everything happened with the fire. Back then."

Xeran's eyes go wide, and he swallows. I'm going to tell him about what happened, even as my heart thunders in my chest and every instinct in my head tells me not to.

"I... had this group of friends. Some other girls in school who also felt like outcasts. We could all do magic, and the shame of that... well, I guess it kind of drove us together. After that day, when I tried to claim you, to ask you to prom..." I pause, taking a deep breath, trying not to think about how intent Xeran's eyes are on me.

“I don’t remember who suggested it, but we came up with this idea to sabotage prom.

To do something that would make everyone sorry for the way they treated us.

It was never supposed to be a fire, but one of my friends...

” I close my eyes, think about her blue hair, the way she screamed when the flames overtook her. “She just took things too far.”

Xeran’s hand finds mine, and his touch startles me. But when I open my eyes, he’s looking at me with compassion, not disdain.

“You didn’t release the energy?” he asks, his eyes searching mine. “You didn’t start the fires?”

“No,” I admit, though I’ve always been confused about what, exactly, my role was that day. “But I was there when it happened. And I’ve always felt like it was partially my fault.”

“But we all blamed you,” Xeran whispers, closing his eyes. “We never even really asked for your version of things.”

“As far as I know, Valerie and Maeve got the same treatment as I did,” I whisper. “The only one of us who got off without being connected to it was Aurela.”

“ Aurela ?” Xeran asks, his eyes widening. “Aurela Cambias? Lachlan’s sister? She had something to do with this?”

“She was there,” I confirm, though she was so quiet, always silent during our meetings, that maybe it’s fair her parents swooped in with their money and made sure their daughter’s reputation wasn’t harmed by the rumors, by the swift social

punishment.

“Holy shit.” Xeran pauses, takes a deep breath, and tugs on my hand to bring me closer to him. “I’m sorry, Seraphina.”

“You can call me Phina,” I whisper, swallowing, watching the expression on his face morph into something tender, something intimate.

“Okay.” Xeran’s smile is crooked, endearing. “I’m sorry, Phina. I’m sorry for everything.”

I don’t know whether it’s me or him who moves, but suddenly my lips are pressed against his and I’m sliding up onto the couch, my legs moving to either side of his hips.

I feel heat flood into me with the press of his hand against my lower back, his tongue parting my lips, his hips driving up against mine.

I feel him there, already hard against me.

“Xeran,” I whisper against his lips, and when I reach out with my magic to check, I feel that Nora is asleep in the bathroom, the door locked.

We have time.

Maybe this shouldn’t be happening as his friends are out in the fire beyond us, but it’s like everything in the world falls away, like Xeran and I are two magnets that have been slicing through the world to find one another again. Like it was inevitable.

He growls against me, and despite the injury still warm on his chest, Xeran grabs my hips, holds me, and flips us around so he’s hovering over me, his mouth hot against

my neck as he kisses and sucks.

For a mind-numbing second, I think that he might mark me there—that he might just sink his teeth into the soft skin on my neck.

But he pulls back, letting out a strangled sound in his throat. His hands travel down my sides, finding the hem of my nightgown and drawing it up.

There were times in high school when we lingered on one another. When we took our time to chase pleasure together, discovering and exploring one another.

This is not one of those times.

This feels like a stolen moment, like every second we waste not getting straight to the point is another chance to be interrupted, for the universe to come between us again.

So when Xeran's hands find my underwear, he doesn't pull them off. He rips them, desperate, until they come away in shreds. His sweatpants are already loose and twisted around his hips, so he pushes them the rest of the way down, taking his boxers with them and exposing his cock.

When he draws back, adjusting his knees on the couch and positioning himself, I catch sight of it—the pearl of pre-cum right there at the tip, the length and width of it, how it throbs. For me .

If it's possible, he's grown since the last time I had him, and it makes my pussy tighten in anticipation—and a little anxiety about whether or not that thing is going to break me.

“Come here,” he growls, notching at my entrance, bracing himself over me, and taking my mouth with his, his hips forcing my legs open as he presses in.

Inch by inch, he sinks inside me, the pain and pleasure mixing until I have to bury my face in the crook of his neck and mewl against him, trying to stay quiet, trying to keep this thing between us a secret from the world.

Xeran grips my hip with a single shaking hand, as though taking it slow is the most difficult thing he's ever had to do. I feel the restraint in every movement of his body, each time he pushes a little deeper inside me, stretching me.

And when he's fully seated inside me, our bodies as close as they can get, he sighs, grunts, and pulls out in a swift motion before driving back in and rocking both of our bodies up together.

“ Oh ,” is all I manage before I lose myself to the pleasure, the motion of our bodies together, the bliss of not thinking, not needing anything other than Xeran and me, the push of him, the pull of me.

When I orgasm around him, it's with my arms around his neck, hands clasped tightly together, back arching so my breasts press against his chest through my thin nightgown.

And when he releases, I feel it—his knot forming deep inside me, locking him there, pulsing against me in a way that makes the omega in me squirm with delight. Only an alpha can touch me like this, form a knot that presses the right buttons.

And only Xeran can touch me like this. Reaching every part of me. As his knot pulses, slowly releasing inside me, the slow, warm ooze of it mixing with the slick from my heat, Xeran breaths heavily and kisses me.

He kisses my forehead, my neck, and uses his hands to turn me side to side so he can press a kiss to each of my temples. His lips flutter along my hairline, my jaw, then back to my lips.

I realize I'm comfortable here, with him. Something hungry and desperate inside me finally sated, if just for a moment. The heat coming and going that quickly, galloping in with want and sitting back now, having gotten exactly the thing it wanted.

And I realize everything has just changed between us.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I should just take this moment for what it is, finally getting Seraphina— Phina —back.

After years of forcing myself to stay away from this town and convincing myself that she would never accept an apology if I offered it, I've proven myself wrong.

She's accepted my apology. She's right back here in my arms, despite everything.

So I should just leave the moment alone. At least for right now, I should keep the other question in my mind at bay. I shouldn't let it come forward, shouldn't give in to the urge to ask her.

And yet, I do.

"Phina," I say, pulling back from her as my knot continues to pulse, emptying inside her thoroughly, satisfyingly. Searching her face, I ask, "Who is Nora's father?"

She goes stiff beneath me, her hand that was just running up and down my forearm pausing at my elbow before she pulls it away. When she looks at me, it's like she's searching my face for an answer I don't have.

"I—" she swallows, looks away from me. "It's nobody."

"What do you mean?" I'm being stupid—I should have waited for another moment to ask her this, but I had to know. And now she's flattening beneath me, trying to gain distance even as I'm stuck inside her. "Phina, you can tell me the truth—"

“He was just passing through town,” Phina says, turning her head back to me suddenly, those brown eyes flashing as she stares up at me. Something like amber, luminous and full of life, flickers with something I can’t place. “It was a temporary thing. He was never going to stay.”

“An alpha?” I ask, feeling jealous and possessive. “And you don’t even know his name?”

She works her jaw and bites her lip. “No.”

It doesn’t seem like her, to sleep with a man without knowing him.

In high school, we came together on accident, getting stuck in a supply closet together for hours until someone came and unlocked the door.

Talking and inching closer the whole time—that’s what led to the walls breaking down between us.

I’d always been drawn to her, but after that, I knew I couldn’t stay away from her.

And after that, she started to look at me like someone she knew. Someone she understood.

Before the first time I took her, when we were alone in the middle of the woods, she asked me for my middle name. Like it was important that she got to hold on to a little piece of me before we touched each other in that way.

“It’s not a big deal,” Phina says, shifting beneath me and reaching up to brush some of the hair from her eyes. I watch a wave of pleasure flood through her in the flutter of her lashes, see how difficult it is for her to work out the rest of her sentence. “Nora and I have always been enough.”

My knot continues to pulse, and though the bulk of my pleasure is through, I know that some omegas can orgasm again from the pressure of it against them. Shifting, I watch as her face softens and tightens. Her eyes shut.

This conversation is important to me. And I get the sense that there's something she's not telling me.

But I want to chase the edge of that pleasure more. Want to watch her come around me once more, want to feel her body giving in to mine again.

Words drift away as I move against her—not pulling in and out, not thrusting, but moving gently from side to side so my hips press against hers and my knot moves inside her.

When she lets out a moan—hushed but still a little too loud—I cup my palm over her mouth. Her eyes flutter open, find mine, and I reach down with my other hand to find her clit, pressing it with my thumb.

This time, she moans into my hand, her eyes shutting again, and I feel her tightening around me, the crux of her pleasure coming closer and closer.

I want it—I want to taste it for myself. Not because it feels good for me—though the pressure on my knot does feel good—but because it feels good for her. And I would go to the ends of the earth to make her feel good.

When she comes, she bites into the soft part of my hand, and it makes me want to mark her bad enough that I have to bite down on my own tongue, close my eyes, and imagine what it would be like—to leave my mark on her neck, to show everyone that she belongs to me.

But I can't.

Can I?

I've already publicly turned down her claim, told everyone that we weren't mates. Is it possible for me to go back on that declaration now?

When she's done, the pressure of her orgasm has worked my knot along until it's nearly gone, and I'm able to slide out of her.

"I'm going to go clean up," she whispers, sliding up and off the couch, grabbing her torn underwear from the ground.

When she's gone, I swear under my breath—I've never felt more confused than I do now. Was she telling the truth about Nora? Something tells me that's not true.

But if Nora was mine, I'd be able to smell it, loud and clear. The Sorel scent would be obvious. Hell, Kalen would have noticed and told me about it before now.

All this forces me to face something else—I wanted Phina to tell me that Nora was mine. I wanted it to be true that the few times we were together in high school were enough for her to get pregnant.

Even with the pain of knowing I'd missed so much of her life already, I would happily accept the joy of knowing Nora was mine. That I would have some claim to Phina and her daughter.

If it was public knowledge that Phina had my child, it would make things a lot easier in the pack for me to claim her again. It would only make sense.

But pressuring her isn't going to make things better—it's only going to make things worse. The last thing I want is for Phina to pull away from me, to feel that she needs to hide.

When I stand from the couch, I follow her into the hallway. There, I find her coming from the upstairs bathroom, her cheeks pink, her skin glowing. Is this what she used to look like before? How had I never noticed?

“Hey,” I say, catching her by the arm as she goes to walk past me. I pull her back and line her up against the wall, watching as her gaze rises to mine, unsure and waiting for my next words.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m sorry for probing. I was just... curious.”

She shifts uncomfortably, clearly unused to accepting apologies. “It’s okay.”

“I—I don’t want you to run from me, Phina.”

Her eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

“I want... to see where this goes. Between us.”

If it’s possible, her eyes widen even more, flitting back and forth between mine. This close, I can still smell my scent on her, the heady evidence of our sex. I can feel her heartbeat picking up speed and resist the urge to lay my palm over her chest, right above it.

“You do?”

“I do,” I say, swallowing, opening my mouth to add more, but I’m cut off by the sound of Nora rousing herself in the bathroom. Phina and I separate, eyes still on one another, both of our heartbeats picking up speed.

I tell her with my gaze that we can talk more about it later.

She looks away from me, gaze settling on the bathroom door as Nora steps out. While Phina goes to her daughter, I follow the sound of buzzing to the kitchen, find my phone there, and check the texts from the guys.

They've contained the fires for now.

I confirm to them that I'm fine, even as an ache stretches out through my chest, a pain I hadn't noticed when I had Phina in my arms.

A moment later, Nora and Phina appear in the kitchen, watching me expectantly.

"Is the fire done?" Nora asks, her voice small.

I nod, eyes moving between her and her mother. "For now," I say, which seems to calm her somewhat.

Phina meets my eyes, and I realize Silverville has needed me far more than I ever thought.

This town needs me to help stop the fires.

And Phina has needed me all this time. Needed an apology, needed someone to lean on, needed someone to protect her.

Now that I'm here, the idea of moving back to Illinois grows weaker and weaker with every passing second.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I know that I shouldn't, but I find Xeran in his room again the next night.

And the next, and the next.

He labors over my body, touching each part of me like he's marveling at the fact that I exist. During the day, Xeran steals a moment to touch me, to twirl his fingers in my hair or lay a stray finger on my waist.

On Wednesday, he comes back from training with the guys and sets a large glass vase of roses in the center of the kitchen island. There's no card, and no words exchanged, but I can't shake the feeling that they're for me.

Nora and I continue working on the house, and on Friday, Xeran comes home before lunch, laughing when he finds us in the basement, trying to identify a spider we've captured.

"Science class is over," he says, sweeping his arm upstairs. "I have a surprise for you."

Nora and I exchange a glance but follow him upstairs, along with his instructions to pack a bag each. The trauma of my past manages to convince me that he's kicking us out—which is ironic, considering how only a few weeks ago, I thought that he was keeping us against our will.

But he doesn't kick us out. He has us climb into his truck with him, Nora sitting between us as we take the road out of town, then down out of the mountains and across the state.

I hum along with the music and watch as Xeran betrays himself, singing along to some of the Disney songs Nora picks for the drive.

Happiness blooms in my chest when we turn a corner and the Red Rocks open up in front of us. Xeran pulls off onto the side of the road and cuts the truck's engine, glancing over at us.

"I'm meeting someone here on Sunday, so I thought we could take a trip out of Silverville together," he says, helping Nora jump out of the truck. He shrugs as I slide out, eyes widening at the views behind him. "Make a little weekend out of it."

The three of us hike together to the top of the amphitheater, breathing hard and laughing each time we stop and look out.

"This is so cool," Nora says, running her fingers against the smooth red rock around us. "I can't believe this was just here."

"Well, they did have to a bit of shaping," Xeran laughs, and for the next twenty minutes, the two of them talk about natural rock formations, which leads into a discussion of natural advantages.

"Something like this is good for amplifying the music," Xeran says, sweeping his hand around, pointing at the ridges around us. "But it could be good for a lot of other things, too."

"It could have been a secret area!" Nora exclaims, turning to him with her eyes wide. "For people to hide out."

"Yeah, something like that," he agrees. They work a ways ahead, climbing and chatting, and I watch them. The way they walk the same, move their hands the same.

When Xeran asked me who her father was, there was a part of me that wanted to come clean to him right then. Tell him the truth about her, about him.

But I couldn't. For some reason, the words clogged up in my throat, until it was impossible to get them out.

Because it's one thing for me to risk myself—to get tangled up in him, to believe him when he tells me he's sorry. To try to look ahead to some sort of future with him.

It's another thing to implicate Nora this early on. If, for any reason, we have to leave, I don't want her to deal with the heartbreak of losing him.

If, for any reason, Xeran decides he doesn't want to be a dad, or still doesn't want his name to be tied to the Winwards, I don't want him to hurt her, too.

It's my job to protect her, and that means feeling him out.

Seeing if he still plans to head back to Illinois.

Trying to decide, if he were to ask us, whether we would want to come with him.

To leave behind the West. Colorado, the place I've spent my entire life in.

To leave behind a relatively small-town atmosphere for the third-largest city in the nation.

After seeing the amphitheater, we hop back in the truck and fan ourselves as we wait for the AC to kick in. The drive into the city is picturesque, and Nora chats the entire time, asking Xeran about each of his brothers.

I expect him to shut her down, to say that he doesn't want to talk about it. But to my

surprise, he engages, telling her about each one.

“Tanner is a pothead,” Xeran says, and when Nora’s brow wrinkles, Xeran clarifies, “He smokes weed—does drugs. I’m pretty sure his brain is fried.”

“Say no to drugs,” Nora agrees with a glance at me, which makes me laugh. Apparently, one of the campaigns at school really stuck in her head.

“That’s right,” Xeran agrees, smiling as he glances over at me from the driver’s seat, flipping on the turn signal and taking an exit into the city. “And Farris likes to act tough, but he’s something of a mama’s boy.”

“So where’s his mom?”

I wince when she says it, and Xeran pauses for a moment, clearing his throat. “Well, she died when Farris was... probably fourteen. I think it messed with him, being that young.”

“How old were you when she died?”

“Nora, that’s not—” I start, but Xeran holds his hand up.

“It’s fine,” he says to the highway, then to my daughter, “I was sixteen when she died.”

I remember that day. Apparently, Xeran’s mother had been sick for a long time. When a pack loses its luna, there are long days of mourning. Xeran had shown up to school in a daze for weeks.

Then, once that was over, he got much, much meaner than he was before. Everyone deals with grief in different ways, I suppose.

“I was five when my grandma died,” Nora says, reaching forward to run her hand over the buttons on the dash. “But I didn’t really know her.”

I remember that day, too. The day I found out about her death, and about the fact that she left her home to me. My brother was pissed, but the lawyers made it clear that she was of sound mind when she made the decision.

My wards—and the general neighborhood watch feeling—of the area managed to keep him away. It’s one thing that my nosy neighbors did well, making sure my home wasn’t an easy target for my brother.

Xeran turns into the parking lot of a very nice hotel, bumping over the cobblestones without a care. My eyes widen as I turn and take it in—the large marble columns, the man standing outside in an honest-to-God suit and tie.

“Good afternoon,” he says when Xeran hops out of the truck and gestures for us to bring our bags.

“Hey, checking in,” Xeran says. “We won’t need the valet—we’re heading out again here in five minutes.”

The man in the suit nods, and we follow Xeran inside, then upstairs to a pair of suites on the top floor. I knew that the Sorels were wealthy, but I never imagined they were this wealthy.

Nora squeals and runs between the two rooms, lying on each bed to assess the softness. It’s one of the rare moments I see her actually acting her age, which is happening more and more now that she’s around Xeran.

“Xeran,” I whisper when Nora races into the adjoining room. “This is...”

He turns to me, shrugging, but there's a satisfied smile on his face. "I've been working for years in Chicago, only paying for myself. Plus, I have the inheritance from my dad. Been a long time since I did something just for the heck of it."

I hum, and he glances into the other room. Seeing the bathroom door closed, and Nora apparently closed up inside, he wraps an arm around my lower back and hauls me into him, kissing me thoroughly.

Like always, I melt into him, hands going to his chest. A sigh escapes my body, tension fizzling out.

For the first time in my life, I wish that Nora wasn't here.

I wish my grandmother was alive, and we could have left my daughter with her so Xeran and I would have this entire hotel room to ourselves.

So we could be loud and reckless and touch each other without worrying about how quiet we were, or whether or not we could be heard from down the hallway.

When the door to the bathroom clicks, Xeran releases me, but those dark blue eyes stay fixed on me, hungry, seeking, clearly wanting more. Clearly thinking the same as me.

"Come on," he says, voice thick as he jerks his head toward the door. "We've got a lot more to do tonight."

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Taking the girls to Denver turns out to be one of the best ideas I've ever had.

Of course, I worry about Silverville, but Kalen has promised to let me know if anything happens in the two days we're gone.

Kalen and Felix are tailing Declan, trying to see if he has anything to do with the fires back home.

Kalen insisted that it would be best for me to get out of town—Declan might let down his defenses if I was away. Besides, we needed to pick up more ash to make the extinguisher for our packs, which we usually get from a source in the city.

Nora's face lights up when we walk into the mall, and I take her store to store, buying her whatever she wants while Phina looks worried and runs her hand over her mouth each time I swipe my card.

For years, I've had all this money sitting in my accounts, and I've finally found something worthwhile to do with it.

When we hit the first store that's not just for little girls, I touch a hand to Phina's lower back and gesture for her to go in with Nora, who is already looking thoughtfully at some of the heels as if she would ever be able to wear any of them.

"Go on," I say, indicating she should go into the store and look at some of the dresses. "You'll need something to wear to dinner."

"Xeran," Phina whispers, turning her head to the side and glancing at me. Even under

fluorescent lighting, she looks immaculate. Her blond hair is loose around her shoulders today in loose, bouncing curls. I resist the urge to reach out and tug on one as she says, “This is too much.”

“It’s not,” I say. “If you don’t pick something out, Phina, I’ll choose for you. Then we’ll both be hurting.”

She laughs and rubs her hands up and down her arms. She tentatively takes a step into the store, glancing back at me once more as if I might change my mind.

“Fine,” she relents. “But I am only getting one thing.”

Eleven more bags and the rest of the mall later, Phina and Nora each have a drink in their hands—some sort of tea with little balls at the bottom that I skipped in favor of a black coffee.

We’re heading back to the truck as they laugh and talk, Phina wearing one of the dresses she tried on straight out of the store.

I love the dress.

But I love the idea of taking it off her more.

Back at the truck, I throw their bags in the bed and pull the cover over, locking it up and sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Alright,” I say as we emerge from the dark of the parking ramp and into the bright Denver sunshine. “Who’s hungry?”

“That depends,” Nora says, eyeing me after our conversation on Denver’s most well-known cuisines. “What are we having?”

Phina bursts into laughter at the idea that I might force us to go out and try Rocky Mountain oysters, and I steer the truck toward downtown, where I've booked us a reservation at one of the nicest restaurants in town.

As we're seated, I think about all the times I came with my dad here, eating at this very restaurant and talking to the Denver alpha supreme, a much older man with a lot more territory to worry about than us.

When my father started bringing me and none of my other brothers to those meetings, it only made tensions worse between us.

"Order whatever you want," I say, watching as Phina's eyes widen at the prices on the menu. It's not like I could afford to—or would want to—eat here every day, but I've always felt comfortable spending a bit more on special occasions.

When the waiter comes, Nora says proudly, "I will not be having the oysters. I'll have the chicken tenders, please."

Phina and I share a look, and I wonder if I'm getting a taste of something I could have with them. Maybe even something I could have with them here, in Colorado, in Silverville. Trips to Denver together.

And maybe one day, I'd even be bringing Nora here to meet with the Denver alpha supreme, teaching her about diplomacy and the sharing of resources. Teaching her the same things my father taught me.

When the waiter walks away with our menus and I realize what I've just been thinking about, something hits me. I won't be bringing Nora here and talking to her about being the alpha supreme if that's not the role I occupy.

Once again, the wolf inside me bucks against my rib cage, insisting that it's what I

want. That I should challenge Declan and take the title.

But I left Silverville all those years ago because I decided fighting for it was the last thing I wanted.

“Steak for the gentleman,” the server says, breaking me out of my thoughts as he slides a plate in front of me.

I force myself to pay attention to Phina and Nora, to spend this time with them even as those ideas lurk in the back of my mind, waiting for their moment to come to the front again.

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When we get back to the hotel, Phina surprises me by leaving Nora and me alone as she steps into the bathroom, saying the bathtub is too good for her not to take a bath.

It's the first time she's clearly and obviously left me with her daughter, and it tells me that something is changing. That she's opening up to me. Starting to trust me.

And maybe if I show her that she can trust me more, she'll get closer to telling me the truth about Nora.

Although, that could just be my own wishful thinking. A hope that Nora could still somehow belong to me, despite there being no evidence that she does.

Nora and I sit across from each other at the table, setting up the pieces for the new chessboard I got her while we were shopping. Pink and purple, it's not exactly a traditional set, but I'd find myself thinking that it might look good in her bedroom.

If she had a bedroom, at my dad's place.

My place.

“Xeran?”

I startle, nearly knocking over the king when Nora says my name softly, pulling me from my thoughts. When I look up and find her gaze, those intense eyes are on me.

The same color as mine. It’s impossible to ignore.

“Yes?” I ask, my heart starting to thud a bit harder as my instincts kick in, and I get the feeling that this conversation might be something serious. That Nora is about to tell me something important.

She’s quiet for a moment, adjusting her pawns so they’re all perfectly lined up. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Would she know if I was her father? How could she possibly know? Did she see my eyes reflected in her own, or did Phina tell her? Does Nora know who her father is? If it’s an alpha just moving through town, like Phina said? Has Nora ever met him?

“Of course,” I say, though maybe I shouldn’t respond like that. Maybe she shouldn’t be telling me secrets. But I can’t resist the idea of finding out more.

“My mom doesn’t know,” Nora says, picking up the box to the chessboard and setting it on the ground, then looking up at me with bright eyes. I realize that she reminds me of the little girl from Annie —both incredibly young and incredibly smart at once. Tough and scrappy. A fighter.

I feel like I should say something about making sure she’s safe, that she’s not keeping a secret from her mother that might harm her, but I can’t find the words before Nora speaks again.

“I can do it, too.”

“Do what?” I blink, watching her, wondering if this is about her first shift—but why would she keep that from her mother? Usually, it’s something worth celebrating.

She pauses, and I feel her anxiety radiating from her, her nervousness at telling me this. Then she raises her chin, meets my eye, and says, “I can do magic. Like my mom.”

Something happens inside me—something like dread, like worry, like denial.

I grew up believing that magic was wrong in every way.

That it was people harnessing the natural energy of the world and twisting it into unnatural shapes for their own sick pleasure.

That anyone with the ability to move and shape that magic was inclined toward malice, and those who used it were actively evil.

And here’s this girl, who I think might belong to me, sitting across from me sweetly, her hands trembling as she tells me this fact about herself.

“Are you... sure?” I finally manage to say, clearing my throat and laying my hands on the table. “Because you wouldn’t really know until—”

Keeping her eyes on mine, Nora moves. Not side to side but directly up, her body lifting from the chair as though someone has just grabbed her and lifted her up.

And she hasn’t even moved her hands—no flick of the wrist or visible casting, like with Phina.

I stare at Nora, my mouth going dry at the reality of what that means.

She can cast without any external sign of it at all.

Lowering back down into her seat, Nora says, “I haven’t told her because I think it would break her heart. She hates magic. And everyone around us—they were always mean to her because of it.”

Hypocritically, my wolf wants to rip apart the people who dared to be mean to Phina, to hurt her. Even as I have to acknowledge that, at one point, I was one of those people. At one point, I was one of the people who hurt her the most.

As we play, I find my gaze wandering back to Nora, watching as she considers the board and celebrates each time I make the move she thought I would. I watch her think as she worries her bottom lip.

And I find myself wondering if a girl like her—so young, and still so hurt by the world—could possibly be naturally oriented toward malice. Is it fair to assume that someone is evil just because of an ability they’re born with?

I find myself thinking of the humans and how they assume things of shifters—if they believe in them at all—simply because of the ways we can change our bodies. Is it not the same ignorance to be against magic for no other reason than it being different?

When the bathroom door opens and Phina emerges, wearing a pair of soft pajamas and smiling at us, Nora looks at me, panic flitting over her face.

Subtly, I nod to her. I’ll keep her secret.

Even if I still have no idea how I feel about it.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Saturday morning, I wake up in Xeran's arms, having snuck into his room through the adjoining door the night before. He'd turned over and pulled me in as his little spoon.

Then, as our bodies started to move together, he held his hand over my mouth to keep me quiet, pulling aside my pajama bottoms and pressing our hips together until we were both breathing hard. I fell asleep content, with his knot still emptying inside me.

After getting out of bed, taking another quick shower, and waking Nora from a deep sleep, we head out into the city.

Xeran takes us to the zoo in the morning, then to the aquarium when it gets too warm to walk around outside.

After Xeran buys her a stuffed shark and promises to bring her back for the all-out shark exhibit later this year, we leave the aquarium and head a little outside of downtown to a candy shop.

There, we attend a dessert workshop where they use liquid nitrogen on ice cream.

Nora is fascinated the entire time, asking questions and trying samples of the products.

When we're done, we walk around downtown until we find the big blue bear from the pictures.

"I think I love Denver," Nora says when she's working on her second ice cream of

the day. We're leaving an ice cream shop shaped like a giant milk jug.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her to my side. "Well, I think you just really like sugar, huh?"

She grins, and I think about how Xeran offered his flash-frozen ice cream to her, apparently not concerned with her getting a crazy sugar high.

He's still not concerned with it, judging from the amount of candy clinking around inside the bag at his elbow. Anything she wanted from the candy shop, she got to have.

Also at the candy shop, Xeran stopped to chat with a shifter from the local pack, smiling and shaking his hand before we left. I found myself thinking, Of course he's stopping to talk to another shifter, an ally. That's what the alpha supreme does.

Then I remembered that Xeran is not the alpha supreme of Silverville. And he doesn't want to be. As far as I know, he's still planning on going back to Illinois.

Even though he wants to see where this goes with me.

What does that mean? Other than us finding a way to be together most nights? Other than the fact that I told him about what happened back in high school, and he apologized for the way he treated me back then?

We're not mates. He made that much clear, and even if that wasn't the truth—which I can't even let myself think about—it would be far too late for him to go back on it now.

Lying about a mating bond would be ruinous socially, and if Xeran had any inclinations toward the alpha supreme position, that wouldn't help his favorability

among pack members.

Not to mention the fact that Nora and I have been living with him. If people weren't talking about it before that incident with my mother in the grocery store, they are certainly talking about it now.

He drops us off at the hotel for a while to pack up and get ready to go, then returns with his truck bed full of canisters.

“What are those?” Nora asks while he's throwing our bags in the back.

“Those are extinguishing canisters,” he says, closing the top and walking her around to the side of the truck. “Equal parts holy water and ash from daemonic fires.”

“Does holy water really work?” Nora asks, her eyes wide as he circles the other side of the truck and hops into the driver's seat.

Xeran pauses with his hand on the key, then glances at her thoughtfully. “I'm not sure. It could be just the ash, stifling the fire. But we've never really wanted to try the mixture with regular water. It would be an experiment with much too high a cost.”

Nora nods and leans against me, our activities from the day—and the sugar—apparently hitting her hard.

Xeran and I ride in silence for most of the ride, listening to pop hits on the radio. Maybe we're both in our own heads. Maybe there's not a whole lot that we can talk about with Nora sitting between us, clutching her stuffed shark to her chest.

Then, a few miles out of town, the handheld radio Xeran has hanging from the rearview mirror crackles to life.

“This is an emergency broadcast.”

The voice is rough, staticky and hard to make out. Xeran sits at attention, reaching out to turn the music down and the handheld radio up so we can catch the last part of what the broadcast is saying.

“—massive fire burning due north of Fort Collins, currently heading toward Glacier Park and Silverville. All residents are advised to evacuate immediately. These fires are burning at record temperatures and inflicting maximum damage. The Colorado Fire Agency is requesting all available—”

I can barely breathe.

Xeran’s knuckles go white on the steering wheel, and that’s when we see it.

In the distance, up over the ridge that Silverville is famous for, an orange glow paints the horizon like a false sunrise.

An orange glow, just faintly tipped with blue.

Something the human eye might miss, even as they address the record-high burning temps.

Even as they try to examine the sporadic nature of the fire, point to something scientific that makes sense.

“No,” I whisper, my hands tightening around Nora, my mind going back to that terrifying night I woke up to find that blue fire in our house, eating it to the ground.

Xeran says nothing but presses harder on the accelerator.

The glow burns brighter on the horizon as we fly down the mountain highway.

What started as a smudge of color quickly turns into a wall of light that makes my eyes water, and when I tip my nose into the air, I easily catch the rotten, sulfuric scent of daemon fire.

This is nothing like the little fires Xeran and his friends have been fighting on the outskirts of town. It's too big, too much, and already kissing the Silverville Creek.

I'm not a firefighter, and I don't know much about the mechanics. But everything I've learned about daemon fire tells me that water isn't going to be enough to stop this fire from forging ahead.

"What's the situation?" Xeran asks when his phone rings.

I can tell it's Kalen on the other side. He's talking fast, breaking up, and it's clear that Xeran is struggling to hear him, too.

"Any casualties?" Xeran asks, and my heart stops.

Kalen goes on, talking about the destruction, and I try to focus on my breathing, try to keep myself from panicking as we grow closer to town. I can feel the air around us heating.

When Xeran gets off the phone, he drives even faster, the speedometer climbing up past eighty. Trees blur past us in dark smears, the glow ahead only getting brighter.

What has happened once is happening again.

Silverville is beginning to burn.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

My truck skids to a halt in what used to be the driveway. Half of the trees around the property are gone, the sky startlingly bare in their absence. There's nothing but blackened stumps left, reaching toward the smoke-thick sky like accusatory fingers.

The house, somehow, stands untouched. Likely the result of Phina's magic from the last time a fire was near.

Any wards she laid down, any protective spells she cast—they may still be holding strong.

I should thank her, or say something, but there's no time, and I can't seem to get the words from my throat.

This is entirely my fault.

After my dad died, it was like my entire world crumbled. When it seemed Declan might have had something to do with it, and none of my brothers would help me go against him, I'd written the town off.

But I never should have gone. Never should have abandoned my pack, my responsibility. My legacy.

As much as I try to leave Silverville behind, it's a part of me.

“Go inside,” I tell them, watching as Nora rouses in alarm but not having the time or words to reassure her. “Phina, there are boards in the basement you can throw over the windows. Fill the bathtubs and—”

“ No , Xeran,” Phina says, shaking her head and turning to me, her eyes already sweeping over the line of trees in the distance where that ominous glow hovers, now more blue than orange. “I can help—”

I could feel her fear radiating out from her on the drive here. The last thing I want is for her to be in the midst of the fire. Besides, having her out there would only interfere with my ability to make good decisions. To keep the squad safe.

When I look at her, it’s with what I hope is a hardened, unyielding expression. Beneath it is panic—all of this is already wasting time I don’t have.

“Absolutely not.”

“Think about it. Think about last time, I mean. The house is still here. I can help you—”

“ No .” The word snaps out of me, loud enough that it makes Nora jump, and I feel sick, knowing how this must look to her. But I have to keep them safe, even if that means hurting Phina’s feelings. “We had an agreement, Phina. Magic stays in the house. Period. And that means now.”

“People are dying !” she shouts.

Nora is looking between us, her expression slowly morphing from sleepy confusion to understanding when her gaze skips out to the horizon, which grows brighter by the minute.

“I’m aware of that,” I grit out between my teeth.

“So, if I can do something to help them—”

“You can help by staying here and keeping them safe.”

“But my magic—”

“Your magic is what caused this in the first place!” The words explode out of me, propelled by the panic, the haste, the itch to get to the firehouse and get the squad together. To coordinate our efforts and stop as much of this as we can.

Without using magic. Without putting Phina or Nora at risk.

Phina flinches back from me like I’ve struck her, devastation sparking in her eyes. Her silence is wounded, and seems to spread. Even the wind and the distant roar of flames seem to go quiet, as if the world is holding its breath, also hurt by what I’ve said.

Phina’s face goes white, and she puts her arms around Nora, pulling her closer, even as her gaze stays locked on me.

“What did you say?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

Fuck . Nothing is going how I want. And the glow on the horizon is only getting brighter. Maybe this is the only way to keep her safe—to keep her from following me.

“You heard me,” I say, my voice hard as I reach over her and push open the passenger side door. “Go inside. Don’t use your magic for anything but to keep the two of you safe.”

Without a word, she slides out of the truck, keeping Nora tucked tightly at her side. Nora says something softly, a question, but Phina either doesn’t hear her or isn’t going to answer.

A moment before they push through the front door, Nora glances back at me, worry and panic lacing through her features. She fell asleep happy in Denver and woke up to a wildfire at home, and I don't know how to make it better for her.

My body is split—one half telling me to go to the fire, the other half demanding that I stay here and follow them inside. Get on my knees and beg for Phina's forgiveness.

As if to make the decision for me, the radio crackles to life. Soren's voice comes through, tight with urgency, "Xeran, you close? Where the hell are you? We need every man we can get down here."

My hands shake as I throw the truck into reverse. The smart, strategic thing is to go to the fire. Save who I can, contain what I can. Come back to Phina later. To resolve things with her, I have to make sure she survives this.

I have to make sure we all do.

By the time I fly into the fire station lot, gravel spraying around me as I slam on the brakes, it looks like hell has already hit the building.

Windows are blown out, the garage doors are warped from heat.

Half the roof is missing. But the building is still standing, which is more than I can say for the rest of the town.

Even the tires on my truck started to feel tacky at the end of the drive, like they were melting and sticking to the road.

The guys are outside, clearly agitated and waiting for me, already suited up.

"Thank the gods," Soren says, relief flooding his freckled face as I run up to the

building. “We thought—”

I don't let him finish, flying past them and hurtling inside even as Kalen protests, trying to follow me. The heat is unbearable inside, pressing in on all sides.

“Xeran—”

“I'll be ready in one minute,” I say, pulling on my turnout pants. I know I'll be ready because we time these drills, see how quickly we can go after getting a call. And my time is just over fifty seconds.

“It's not that, it's—”

“Tell me while we move,” I say, grabbing my helmet and walking out. Emerging out into the outside air, which is cooler—but not by much—I add, “And fill me in on the situation.”

“The Emerald Court neighborhood was hit hard,” Lachlan says, pointing up at some of the nicer developments on the other side of town. “Houses are completely gone out there. We emptied all the trailer courts out by First Avenue. Right now, it looks like the fire is working toward the high school—”

“There might be people trapped at the community center,” Felix says, the mirth gone from his usually joking face as he rejoins the circle, clipping his handheld radio to his vest. “The fire jumped the creek and cut off their escape route.”

Up here, Silverville Creek is thirty feet wide and running high from the spring melt. There's no natural fire that could jump a barrier like that. But this is no natural fire.

“Xeran,” Kalen says, grabbing my arm. “Listen, man, I have something to tell you.”

“Is it about the community center?”

When Kalen shakes his head, I point to the truck and say, “Then tell me after that. We have to prioritize right now.”

“Maybe twenty in there, and some kids,” Felix says. “I can drive the one engine we have over there—”

“I’ll take my truck,” I cut him off. “It’s full of extinguisher.”

We break and head out, and Kalen says something I don’t catch before Felix tells him to come in the engine. I can tell he’s frustrated, but whatever he has to share can wait until later.

Soren, Lachlan, and I jump into my truck and follow the fire engine as it roars down the street. Through the haze, I can see the community center in the distance. Flames dance around it like a firing squad, surrounding the place. Smoke pours from the windows on the southern side.

We are running out of time. I take a corner too fast. In the back of my mind are thoughts of Phina, of Nora. Of the way I left things. Of how badly I want to make sure they’re okay.

But the moment we pour out of the vehicles and toward the community center, all that goes blank, and the only thing I can think about is getting these people out safely.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I slam the front door so hard, the windows rattle.

Nora turns, looking at me like she doesn't know me.

Likely because I've never done something like that, never let anger get to me like that.

Right now, my hands shake with rage and heartbreak, and I feel the emotion coursing through me like a substance all its own, like it's replaced the blood in my circulatory system.

There's only one other time in my life I've felt something like this—after Xeran rejected me in front of all those people. And what happened after that only made things much, much worse.

How could I have been so stupid a second time? How could I let myself believe that Xeran changed? That he might change his mind about magic?

Something that I've come to realize about magic is that it's a part of me. It runs through my veins, just like this anger. And I can't separate the two.

It's what I tried to do in high school.

As long as I'm a magic wielder, and as long as I refuse to hide that fact, I will never be good enough for him. He'll see me exactly the same way the rest of the town does—like something dirty. Something shameful.

Something to be hidden away in his house, but never seen in the light of day.

“Mom?” Nora asks, her eyes wide and blinking fast, either from the smoke or from disbelief. That color so much like Xeran’s, it makes me ache. She’s still clutching that stupid stuffed shark to her chest like a flotation device on a sinking ship. “What is going on?”

“Pack your things,” I say, voice shaking as I turn and start to pace in the living room. “Go upstairs and pack your things.”

“But our bags are in the truck—”

“Look for another bag,” I snap without meaning to. “There are more in the closets, I’m sure. We need to take what we can and go.”

“But what about Xeran?”

“What about him?” I turn to her, shaking my head as I wildly grab one of her books from the table and stuff it into a tote bag like this is the most important thing for me to pack. “I told you this was temporary, Nora. Please, do as I say.”

I start to turn, to head to the kitchen and gather up canned food we can bring along with us, but that’s when the scent hits me.

It’s barely noticeable. Subtle at first, hidden beneath the penetrating smoke and Xeran’s charred, sweet scent that clings to everything in this house.

But still, it’s there. Unmistakable. Terrifying.

It’s Nora’s true scent. Rich and complex, carrying notes of both Xeran and me. Hints of alpha dominance that point to her biology, sweet notes of my own scent, and

something that every single person in this town would identify as Sorel instantly.

“No,” I breathe, head snapping up to her. “No, no, no.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks, taking a step back, her eyes meeting mine. And I can see in them that she knows exactly what’s wrong.

“You stopped taking your pills,” I say, staring at her in disbelief.

She shrugs one shoulder. “They ran out.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I forgot.”

“You’re lying , Nora.” I step closer to her, my hands shaking as they hold the tote bag with a single book. “We promised that we would never lie to each other—”

“You’ve been lying to me since we got here!” she interjects, finally dropping the shark.

Her face is caught somewhere between fear and anger, and it’s so starkly clear that she’s just a kid. A kid always acting older than her age. Required to act older than her age, and now arguing with me like a teenager.

“You said Xeran was your friend. And you said I should stay away from him. But he’s nice , and he’s smart!”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s nice, Nora, you have to listen to me—”

“And he’s my dad , isn’t he?”

Chills run down my back. She knew. Nora figured out the purpose of the pills, and she purposefully made the decision to stop taking them. She wanted Xeran to smell her scent, to figure it out.

The realization hits me like a physical blow.

My scheming, brilliant, too-smart daughter, deliberately sabotaging the protection I spent a decade weaving around her.

“You have no idea what you’re doing, Nora,” I whisper. “If he finds out, he’ll—”

“What? Take me to the aquarium? Teach me how to be a good alpha? Is it so bad that I just want a dad?”

I want to scream, Yes!

Because wanting things from Xeran Sorel has only ever hurt me. And I can’t be sure that he’ll want us, or that he’ll be proud about owning us. Would he hide Nora away in this house, keep her as the product of his secret love affair?

And what if he eventually meets his real mate? Has children with her ?

The thought threatens to rip my heart from my chest. As does looking at Nora’s tear-stained face, the pure devastation that sits on her features.

“Just...” I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Just go pack your things. Now, please. We can talk about this in the car.”

Nora hesitates for a moment, but then she turns and climbs the stairs, leaving me alone in the dim living room, trying to figure out what in the world I’m going to do.

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I sit on the couch for ten minutes, staring at the tote bag in my hand, trying to figure out what I'm going to say to her.

Outside, I can feel the pressing heat of the fire, but I can also feel how my wards are holding against it.

They're stronger than anything I've managed before.

Maybe if I could have cast wards like this on my grandmother's house, it would still be standing.

But then, of course, our neighbors would have thrown Molotov cocktails through the windows out of spite for the fact that our house managed to survive when theirs didn't.

I force myself to my feet and move into the bathroom, putting our toothbrushes and the small bag of toiletries in Nora's backpack, which still sits under the bathroom sink. Everything we own—other than the clothes Nora is packing upstairs—is in this bag.

It's oddly liberating. No ties, no baggage weighing us down. When I get up there, I'll take the money Xeran has given me and tuck it into my bra, and we can use it to head to the Midwest.

Where there are no wildfires. Where things are cheaper, and we can start over.

"Nora?" I call when I feel like a decent amount of time has passed. I'll tell her everything in the car. The full truth about Xeran's rejection of me, and what it means for me and her. How I've been making the best decisions I can for the two of us.

She doesn't answer, and I climb up the steps, nearing our room and finding the door shut. I close my eyes and picture her inside, clutching the shark to her chest, so little and so mature at once.

Knocking softly, I say, "Nora? Are you done packing? I think it's time to go."

Just a few weeks ago, she and I were making our way through the woods. A team, solid and together, working to get away. Just a few weeks ago, it was never a question of whether or not Nora would do what I told her to do.

Now, I push the door open, a chill running down my spine despite the heat.

"Nora?" I call again when I don't see her. Is she under the bed? Sitting at the desk? In the en suite bathroom?

No. She's not in any of those places. I check the closet and under the bed again, starting to cough from the smoke.

"Nora!" I call, dropping the tote bag and turning in a circle. "This isn't funny!"

That's when I realize something—I'm coughing because of the smoke.

The smoke coming in through the open sliding door, leading to the balcony. The same balcony that we snuck from when we tried to leave together.

At first, I think she's out there, but when I wrench the door open, saying her name, there's nothing on the balcony but the stuffed shark lying on its side just beside the metal railing.

Nothing but that, and the scents of mint and gasoline hanging in the air.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Daemon fire sings around us, a living, hungry thing. For the past hour, we've fought our way through the town, spraying the extinguisher on everything in our path. Homes and businesses are either up in flames or already burned to the ground.

In high school, Phina's fire took the west side of the town. Now, it seems like it's East Silverville's chance to face the flames.

Now, we move past the high school football field, where somehow the sprinklers still continue to run even with the choked oxygen and the electrical fires breaking out all over town.

Most people are out of electricity. Those who haven't evacuated yet are screaming, the sounds echoing through the night and turning into a consistent, haunting background track.

As we move through the lawns to the left of the high school buildings, I duck under a falling branch, my lungs starting to burn from the smoke despite my resistance to the fire and the mask over my face. Felix is somewhere to my right, and Soren and Kalen to my left.

There's a wide, empty lawn between the buildings, but the trees that butt up on the edge of the school are in line to go up next. It was Lachlan's idea that we come to this side of town, work our way backward, and try to cut them off.

Only for us to find independent bouts of daemon fire, like the one climbing up the pine tree near the high school's greenhouse.

“That tree is coming down!” Lachlan hollers just before we hear the creaking, angry sound of a tree giving into the fire and starting to fall, the fibers inside it giving way one by one, then all at once.

When I spin around, I catch the massive, deep green pine tilting toward Soren, who’s too focused on the flames licking up the side of the high school building to notice.

A great, ancient groaning meshes with the whoosh of the tree moving through the air, sounding like the earth itself is crying out at the loss of old growth.

Silver ash floats through the air, clogging up the air, putting a mystical sheen on the pitch-black smoke hanging around us. It’s a visibility nightmare, and I fight through it, trying to get eyes on Soren, who I suddenly can’t see.

“Sor!” I call, but there’s no answer from him. Lachlan calls again, but I can barely make it out. It feels like the tree falls for ages, time acting strangely, when I finally catch sight of my best friend again.

He’s still facing the wrong way, still somehow oblivious to the tree that’s heading straight toward him. Kalen calls for him, too, but he must be too far away. From this distance, I can see the panic on my brother’s face.

I start to run, but my gear is heavy, and I realize with a sinking, heavy feeling that I’m not going to reach him in time. I scream, the sound trapped behind my mask, desperately trying to get him to hear me.

Then, something impossible happens.

The tree pauses in mid-air, just long enough for Soren to turn around and jump back.

I can’t see it, but I know what it is. Pure, raw magic wrapping around it like giant

invisible hands, suspending it mid-fall.

Then, when Soren is out of the way, the tree thunders the remaining three feet, crashing to the ground with a much quieter thud, some of the needles shaking off into the air and onto the ground.

“What the fuck?” Soren says, and we turn together to see the source of the save just as Kalen reaches us, breathing hard from the run in all his gear.

“Phina!” Her name comes out of my mouth in a mixture of gratitude and fury.

She emerges from the tree line between a cluster of aspens, her blond hair wild, soot streaking over her face and along her clothes, the simple white sweatshirt now dirty and stained, her leggings ripped over her left knee.

Feelings war inside me. I’m thankful that she saved Soren’s life. I’m pissed that she’s here, that she’s putting herself in danger. “What the hell are you—”

“Nora is missing,” she says, stalking forward and not letting me finish my sentence.

“What?” Soren calls as the fires grow closer. The high-pitched, roaring frequency makes it impossible to hear anything.

Phina holds her hand up, turning her fingers slightly, and the noise around us clears out. The air becomes breathable again, just like that, all the ash and smoke expanding into a bubble around us.

“Nora is missing!” she snaps, turning to me, her voice breaking. She looks like she’s walked through hell, and now she’s asking me to come with her on her way back.

Soren begins to cough, and Kalen thumps him on the back like that might help.

“What the... hell,” Soren blurts, shaking his head and bending over, putting his hands on his knees. “How are you doing that?” he asks Phina.

“Nora is missing?” I repeat, the words taking a moment to fully process through my head. What does that mean? “From the fire?”

“No,” Phina says, not looking strained at all by the effort of keeping us in this bubble. Across the field, I watch Lachlan and Felix pause, clearly looking for Soren and me. Apparently, they can’t see the little sphere we’re in. “I think she was taken , Xeran.”

Those words snap something within me, the wolf inside me going wild at the thought that anyone would dare to lay a hand on that girl. My daughter or not, she was in my house. On my turf.

“She was supposed to be packing,” Phina says, tears streaming down her face and cutting clean lines through the soot.

“I went to check on her. She wasn’t there.

The window was open, but I don’t think she would leave on her own.

I’m not sure how she would even get down from that high, but there was this smell—”

“Kind of minty,” I say, eyes locked on hers. “And gasoline?”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes widening. “You know where she is?”

“Declan took her,” Kalen says, his eyes swinging to me. “That minty smell is Farris, and the gasoline, I think it has to do with—”

“Phina,” I say, my mind already racing with a plan, “can you make this bubble bigger?”

Phina nods, and as though her power is limitless, she twists her hand again, expanding the ring until Lachlan and Felix find themselves inside it.

“What the fuck?” Lachlan says while Felix jumps back, holding his hands up like he might go toe-to-toe with the clean air. They’re both covered in soot and looking out of place in the suddenly smoke-free environment.

“Change of plans!” I shout to them through the quiet, empty space. “We need to look for Nora!”

“Who is Nora?” Felix asks, and Lachlan punches him in the arm.

“You two, head to Declan’s place,” I say, already backing up and walking in the opposite direction, heading for the edge of Phina’s little dome. “Text me every ten minutes with an update. If I don’t hear from you, I’m assuming you need backup.”

For a moment, I wonder if they’re going to listen to me. It’s not like I’m the leader of this pack—I’m only the leader of this firefighting squad. And if we’re not fighting fires, then what reason would they have to adhere to my orders?

But they don’t push back. Not even for a second. With nothing more than a nod and an affirmative, the two of them turn away.

“You go back to my place—” I start, but Phina cuts me off as we move together, heading toward the high school parking lot.

“No,” Phina says, her voice and face stormy. “I’m looking for my kid.”

Soren raises his eyebrows, glancing between us. I bite my tongue, knowing I'd fight back against that order, too. But I hate having her out here, hate knowing that something could happen to her.

"Fine," I growl, "but stay close to me."

"Xeran," Kalen says, cutting me off. "You need to listen to me. I know where she is."

I stop, staring at him, questions piling up in my head. But there's only one that really matters. "Well, where is she?"

"At the ridge," he says, swinging his arm in the direction of the ridge that makes up half this town's name. "Declan was involved with the fires, X, and it—"

But all I've heard is that Declan has Nora, and I can't stand around talking anymore. "Come on." I push past him, knowing he's frustrated, but I can't stay still. "Tell me on the way."

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The climb to Silverville feels endless. Xeran moves ahead of me like a man possessed, his sense guiding us through the smoke-filled darkness. Behind me are Kalen and Soren.

Each step sends jolts of pain through my exhausted body. I know that I've already pushed myself too hard tonight. My hands shake with magical depletion, and there's a ringing in my ears that tells me I'm close to burnout.

It's the same thing I heard right before blasting Tanner Sorel into that tree. Before crumpling to the ground, my consciousness blinking to black.

As we move, I can't stop myself from thinking of another time I was on this ridge. More than ten years ago, with four other girls.

Fighting. Crying. Having no idea what was happening until the first burst of daemonic energy ripped through the air, hitting the trees and gripping them, setting the leaves alight.

That first daemonic fire, the energy ripping up from under the crust of the earth, startlingly blue, so potent the air crackled around us, turned my saliva bitter and metallic.

I had no idea what was going on—other than the fact that it seemed like our group was falling apart—but whatever happened that day seemed to open up a fissure, allow the constant pressure of the daemonic energy around us a path into our little town.

Aurela had cried. Valerie had run away. And I watched, screaming for her to stop, for

her to be careful, as the fifth member of our group laughed and dipped her hands into the writhing, oily blue flames.

“There.”

Xeran stops, pulling me out of the memories, and I realize my hands are shaking harder now from my mental detour.

Our group comes to a stop, and Xeran points through the haze, and I can only barely make out figures at the top of the ridge, looking for all the world like they’re just waiting for us to appear.

“They’re waiting for us,” Kalen says, speaking my thoughts out loud. “They knew we would come.”

Xeran glances at him, and I realize Kalen hasn’t been able to tell Xeran his important thing in the truck. It was too loud and too tense, with Xeran trying to dodge debris in the road, fires raging outside on all sides.

As though realizing this as well, Xeran turns to his brother. “What’s going on?”

“I was trying to tell you—”

“Xeran! Kalen!” Declan’s voice booms through the space, magnified by something, and the sound of it makes a shudder run up my spine. “Don’t be shy—come on up here. Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

The look on Xeran’s face is murderous, and when we move closer, the smoke lessening from an all-out blackout to a haze, I’m able to make out the shapes of the other Sorels. Farris and Dallas. Even Tanner, who looks at me with an apathy just this side of rage.

They're all standing near the edge of the ridge, far closer than I would ever dare to stand. And when we get close enough, I can make out the shape of something smaller.

My daughter.

"Nora!"

"Uh-uh," Declan warns, and I realize he has something in his hand. A knife. Pressed to her throat. "Not another step closer!"

Fear and anger and protectiveness roll through me with the speed of a shockwave. My body moves on its own accord, but Xeran reaches out, putting a hand on me and holding me back.

"That's right," Declan coos. "You keep her in line, Xeran. It's nice to see you finally enjoying one of my gifts. That soccer ball I brought you just deflated in the garage. Do you know how hurtful that was?"

"What do you want, Declan?" Xeran asks, and to my shock, his voice is deathly calm. If it's an act, it's an amazing one. I feel like I might throw up, my eyes locked on my daughter, my brain unable to think of anything other than the knife that's far too close to her skin.

Nora is clutching onto Declan, her heels along the back of the ridge, a wide-eyed, fearful pain on her face. When I find her gaze, I try to communicate everything in the way I'm looking at her.

I'm sorry. I love you. I'm going to get you out of this.

"Really, Xeran?" Declan tuts. "Mr. Strategy? I thought you'd already know what I

wanted. In fact, I thought you might bring it with you.”

“Let her go, Declan. Your fight is with me.”

“Did you bring it or not?” Declan’s face falls, and when he yanks on Nora, I realize he has her by the back of her head. The thought of his hands on her, pulling her hair—it makes more magic rise to the edges of my skin, sparking.

“I brought it,” Kalen says, stepping forward and pulling something from his pocket. When he unfolds it, all I can see is a manila folder, rolled and wrinkled from being tucked in his firefighting suit. “It’s all here.”

“Now, Kalen, how can I be sure that it’s all there?” Declan asks.

“What the hell is going on?” Xeran snaps, looking back and forth between them.

“This is what I was trying to tell you,” Kalen says, slapping the folder into Xeran’s hands. “It’s what we found out about Declan, that day we tailed him.”

“When you broke into my place,” Declan corrects, snarling through the smoke. Behind him, I can hear the rush of the creek far below. “Fucking weasels.”

Xeran opens the folder, but I know he can’t read it. It’s too dark, too smoky.

Kalen says, “It’s documents, financial records. Enough to prove that they were the ones starting the fires.”

“You can’t start a daemonic fire,” Xeran says, shaking his head.

“Oh, really?” Declan asks, laughing as he uses his knife to gesture to me. “You can’t? Just ask your girlfriend how she did it.”

“Start a fire, and the daemon energy will come,” Dallas says, stepping forward for the first time. “It’s fucking obvious, and it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to stand here and talk. You give us the stuff, we give you the girl.”

“No,” Declan says, holding his hand up to his nephew. “ No, you don’t make the fucking deals. Step back.”

Rage ripples over Dallas’s face, but he steps back, his jaw ticking.

“It’s more than the fires,” Kalen says quietly. “It’s faulty insurance. A whole scheme. Not only is he burning the town, but he’s taking everything from families, swooping in to buy what’s left when the fires are done.”

“You’re looking at the proud owner of several acres,” Declan says, a slimy grin spreading over his face. “And it’s only right. The Sorels should own more of this town than the fucking Cambiases .”

“But you don’t just keep it,” Kalen challenges, disgust in his voice. I’m surprised—I never thought Xeran’s little brother would have it in him to stand up to Declan like that. “You sell it to human developers when you know that hurts the pack. Makes it harder for us.”

“When you make ten times the value of the lot, you’ll do it, too,” Declan says, rolling his eyes. “Colorado is trendy , nephew. That’s just good business.”

“Dallas is right,” Tanner says, sounding bored like always. “Do we have to stand up here and chat? Can we get this over with?”

Declan cuts his gaze angrily to Tanner, then rolls his eyes, turning his attention back to Xeran. “Here’s the deal. All that evidence burns. And you sign a pact, here and now, that you will never challenge me for the spot of alpha supreme.”

“Not going to happen.” The words come out of Xeran so fast, I’m not sure he’s fully considered them.

A wicked grin spreads over Declan’s face as he returns the blade to Nora’s neck, and this time, he actually nicks her skin, drawing blood.

I try to do something, try to reach for magic, but there’s nothing left. A scream buries itself in my throat.

“Stop!” Xeran steps forward, then stutters, stopping like he’s been slapped in the face. “... What?”

And I realize why he’s stopped a moment later when the smell hits me.

Up here, in the smoke and with the scents swirling around us, it was easy to miss Nora’s scent. But when her skin is nicked and her blood hits the air, it floods around us.

Strong. Sure. And undoubtedly Sorel.

“That’s right,” Declan says, his grin spreading. No doubt he figured it out when he took her and smelled her without the scent-blocking pills. “She’s not just some outcast’s bastard anymore. She’s a Sorel. Your blood—hell, my blood. A legacy.”

Nora trembles under his touch. Xeran growls, stepping forward, then stopping when Declan twists the knife, showing Nora’s blood shining on the blade.

“What will it be, nephew?” Declan asks, a laugh running through the words. “Let’s make the decision quick, my other nephews are clearly growing impatient. I’ll give you one minute to choose—what will it be? Your pack, or your daughter?”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I knew it.

Of course I did. Maybe the problem was not the knowing, but the way I'd denied it. I was so sure that Phina wouldn't lie to me about that. That she would have told me, kept me from leaving all those years ago.

Or maybe I thought that I would know more unequivocally. I was unprepared for the uncertainty when I couldn't scent myself on the girl.

But I've spent weeks with her. Playing chess. Reading. Talking through issues and watching her brilliant mind attack problems with the same methodical precision I use.

It's hot up here on the ridge. Embers float through the air, blowing through from the fires in town, the wood crumbling under the weight of the daemon flames.

I haven't been to the ridge since I was a kid. Behind Declan, there's nothing but sky. If I remember the drop from coming up here and looking out as a teen, from walking along it with my dad, it's impossibly steep. All rocky cliff face on the way down.

A beach at the bottom, more rocky than sandy and at least a mile out, marks the start of Silverville Lake.

The water is inky black in the night and blinks away into the other side of the basin, running up against the foothills of more mountains.

Too dangerous for kids to play out here.

Multiple signs and chain-link fences used to line the edge, but were apparently removed by my uncle.

Maybe even for a little stunt like this.

Nora Winward stands less than ten feet from me, under the thumb of my uncle, and she is my daughter. Nora is mine. It's obvious—from her eyes, the way she carries herself. It's been obvious this entire time.

And now, beyond the blood, carried on the smoky breeze, even beneath the fearful sweat on Nora's skin, I can smell it. Something unmistakable. Familiar.

My scent.

Not just the kind that hangs on the surface, that she would adopt from sleeping in my house, but something more.

Something bone-deep and undeniable. There are pieces of me in her DNA.

Alpha blood calling to alpha blood. What I've been sensing from her all this time wasn't just potential—it was heritage.

My heritage, flowing through her veins.

"Nora," I whisper, unable to say anything else, hit with the full implication of those ten years apart from her.

No baby days and first steps, no first word, no trying to get her to say da-da .

Ten years missed of inside jokes and the knowing that would come with seeing her grow into herself. "Ten years."

“That’s right,” Declan says, like some sort of self-important teacher.

Like he knew this entire time. I know there’s no way that’s true—if he knew I had a child, he would have used her as leverage long before this point.

“Your little legacy, raised in poverty and shame while you played house with the humans.”

I feel Phina beside me, worn with exhaustion and as stiff as a board. Tired of her personal life being aired out for everyone to see.

Strangely, rather than summoning anger at her, I can’t help the first thought that comes to me— we’re even.

I hate that I hurt her all those years ago, betrayed and humiliated her.

But this? Losing ten years with my child?

It should more than make up for it. The pain can’t be measured, but maybe in some way, in some world, we can consider it equal.

Because I understand the situation she was in.

I can see why she made the decisions she did.

And I know, above all else, that she is sorry for them.

“So, now you know,” Declan says, his teeth glinting in the light of the fires. “You know what’s at stake here. Let me make this very simple for you.”

The knife glints as he adjusts his grip, and Nora’s breath catches, her hands rising up

to grip tightly to him.

Those blue eyes—so like mine—lift, catching mine. And I see something there that breaks my heart. Something less like fear and more like understanding.

Nora knows what's coming. She understands the choice I'm faced with.

And after weeks of conversation, of playing chess together, she thinks she knows which choice I'll make. Just like I did a few days ago, I hold her gaze, give her the slightest shake of my head, just like I did when I promised her I would keep her secret.

“You're going to swear a blood oath,” Declan drawls as I stare at my daughter. “Right here, right now. Swear that you're leaving Silverville, and that you'll never return. Punishable by death if the oath is broken. We'll do it in front of your little fire brigade, just to make it final.”

The danger in a blood oath is the ancient magic that runs within it. When an oath like that is punishable by death, it doesn't mean that someone will hunt you down and stick you in an electric chair.

It means you'll drop dead the second you violate what you swore to adhere to.

And the only reason Declan is doing this is because he knows he can't take me. He knows he can't take me, and that none of my brothers can, either.

“You'll swear to never challenge my authority as alpha supreme,” Declan goes on, his voice carrying across the wind.

There is no choice. I would choose Nora over anything. Maybe Declan knows that, or maybe he doesn't.

If my father was here, he might be disappointed in that instinct. He might tell me again that my duty is to the pack, always. That a shifter is nothing without his pack, that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

If my father were to come back and stand right here, stopping time and counseling me on this moment, he would tell me not to promise away my right to a challenge.

He would tell me to do my best to save Nora, but to accept that I can't control everything.

That her death would be at the hands of Declan, the one holding the knife to her throat.

My father would tell me to think . To come up with the answer to this.

And, eyes locked with my daughter, I realize the answer is already there, in her eyes.

She figured it out a long time ago, and she's been waiting for me to figure it out.

Without speaking, I can see it there between us, hanging in the air so intelligibly that I'm surprised Declan can't see it, even as he continues to drone on about the choice I have to make.

"... and in return," Declan is saying, "I'll let the girl live. You can take her back to whatever human hovel you've been hiding in."

Nora is not afraid. She's clever and resourceful, too smart for her own good. She sees something that I don't, an angle that I don't understand.

The slight nod she gives me back is almost imperceptible, but it's enough.

And I find that I trust her to follow through.

Without warning, and in the middle of another rambling monologue from my uncle, I launch, shifting mid-air and running toward him at full speed.

At the same time, Nora pushes away from him, but he turns and grabs her, throwing her with all his might over the edge of the cliff.

Phina screams as I collide with my uncle.

And the three of us go tumbling over the side of the ridge.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The scream tears from my throat as Xeran launches himself at Declan with inhuman speed, shifting in midair so his massive paws land on his uncle's shoulders, spinning him around and sending him over the side of the cliff.

But before Declan can fall, before he can tumble to his death, he makes sure to grab Nora, pulling her out and over the edge so she starts to drop, a scream ripping from her mouth just like it has from mine.

“Nora!”

Declan and Xeran are silhouetted against the fire-stained sky for just a moment before gravity takes hold, and they follow after Nora, falling straight down like something out of a cartoon.

“Nora!” I scream again, and this time, there's nothing stopping me from running forward, falling to my knees on the rocky ground. It should be painful, but I feel nothing, even as the warmth of blood rushes forward.

It doesn't matter.

Nora fell. I know this ridge—I know how far down it goes. I remember looking past my friends years ago, seeing the steep drop, thinking that one of us was going to go over it in the chaos.

My entire world is gone, over the side of this cliff. Silverville.

This can't be real.

I crawl on my hands and knees, screaming and crying, almost unable to see through the black dots crowding my vision. My skin scrapes painfully along the rock, ripping away and leaving raw, bloody flesh behind, but I don't care.

I don't care.

When I reach the edge where the rocky, grassy earth drops away into darkness, I peer over it, tasting blood and the very start of clawing, suffocating grief. There's the sound of shouting, of claws on stone, but I can't see anything through the smoke and shadows.

Futilely, I scream into the void, more a curse than a hope, "Nora !"

Then somehow, a voice returns to me, small and desperate. Reaching.

"Mom!"

It's a spark in my chest, like the first time I felt magic inside my body. I can hear the Sorels fighting behind me—Kalen and Dallas, Farris and Soren—but I don't have time or energy to think about it.

Because I see her.

Nora hangs in the air five feet below me, suspended by shimmering threads of magic that I can see—either from the smoke or from the intensity of the energy. It dances around her like living light, like the glowing algae I've seen in videos.

As though the gods themselves decided to reach down and save my daughter from this fate, from falling down the side of the cliff.

I anchor myself on the edge of it and reach for her, calling her name again and again,

even though she's looking at me and reaching for me, too. Her face is pale, and I realize with a start that the magic isn't coming from the gods.

It's coming from my daughter.

Her small hands glow with power. A power I didn't know she had. Through her sheer force of will, she defies gravity. But I can see that her power is fading, the magic beginning to flicker and fade.

Nora is only ten years old, and she's doing magic I never could have dreamed of at that age. She's a product of Xeran and me, and I should have known to expect this. Strong genes and stronger willpower.

"Reach for me!" I scream, tears leaking from my face as I strive toward her, feeling at any moment like I could tumble right off this cliff. There's no magic left within me, but if I need it, I will find it.

I'll reach right into my soul and take the energy from that.

I may not save myself, but I am going to save my daughter.

When her power wanes and she starts to sink down, I throw myself forward, grabbing her wrist as her power gives out.

The sudden weight threatens to pull me over the edge, but Felix and Lachlan appear at my sides, grabbing me and hauling Nora and me up over the ledge.

She's okay. She's alive. I hold her to me and bury my nose in her hair, sucking in the scent of her—now stronger and smelling of her father, too.

"I'm sorry," she sobs in a rare moment of sounding her age. She clings to me, and I

hug her back hard.

“Don’t apologize, baby,” I say, pressing my lips to the top of her head. I don’t know what she’s saying sorry for—whether it’s for using magic or for the fight we had before she was taken—but none of that matters now. All that matters is that she’s safe. That I have her.

As I catch my breath, scooting away from the edge with my daughter in my arms, I hear growling, the heavy sound of bodies against the ground. Soren and Kalen are shifted and crouched, snarling at Dallas, Farris, and Tanner’s wolves.

With Nora and me safe, Lachlan and Felix turn back, shifting the balance of the fight, putting the Sorel boys at a disadvantage.

And, seeming to realize their position, they slowly begin to back toward the trees. Cowards.

Now that their uncle has gone over the edge, they’re tucking tail and running.

Their uncle, and their brother .

Fear races through my heart again, and I’m pushing Nora down, telling her to stay put.

In all the chaos, I haven’t been able to fully process everything. Xeran and Declan went over the side of the ridge—and it would make sense to assume them dead.

But I heard scraping when I was reaching for Nora, the sound of something clinging to the cliff face.

I make it to the edge before the others, and when a great gust of wind moves through,

pushing away some of the black smoke, and I see him.

There, hanging from a twisted pine tree just two feet down from the edge, is Xeran, his powerful frame cutting a strong image against the cliff face. He saved my daughter. Our daughter. Somehow, Xeran knew exactly what she would do.

Looking at him now, even with the magical strain and the panic of the moment, I realize something.

I'm in love with him—everything about him. And it doesn't matter to me that I'm not his mate. I'll fight any other woman who dares to try and take him from me.

“Xeran.” I waste no time in lying on my stomach, reaching my hand out toward him. When he looks up at me, his dark eyes finding mine, it sends a feeling both warm and searing through me. It's ridiculous in this context, but I want him. “Xeran, take my hand—”

Not reaching for me, he asks, “Is Nora—?”

“She's fine,” I say, scooting toward the edge again, stretching my shaking hand out to him. “Please, Xeran, take my—”

“Watch out.” Lachlan and Soren are at my sides, kneeling down. Felix tries to pull me back, and when I turn my head, I see Kalen with my daughter, a hand on her back.

“We'll get him, Seraphina,” Soren says to me, and I relent as he pushes me back from the ledge, his hands firm but gentle, like he's herding a scared cat. Soren and Lachlan reach down, but before Xeran can grab their outstretched hands, another voice cuts through the air, high-pitched. Terrified.

Just below his nephew, Declan clings to a narrow outcropping, his fingers white with

the strain of holding onto the rock. There's blood smeared on his face, and I feel some satisfaction in knowing Xeran got a good shot at him.

Normally, I'm a forgiving person. But that man tried to throw my daughter over a cliff—he deserves to hang here until he eventually plummets to his death, a victim of his own weakness.

“Help me!” Declan's voice is desperate, strangled, all sense of bravado gone. “Declan—I'm going to—I'm slipping !”

I stare down at this man who has disregarded so many lives in starting these fires. And yet, now that it's his life on the line, his body slipping toward death, he's aware of the consequences.

He's daring to ask for help .

“Please,” he adds when Xeran doesn't move from his spot, looking down at his uncle with disdain. “ Please ,” Declan says. “Help me, and I'll give you whatever you want. All those acres—yours. The alpha supreme position. I'll give it all up. Please! Just don't let me fall!”

“Xeran, man,” Soren urges. “Grab my hand. Leave him.”

“Come on,” Lachlan says, pushing out forward. All Xeran has to do is swing one of his hands up, and he'll be safe. But for a long moment, he doesn't move, just hangs there and stares at his uncle as Declan starts to slip.

The older man starts to whimper as he slips and scabbled, readjusting and trying to regain his hold on the rocks.

This man threatened my daughter. Participated in kidnapping me. Offered me up like

a piece of property. Terrorized us and sold our town out for profit. Took any number of lives with the fires he intentionally started.

He deserves whatever waits for him in the darkness below.

But, just like I knew he would, Xeran moves, taking one of his hands off the tree and shifting his body to offer it to Declan.

“Take it,” Xeran orders, his voice carrying the authority of an alpha. “Swear on your life that you’ll step down. Peacefully.”

“I swear,” Declan practically sobs, reaching up, his fingers closing around Xeran’s wrist. “On my own blood. On the pack bond.”

Xeran hauls Declan up, his grip never wavering as he helps him get a grip on the tree. Kalen and Felix reach down, hauling Xeran up, but when they move to grab Declan, Xeran shakes his head.

“Just me,” he says, getting down on his stomach and reaching for his uncle, who reaches up and takes Xeran’s arm, letting his nephew pull him up over the side.

I retreat as he does, moving back to my daughter, who lets out a low whine when she sees Declan crumple to the ground, pushing with his heels to get away from the edge.

“Seraphina,” Xeran says, walking toward me, and when I look up at him, I decide I don’t mind the sound of him using my full name. His dark eyes are leveled on me, his concern evident. It makes something in my heart spark, something in my stomach turn over. “Are you hurt?”

“We’re fine,” I say, running a hand over Nora’s head, then putting a hand on my knee and shakily getting to my feet. “Are you—”

But I don't finish my sentence because at that moment, something comes hurtling at Xeran from behind, hitting him with full force.

I scream his name, but it's too late.

Declan has shifted into his shining black wolf, and he's pinning his exhausted, human nephew to the rocky ground, his teeth bared just over his throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

Declan's yellow eyes burn with madness as he snaps at my throat, foam flecking his muzzle, and I realize my assumption upon seeing him that first time I came back home was right—the man is on something. Something that makes him frenetic and unthinking.

Something that really makes him believe, even with a surprise attack, that he would ever have a chance against me.

Shifting beneath him is painful, and he manages a swipe of his claws over my ribs, which feels like liquid fire, tearing through the muscle and scraping at the bone. Hot blood runs down my side, but the pain just makes me angrier.

Declan's wolf is smaller than mine, and he fights with a desperation that gives him an edge, but I've been training since the day I was born.

I'm better than him in every way. More focused, stronger, bigger, more strategic.

There isn't a neuron in my brain that believes I am going to lose this fight.

Shifting shoots through my system like a shot of espresso, leaving behind the clean, burning trail like whiskey down the throat. It sharpens my senses, floods my muscles with predatory power.

The scent of Declan's fear cuts through everything—the smoke and ash, Nora's scent, Kalen shouting at me from over my uncle's shoulder.

I tried to give this man mercy, to give him the benefit of the doubt. Even after seeing

him crouched over my father like that. Even knowing, just from the look on his face, that my father's death wasn't wholly accidental.

But mercy is what my father would have offered. It's the way of a good leader.

I gave my mercy to Declan, and he wasted it.

My uncle lunges for me again, going for my jugular, but I'm ready for it this time, dodging him and kicking up, sending out wolves tumbling over. Declan thrashes wildly when I land on top, my paws pinning him down.

His claws kick out, looking for purchase on my shoulders and chest. I should bury my maw in his neck, shake him out like a limp doll. Years of rage pour out of me—rage at his corruption, his willingness to sell out the pack. To destroy innocent lives, just to make some money.

Rage at the way he threatened my daughter. He held a knife to her throat. Treated her like a bargaining chip.

The wolf in me wants to take my time, to play with him, to sit on him like this and use my weight to squeeze the life from him. To fight him until he's so weak from exhaustion that I can take him apart piece by piece, ripping off his legs and listening to his howling like sweet music.

My wolf wants the pleasure of his pain.

The human in me wants him dead.

And through all of it, I know that Nora is here. That she's watching this play out. That this will be an example to her in the future, should she ever take over as alpha supreme of the pack.

So I snap at him, burying my teeth in his throat and ending this once and for all.

He fights, but starts to wane sooner than I thought, his struggles growing weaker, his movements becoming more frantic and uncoordinated.

Blood mats his fur and flows around his eyes, staining my muzzle copper red.

His blood tastes rotten, like you would expect from a man pumping his body full of drugs.

Declan's eyes roll back in his head.

This is for my pack , I think. This is for my daughter.

And finally, though there's no proof of this and I'll never really get closure, I add,  
And this is for my dad.

The final snap of Declan's neck is almost anti-climactic.

Moving with certainty, I drag his body to the edge of the cliff and toss it over, watching it tumble into the smoke, disappearing from sight long before it hits the ground below.

The wolf is satisfied. Ready to sleep for years. But that relief is short-lived. Just as I shift back to my human form, feeling the screaming pain of my ribs more acutely, daemon fire starts to roar around us.

During this episode, we've been so focused on Declan, on playing out this drama, that we haven't been paying attention to the flames around us, growing nearer. Closing in on us.

The heat is overwhelming, and the smoke makes my eyes burn. My truck—along with the extinguisher—is at the bottom of the cliff. Even if I had the energy left to fight, I don't have any of my equipment.

Phina shouts something at me, standing with Nora held close to her side, but I can't hear them. As we realize the fire is all around us, the seven of us back into a tight circle, coughing and struggling, arms up futilely over our mouths.

My mind races to find a solution to this, to think of something we can do.

Soren starts to cough harder at my side, and this time, nobody bothers to pound at his back to help the stuff out. We're not clear of it, and it's going nowhere.

The fire moves fast, defying logic and physics. It's not going with the wind, seeking fuel—it's hunting us. Deliberately circling around us. As though seeking revenge for the death of a man who repeatedly helped to bring it to life.

It licks up the trees and writhes around us, cutting off every escape route. The temperature is so high that I can feel my hair singeing and my skin blistering from the radiant heat. The air itself seems to be on fire, searing my throat and lungs.

For the first time in my life, I actually start to think that I might die in a fire. Grabbing Phina and Nora, I hold them to me, unable to speak, but praying they know everything I want to say through the way I hold them.

Then, from nowhere, relief.

I blink, lifting my head, wondering if we really died that quickly. Then I see the little bubble forming around us, just like the one Phina made at the high school earlier.

Phina shouts something at Nora, but our daughter doesn't listen, shaking her mother's

arm off and increasing her focus, raising her arms, growing the bubble until it includes Soren, who falls to his knees on the ground, hacking and coughing.

Instead of fighting her, Phina joins in, creating a bubble of her own, pushing it up and out around the other guys, who look around dazed, like they also think they're already dead. The bubbles grow and grow, though I'm unsure how or where they're finding the energy for it.

Nora's small frame trembles with the effort of channeling so much power. Sweat beads on Phina's forehead. The bubbles grow, and the fire pushes back into the trees, looking for all the world like it's afraid .

"More," Nora says, her voice shaking. She doesn't look up from her hands, like a kid who needs to watch them as they type. Like if she looks away, the magic might stop. "I need more!"

For a moment, the bubbles start to shrink, then Phina takes a jerky step to the side, and, her eyes squeezed shut, she takes Nora's hand, holding it in hers. The domes grow and combine, the magic around us thriving, pulsing through the air with considerable strength.

The barrier becomes something solid, pushing back against the flames with a renewed force. It's suffocating it. Doing more than we've ever done with the extinguisher.

As they push, the daemon fire recoils almost like it's in pain, the roar of the flames rising in pitch until it starts to sound like screaming again.

My head swims with pain, and blood continues to flow down my side, but I stand with my daughter and Phina, hands on their shoulders, not knowing what to do for them.

I can feel how unsteady they are. How much this is taking from them.

It looks like it's going to work, then Phina slips, moaning as her hand falls from Nora's. She collapses backward into me, and I catch her, watching as the dome halves in size. Nora throws both her hands up like she's going to catch it, hold it up.

"I can't," Nora sobs, shaking her head, her entire body vibrating with the effort. I reach up for her, taking her hand where Phina held it before, but I have no magic to offer her.

"It's okay," I say instead, squeezing her hand, so proud of her for trying. "Nora, it's okay. You did your best."

Nora turns and looks at me, tears streaking down her dirty face, and then she does something I wasn't expecting.

She laughs.

And when she does, it's like magic bursts forth from her, pulsing into the wall and pushing outward like a sound wave. It sweeps over the forest in a sonic boom, extinguishing the fires atop the trees, muffling them instantly until only tendrils of smoke rise from where it was before.

"Holy shit ," Lachlan breathes, standing there, looking out at the aftermath.

Then, just like that, Nora collapses into me. I hold her, too, reaching up to feel her pulse. It's weak, but it's there.

My daughter just saved our lives.

"Did you see that?" Felix asks, appearing beside me with his hands on his head, his

mouth wide open with awe even as he's still wheezing through the smoke. "Holy fucking gods, Xeran, did you fucking see what they just did? They—"

I turn, still holding the girls in my arms, looking at my friends. The men who have followed me into fires, who would do it again.

"You saw nothing," I hear myself say, looking at each of them. Soren frowns but says nothing, and the others follow suit. "None of this happened."

"Xeran—" Kalen starts, but I shake my head, already knowing what he's going to say. Magic like this could be all the difference in firefighting.

But I have to learn more about it before I go offering up my family to the flames. And after seeing Nora collapse like that, there's not a single part of me that wants to see her do it again.

"Nothing," I repeat, and I realize my voice carries with it the authority of the alpha supreme. "Now, help me get these guys to the hospital."

Kalen and Soren lean down to help, but Felix lets out a low whistle, his hands on his hips as he looks out at the town below us through the drifting smoke.

"Sure," he says, then frowns. "If the hospital still exists."

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

I wake to the gentle pressure of a cool cloth on my face. Around me is a sweet, gently charred scent. Something deep and masculine, like cedar wood in a fire that's been burning for far too long.

My eyelids are heavy, and though I expected my body to hurt, it doesn't. I feel heavy, like I might not be able to lift my limbs, but there's no pain there. No hurting.

When I open my eyes, Xeran is there, those dark blue eyes intent on me.

"Nora?" It's the first thing I ask, a word that escapes my lips before thoughts are even present in my head.

"She's okay. She's sleeping," he assures me, lifting a hand and running it along my hairline, pulling a few errant strands away from my sticky face. "She kind of saved our lives, Phina."

I blink as the memories come back to me. Declan. The fire, closing in around us. Nora reaching for her power, even as I knew there was none left in her little body.

When I move to sit up, Xeran's hand finds my shoulder, and he helps me into position.

I can tell from the scent that this is his room—it's so thick in here, so comforting and warm, like steam from a scented bath.

It's dark, with the curtains drawn. Without asking, he hands me a glass of water, positioning the straw so I can take a sip.

“What time is it?” I ask, eyes finding his.

“It’s around one,” he says, his gaze wandering over me like he might need to take stock of any changes, watch me for injuries. “You’ve been sleeping for almost twenty-four hours now. Do you remember any of the times I woke you up?”

I blink again, my understanding of time realigning with what he’s said. It’s not surprising to me that I slept for that long, but it takes a moment for my brain to adjust.

“No,” I admit, slowly bringing my gaze to Xeran’s.

“I’ve been feeding you,” he says with a soft smile. “I’ve been waking each of you up every few hours, making sure you eat. Nora is like a furnace, so I’ve been putting some cold compresses around her, too.”

“She was so brave,” I whisper, remembering the little dome she made. The fear on the faces around me, and the way her magic saved us, combined with mine. We made something stronger together.

It feels like a fever dream.

“She was,” Xeran agrees, putting his hand on my shoulder when I reposition myself again. “Take it easy—I don’t know how much time your body will need to heal. To adjust.”

“Are the others okay?”

“Well, this experience finally convinced Soren to get an inhaler,” Xeran jokes.

When I keep looking at him, prying for more information, he runs his hand along my arm, tracing the path of my wrist bone.

“Yes. Everyone is okay. Though Felix was a little mind-blown at the display of magic from the two of you.”

My eyes widen. “Are they going to say something?”

“To who?” Xeran jokes softly. “The alpha supreme?”

I stare at him in confusion, then I realize what he’s saying. He assumed that title the moment Declan died. I replay the image of him tossing Declan’s body over the cliff. I know it should make me sick and not filled with pride, but I can’t help the way I feel.

“It’s going to take a while for the town to recover and rebuild,” Xeran says, and the way his eyes flash tells me that it was bad this time.

I knew that already from driving with him and seeing the flames, but it’s always worse after, seeing the piles of silken ash.

“But we can do it. We’ve done it before. ”

Xeran wasn’t here for the first round of rebuilding. I can only imagine things will go smoother under his leadership.

We sit in silence for a moment. I can feel my mind physically processing this information, working through everything that’s happened. It settles between us like a weight, like something you could reach out and touch.

I see it in Xeran’s expression, in the wrinkle on his brow, the set of his shoulders. He’s wearing an open button-up shirt, and for the first time, I see the thick white bandages around his chest. Dressing the wounds he got from Declan.

He really is the alpha supreme now.

“You should rest, too,” I say, reaching out and skimming my fingers over the bandages. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ll be fine,” he dismisses with a wave of his hand. I know he’ll heal faster than me, and even faster than other alphas, but I grab his hand, anyway, tugging on him until he gives in and climbs into the bed with me, taking special care not to jostle me.

Once he’s settled and I’m staring at his ocean-blue eyes, the rest of what happened on the ridge comes back to me.

“Xeran—” I start, but he reaches out, taking my hand in his.

“We don’t have to talk about it right now, Phina. All I want is for you to get better.”

We don’t have to talk about it. The “it” could be so many things—the magic, our future, the truth that I kept from him for far too long.

Maybe we don’t have to talk about it, but I find myself forming the words, anyway.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” I say, dropping my gaze to my hands, working quickly on the edge of the duvet.

“I understand why you didn’t.”

That surprises me, and my eyes fly up to meet his. “You do?”

He shrugs, closes his eyes, and lets out a breath. “You tried to claim me as your mate. I told everyone you were a liar. It makes sense that you’d assume sharing the pregnancy with me wouldn’t go much better.”

“I wish it had been less public, but it’s not like I expected you to lie for me—”

“I did lie, Phina.” When my eyes find his, his face is more serious than I’ve ever seen it. “You were right, and you felt it correctly, even back then.”

“Are you saying...?”

“You are my fated mate.” His pupils damn near swallow his irises when he says it, and it makes something in my stomach turn over giddily, like I’m a teenager again. “And I was an asshole to ever deny you.”

It’s my turn to tell him I understand, because I do. “You were under a lot of pressure—”

“You and I both know the bullying didn’t start and stop with that mating bond thing,” he says matter-of-factly. “And I meant it when I said it, Phina. I’m sorry for every ounce of pain I put you through back then. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

I swallow, eyes returning to the blanket. “But it’s too late. You already announced that to the pack, and I know what it would look like—”

“What it would look like if I were to discover my daughter? If I were to spend more time with you and realize the bond was there after all? What a miracle that would be?”

My eyes fly up to his so fast, I almost give myself a headache. He’s already thought it through—and he’s right. The pack would accept something like that. Would certainly prefer him being there for his own daughter, even if it meant going back on what he originally said.

“But...” I start the sentence, not sure where it ends, not knowing what comes next, but being pretty sure that there should be something in our way. Something standing

between Xeran Sorel and me. There has to be something keeping us from being together. There always has been before.

“But nothing,” he says, scooting in closer to me, close enough that I feel his lips moving as he talks.

“I’m in love with you, Seraphina. I have been since we were teenagers, and I’m tired of letting life get in the way.

I love you, and I love Nora, and if you’ll have me, I would like to build a life here with you in Silverville.”

This time, I’m the one who kisses him. I surge forward and find his lips with mine.

He tries to pull back, muttering something about me needing to rest. But I don’t need rest.

I know exactly what I need.

Pushing Xeran onto his back, I swing my leg over him, straddling his waist and gasping against the feeling of him against me.

I know that being around him more means more—and much longer—heats in the future.

And I don’t care. In fact, the idea of a few days in which I do nothing but stay in bed with Xeran sounds like something I could get on board with.

He sits up, scooting so his back is against the headboard, and I stay in his lap as he strips off my nightgown and hooks his thumbs in my panties, drawing them off my legs as I raise myself up for a second.

I pull his shirt off, being careful of his bandages, and when I reach into his pants, I gasp at the feeling of his cock, hard and ready for me.

“Sera phina ,” he gasps, letting his head fall forward against my shoulder as I start to work him in long strokes, enjoying the way his body moves around me, how he grips me closer to him like I’m the only thing in the world that could ever scratch this itch.

And eventually, he makes it clear that my hand is not enough for him.

He lifts his hips, pushes his pants to the end of the bed, grips me by the waist, and lowers me down onto his dick, slowly applying gentle pressure until I’m taking in all of him, his cock hitting that spot inside me that makes little spots appear in my vision.

When I start to ride him, he leans forward, taking my right nipple in his mouth as his left hand massages my other breast. His right hand grasps my hip, firm and solid, guiding my rhythm.

It’s far better than any fumbling thing we did as teenagers.

I grind against him, and as I bear down, seeking my own pleasure, it blends into his.

He thrusts up into me, his hips moving almost of their own accord, and as we move together, he whispers in my ear.

About wanting to flip me over and get me on my back.

About wanting to bend me over the side of this bed, wanting to take me in the shower.

Wanting to taste me on his tongue as I come for him.

It brings me closer to the edge, filling my head with all the possibilities in our future. All the ways he can touch me, love me, feel me, fuck me.

When I come apart on him, his head drops back and he watches me through half-lidded eyes, his gaze darting between my tits and my face, his cock throbbing deep inside me but still not releasing, like he's holding it back.

He's not the only one who can dirty-talk.

"Please," I whisper, leaning forward and placing my lips against his ear. "I want to feel your knot inside me, Xeran."

And with that, he comes undone.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

The second my first knot has fully emptied inside her, I grab Seraphina and pull her to the end of the bed, turning her and bending her over the side of it.

Since that first night—and for years, really—I’ve been fantasizing about getting her like this. The wolf inside me wants this, craves this, and for good reason.

I line my hips up with hers, growling at the way she lifts her ass up, pushing against me, asking for my cock. When I lean down over her, I press my cock between her folds, making sure it rubs against her swollen clit so I hear her moan.

Gathering her hair in my hand, I pull it to the side as the scent of her overtakes me, making my head thick with lust, a driving, animalistic force that threatens to take over if I don’t keep it at bay.

“Seraphina,” I whisper as I slide my cock against her, but not inside her.

“Yes,” she breathes, turning her head, and I can’t resist the urge to take her lips with mine. So I do, kissing her deeply, delving into her mouth with my tongue as I thrust against her pussy, feeling her get more and more wet around me.

There’s something about this woman that makes me wild. That makes me feel like I can let go.

“I’m going to mark you now,” I whisper, and the gasp she lets out is almost enough to make me come right then and there, which would be a massive waste. I don’t want to come on the bed. I want to come inside her, feel myself release in her pussy.

Normally, I would slide into her slowly, but I know that she's already warm and pliant from taking my cock the first time. So I gather her hair in my hand, pull her head back, and slide into her all at once, her body rocking forward and her ass slapping against my hips with the movement.

It's incredibly fucking hot, and I take a moment to gather myself, to keep from losing myself to the wolf and driving her into the bed with abandon.

When I take too long, Seraphina moves against me, rocking her hips, pulling my cock out of herself, and sliding back onto it.

Watching her fuck herself on me takes my breath away, and I keep her hair loose in my hand, watching her ass and hips move, taking me again and again until I can't stand it anymore.

"Alright," I growl, placing a hand on her lower back and pinning her to the bed. "That's enough."

When I drive into her, she lets out a mewl so loud, I reach forward and slide my hand over her mouth. She bites gently into my hand as I fuck her, her knees widening against the bed, opening up for me and tipping her hips for better access.

With my other hand, I reach around her, finding her clit and applying pressure, watching her body shake with pleasure.

I could do this every day for the rest of my life.

Maybe that's what the mating bond is—chemistry so good, and so real, that you would never yearn for another person.

Everything about Seraphina is made for me, from the way her hair slides through my

fingers, to how her pussy stretches and tightens around me, driving me fucking crazy.

And this time, when I get close to coming, I fold myself over her, my stomach against her back, our hips lined up, my cock as deep inside her as it will go, and I bury my teeth in the side of her neck, my hand falling away from her mouth as she cries out into a pillow.

Mating marks should be painful, but they're not. Instead, they only deliver pleasure, and I feel that in the way her body trembles around me, in the way she clenches around my cock, coming so fast and so hard that she has to hold on to my arm for support.

It sends me over the edge, too, my knot forming larger than I've ever felt before—maybe the result of the marking hormones inside me, the knowledge that I have just claimed my mate.

When it's over and my knot is still slowly draining into her, I pull our bodies up onto the bed, covering her with a blanket and nuzzling into her, loving the way I can already sense her scent changing, accommodating me, showing how she belongs to me, and only me.

“Xeran?” she murmurs sleepily. I trace a path over her shoulder, loving the curve of it.

“Yes?”

“I want to do you.”

“Do me?”

“The mark,” she says, and I see in the droop of her shoulders that she's drifting off to

sleep. It's not always required for the omega to bite the alpha back, but I want her to.

"Next time," I murmur, running my lips over her neck, watching as she shivers in response.

"Promise?" she asks, barely getting the word out.

I kiss her on the temple, brushing the hair away from her face. "Promise."

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The next morning, I find the bed empty when I wake up.

Phina is in the kitchen cooking eggs when I come up behind her, pulling her hair to the side and kissing the mark on her neck.

She whispers, "Careful."

"Careful?" I ask, laughing when she leans back into me, pressing her ass into my hips. "Of what?"

"I need to eat something," she says, shaking her head. "And I should probably take something to Nora, too."

Nora is still passed out, sleeping off the major use of magic she displayed at the ridge. I'm already wondering how much longer she's going to sleep like this, and at what point we should start worrying about her.

"I've never drawn that much out of myself," Phina says as though she's thinking the same thing as me. She slides the eggs onto two plates, handing one to me. Glancing up, she says, "I'll make one fresh to take to Nora after we eat."

We sit at the table together, and I clear my throat, knowing I'll have to talk to her about it eventually.

“Seraphina,” I say, and she goes still, looking at me with trepidation. “I think we need to talk about magic.”

Taking a bite, she nods, reaching for her napkin. “Yeah, I think so, too.”

“I want you to know that I'm working through the... ideas my grandpa and dad had about it.”

“Okay,” she says, nodding, her gaze falling to her plate. “I'm sensing a but .”

“But I'm not sure the pack is ready for me to just... allow it. I want to work toward that at some point in the future, but I think we have to make a plan. Figure out a way to be strategic about it.”

For a second, I'm worried that I've upset her with this proposal, but after a moment, she nods and sighs. “Honestly, I was kind of thinking the same thing. But with what happened at that ridge...?”

“The guys are sworn to secrecy about it. Obviously, they know what happened. But until we figure out what approach we take with all this, we say nothing.”

“It makes sense,” Phina says. “Even if I don't like it. I think the people in this pack are going to have enough to get used to with me being the luna.”

I reach out, taking her hand. “You'll make a wonderful luna. You know that, right?”

“Right,” she says, though she doesn't sound completely convinced. “I know.”

For the next hour, we sit together, talking about magic and what it would look like to get rid of the rules around it. To make the pack a place where magic-wielders could feel included, honored.

After Phina and Nora's show of power at the ridge, I'm starting to think it was a major strategic mistake for my father to discount magic the way he did. Having wielders on our side might just make the difference between winning or losing if a pack war ever started.

"You guys are having breakfast without me?"

Phina's face lights up as she looks over my shoulder, and I twist around to see Nora standing in the doorway, eyes trained on the empty plates between us.

She looks pale and frail, but she's standing on her own and is strong enough to come into the kitchen.

She's not still sleeping, stuck in that constant exhaustion.

Phina jumps up from her spot and moves to the stove. "I was just about to bring you some. Here, sit. You want scrambled?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Nora says, yawning and settling into the spot across from me, picking up a half-eaten piece of toast from her mother's plate and eating from it absently.

"So," Nora says, raising her eyes to mine. "I've been thinking. If we're going to move in here, I'd like to request that we add some books to the library."

Phina laughs from the stove, and I feel a chuckle move through my chest. "Oh, is that so?"

“It is so,” Nora says, grinning.

“Alright,” I say, leaning back in the chair, feeling the sunshine through the windows on my face. It’s a beautiful day, and though we have a lot of work to do—to rebuild the pack, rebuild the town, and recover from the fires—I’m hit with a sudden, and unfamiliar, feeling of contentment.

Because right here, right now, I have every single thing that I need in this kitchen with me.

And one of them is pulling out a written list of ISBNs.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:59 am*

“Nora Winward , you had better put your ass into gear, or we’re going to be late!”

I holler this while looking at my reflection in the mirror, leaning forward to put in a dangling diamond earring. It’s a pair I got while we were shopping in Denver, and even with everything that happened after that day, I still hold that time close to my heart.

For the rest of my life, I will remember that weekend in Denver as the first time the three of us really started to feel like a family.

“Nora—” I start again, but when I turn, I find her standing in the hallway in a simple blue dress. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and she stares at me with a single eyebrow raised.

“I hate that your father taught you how to do that,” I remark.

“Stop hollering at me,” she says. “I’ve been ready forever. Just waiting for you.”

That makes me laugh. It’s been exactly one week since everything went down on the ridge, and today is the official alpha supreme recognition ceremony.

Before Xeran’s grandfather, there was never a ceremony like this.

Instead, there was just a fight to the death, and maybe beers at the pub.

Xeran’s grandfather was the one who thought the pack could do with a little more decorum, a little more of a formal celebration.

According to Xeran, his grandfather thought a ceremony might make the title a little more official rather than feeling like a blood rite.

And I agree with him, mostly. Still, it's going to be our first appearance in public as a family together since everything happened. And I have no idea how people are going to respond.

“You have not been ready forever,” I finally retort to Nora as I wrestle the other earring in. “You were literally asleep twenty minutes ago.”

Which means she used her magic to help her get ready. Why didn't I do that?

Since the incident, Nora doesn't sleep all day, every day, but she definitely takes her fair share of naps and sleeps for more than ten hours a night.

Xeran is hopeful that after her first shift, her sleeping schedule will adjust, but we ultimately have no idea how that night is going to affect her body.

When we get to the pack meeting hall, I can't stop myself from gasping dramatically at the transformation.

Xeran had insisted this place be the first building they fixed up, and for good reason.

The hall would offer them the ability to feed people, give them a place to shower and crash for the night while sorting out the housing crisis in town.

Since that first night, Xeran's been working basically around the clock, building and making plans and cleaning up the ash piled around town. I wanted nothing more than to go out there and use my magic to help, but Xeran still doesn't think it's a good idea.

Sometimes, we fight about it.

But it doesn't stop him from making it up to me for at least a few hours each night.

I smooth down my dress and glance around at the new walls and windows—everything they've managed to repair and replace in such a short amount of time. The early morning sun streams in through the high windows, making the place feel like it could be the start of something new.

“You look beautiful,” Nora says, grabbing my hand and squeezing it. I glance down at my own navy blue dress, something I thought would make me look mature without seeming like I was trying too hard.

“Thank you.”

Something else is different about Nora since that night—a sort of confidence. The way she holds her head. A sense of belonging she didn't have before.

If I'm being honest, the pack has surprised me so far.

Xeran announced that he would be claiming us publicly, and instead of outcry, there's been something more like quiet acceptance.

It's almost like our pack members are relieved to understand a connection they sensed but couldn't place.

Nora screams Xeran in every expression, in the color of her eyes, and now it all finally makes sense to them.

“Are you nervous?” Nora asks, tilting her head and looking up at me as people begin to file in.

“I’m terrified,” I laugh, smoothing my dress again.

That makes her laugh, but it’s cut short by someone approaching us. Shocked, Nora and I look up to see the queen bee from our old street. The woman who screamed at me not to touch her son after I saved him. Who saw to it that Nora was never invited to a single sleepover or birthday party.

“Good evening,” she says, glancing between the two of us. “I just wanted to congratulate you, Seraphina, on your mating.”

I’m gaping at her, I know I am. What in the world am I supposed to say to her? Part of me wants to laugh in her face. Another part of me wants to cry.

“Thank you very much,” Nora says, smiling sweetly at her. “Be sure to check for your name on the list at the front before the ceremony begins.”

Queen Bee’s eyebrows shoot up, and she clears her throat, embarrassed as she says a quick goodbye and turns, heading for the exit.

“Since when did you get so snappy?” I ask, glancing at Nora, who just smirks at me and shrugs.

Then, the breath leaves my lungs when Xeran walks in, striding forward confidently like he owns the place.

And in a way, I guess he kind of does.

He turns and walks straight for me, the look in his eyes making my skin tingle. It’s determined and possessive, and when he stops in front of me, he clears his throat and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a ring box.

“It occurred to me,” he says softly, his gaze locked on the box in his hand as Nora gasps beside me, “that I wanted to do this before the ceremony. And time got away from me.”

I’m staring at the box, my heart pounding. Xeran and I are already mated. A silly human tradition like marriage means nothing compared to the weight and permanence of the mating bond.

But I told him while cuddling that I’d always liked the idea of a wedding. Of marriage. Of changing my last name to my husband’s.

Xeran opens the ring box to reveal a shimmering moonstone set with tiny diamonds around it.

“Sorry this isn’t more grandiose,” he says, looking up to meet my eyes. “But Seraphina Winward, would you do me the honor of becoming Seraphina Sorel?”

“ Yes ,” I breathe the word so quickly, it would be embarrassing if it were any other circumstance.

He takes the ring from the box and slides it onto my finger. Then he turns to Nora, who watches the exchange with a strange look on her face.

“And Nora,” he says, reaching into his other pocket and pulling out a longer, sleeker box. When he opens it, he reveals a necklace with a similar stone setting to mine, like the moon surrounded by the night sky. “Would you do me the honor of becoming Nora Sorel?”

“I would have done it without the necklace,” she says, grinning at him before she takes the jewelry. “But yes, I will. And thank you.”

He helps her put it on, then wraps his arms around her, holding her tight and closing his eyes. I know that when he does, he thinks about that night again, just like I do. About how close we came to losing her.

And how we're never going to let something like that happen again.

More people flood into the space, their eyes immediately darting to us, and I know I'm going to have to get used to this.

I'm used to people looking at me. But I'm not used to people looking to me.

Xeran's friends arrive, and we work the room together, mingling. Laughing. Nora disappears to the corner of the room, where I see her talking with other kids her age.

It's not going to be comfortable right away for either of us, but we'll get there.

When the room is full to bursting, Xeran clears his throat and makes his way to the front of the room.

Nora and I follow him, climbing onto the stage behind him and standing just to the back.

We stand straight as we stare out at the hundreds of pack members gathered in the room, staring right back up at us.

Xeran stands at the podium, clears his throat again, and begins the speech he practiced a million times with us at home.

“Good morning, everyone. We're going to make this event short and sweet because I know we all have a lot of work to get done.”

A short laugh ripples through the room, and I watch it bolster his confidence.

“When I left Silverville eight years ago, I was running from my grief over my father. From my responsibilities here. And I stand here now, officially accepting the honor of alpha supreme as a promise to all of you that I will not run from that responsibility again.”

The room is deathly silent—the reality of a weathered, unsure, uncertain pack that’s been beaten and bruised by circumstance.

Xeran goes on, “My uncle’s betrayal cost us more than buildings and businesses.

It cost us trust—in our leaders, in our institutions, in each other.

But standing here today, seeing how this community came together in our darkest hour, I know that trust can be rebuilt.

When the fires came, you didn’t run. You fought.

You saved each other. You proved that Silverville is more than its leadership. It’s its people.”

A cheer rises from the back and works its way to the front of the room, and Xeran has to pause for a moment to let it die down before he can go on.

“My first act as alpha supreme is to allocate funds for the rebuilding of this town. We’ve done it before, and we will do it again. I promise you I’m wrapping this up, but first I want to take a moment to express my gratitude.”

Swallowing, Xeran looks to the back of the room where his friends and brother stand. When he sees them, they raise their glasses to him.

“To those who stood by me, fought with me—Soren, Felix, Lachlan—thank you. You risked everything to do what was right, and I won’t forget that loyalty. And to my brother, Kalen... well, I have him to thank for the fact that I’m here in Silverville at all.”

Kalen waves from the front row, and there’s a small titter through the crowd.

When I look at him, I can’t help but think about the other Sorel brothers—still lying low somewhere, licking their wounds.

Maybe directionless without their uncle at the helm.

At night, before we fall asleep, Xeran will sometimes talk about their betrayal and how it still stings, even after all this time.

Finding them, punishing them, is a priority, but not above rebuilding the town.

Xeran smiles down at his notes before glancing over at Nora and me. Anxiety thrums through me. I know what is coming next.

“To Seraphina, my mate and fiancée, and Nora, my daughter, the two of you have changed my life for the better. You’ve shown me what real strength looks like.

You’ve taught me that courage isn’t the absence of fear, but the decision to act in spite of it.

And you remind me every day to be kind to everyone I meet, no matter who they are, or how they differ from me. ”

It’s over—the part in which he claims us, and nobody in the building has shouted in outrage. In fact, most of the people here look too tired to care about who Xeran

chooses as his luna.

Something inside me finally, finally relaxes as he finishes his speech.

“This pack has been through fire—literally and figuratively. We’ve lost buildings, businesses, and people we cared about.

But we’ve also discovered strengths we didn’t know we had, forged bonds that can’t be broken, and proven we’re stronger together than any challenge we might face apart.

Thank you, all of you, for giving me the honor of being your next alpha supreme. ”

The moment it’s clear that he’s finished with his speech, the applause is thunderous.

And when Nora and I join him, his arms wrapping around us and pulling us in close, his warmth surrounding me, that applause somehow only seems to grow louder.

## Page 33

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Despite all of Nora's assurances to me that she didn't invite that many kids, my backyard is alive with voices and laughter with the chaos that comes from a yard full of kids, all hopped up on sugar and cake.

It's early spring but unseasonably warm, so we decided to move the party outside, where the air is bursting with the scents of Phina's garden, all those fresh flowers she and Nora planted.

Seeing it like this reminds me of my mom, of all the time she used to spend back here growing fruits and veggies and cutting fresh flowers to bring inside.

At first, I was worried that living in my dead parents' house might be too morbid, but being here with Nora and Phina is different. They bring the entire place to life.

Nora kept the room she and Phina had shared, painting it blue and picking out her own furniture. The first thing she brought in was the pink and purple chessboard from Denver.

Phina redecorated what's become our bedroom, filling it with lighter colors and swapping out the dark wood for light. Now it looks like a completely different place.

And even the backyard has had another facelift.

With fairy lights twinkling overhead and a hot tub in the far corner, it actually feels like the kind of place where you'd have a party.

Phina even went so far as to build a picnic table, painting it a soft purple and situating

it under our tree, which is currently strung with balloons.

Phina is bustling around, refilling punch and fetching snacks and cleaning up messes before they even happen. Occasionally, I catch her using a tiny bit of magic, and when we lock eyes, I shake my head at her. She just laughs.

The rule was only in the house. I just never knew my house was going to host all of Silverville's sixth grade.

Apparently, after years of struggling to make friends, Nora didn't take long to amass a queue of potential party-goers once news spread that she was a Sorel. And not just any Sorel. The alpha supreme's daughter.

I lean against the porch railing and watch Nora command her party, just another sign of the alpha she's destined to become. Even the other alpha kids are listening to her, and I get the feeling that it's not just because it's her birthday.

Or maybe that's what every parent thinks about their kid.

"Dad!" she calls, surprising me by turning and meeting my eyes like she knew I was thinking about her. "Be on my team for the relay race!"

I shake my head and laugh. "Not sure that would be fair, kid."

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly, then turns back to the race, which Felix has been laying out for the last ten minutes. When Phina gave him a task for the party, I didn't actually think he would do it. And I certainly didn't think he'd do such a good job.

Lachlan, Felix, and Soren are in the corner of the porch, working the grill. They'd tried to convince me that cooking the meat was part of my job as alpha supreme, but I managed to convince them that there was no way I'd be standing over a hot grill all day.

“Hey,” Phina says, opening the sliding door and appearing next to me. I turn to find her offering me a glass of lemonade, and I accept it, unable to tear my eyes from her. She’s beautiful today, dressed in a simple sun dress, her blond hair loose around her shoulders.

In this light, she’s practically glowing.

“Hey,” I reply, pulling her in and kissing her cheek quickly, as though someone might catch us being affectionate in our own home and kick us out.

Well, more specifically, Nora might gag all the way from across the yard.

The party proceeds exactly according to Phina’s schedule.

First, we sing to Nora. It’s controlled chaos as we gather around the picnic table.

Eleven candles flicker on top of a chocolate cake decorated with sharks and seaweed.

Nora laughs and sings along while everyone sings “Happy Birthday” with varying degrees of enthusiasm and key accuracy.

Felix’s voice cracks on the high notes while Lachlan harmonizes perfectly, because of course he does.

Knowing him, his parents insisted that he take singing lessons as a kid to go with his violin and piano lessons.

But it’s Phina’s voice I focus on, soft and sweet beside me, her gaze locked on our daughter.

When we’re done singing, Nora takes a deep breath and blows out all eleven candles in one go, earning cheers from the assembled crowd.

After the cake, it's time to swing at the pinata. A squid, which Nora informs us is different than an octopus. It's been provided by Lachlan and strung up by Soren.

Finally, after Nora nearly takes the head off another kid who's not paying attention and goes running by the pinata, it's time for presents.

From us, Nora asked for a pet shark, despite definitely knowing that wasn't going to happen.

Instead of a tank, her gift comes in an envelope and is an annual membership to the aquarium in Denver, along with a pass for one friend on each visit.

She throws her arms around us, squeezing us tight and squealing in excitement. Right now, she's convinced she's going to be a marine biologist.

The rest of her gifts are thoughtful: jewelry and new clothes, a stuffed octopus, a book about the Atlantic Ocean's weirdest critters. When she thinks she's done, she goes to stand, but Phina clears her throat.

"Looks like there's one more," she says pointedly.

It takes Nora a minute to find the smaller box on the table. "Weird," Nora says, glancing up at everyone as we all watch her. "This one isn't for me."

"It's not?" Phina asks, her voice slightly higher as she glances between her daughter and me. There's something going on here, but I can't quite put a finger on it.

"It's for me and Dad," Nora says, and just like always, hearing her say that word makes something warm and heavy settle in my chest. Dad—something I didn't know I was until so recently. Something I'll never get tired of hearing.

Then, I finally register that it's a gift for me, too.

“What?” I stand up, shaking my head and peering at the present. “That can’t be right. It must be a mistake.”

Unless it’s a prank. I look questioningly at Felix, but he shakes his head and holds his hands up, as though that can prove his innocence.

“Weird,” Phina remarks coyly, shifting in her seat. “You guys had better open it, then, if it’s for both of you.”

I glance at her, trying to figure out what she’s getting at here, but she avoids my gaze, her eyes locked on the present.

So, while everyone watches, Nora and I open the gift together. The first thing that falls out is a tiny firefighter’s helmet. Then Nora pulls out an equally tiny shark costume, one that would never fit her.

“Cool,” Felix jokes, leaning on the railing and taking a sip of his soda. “You guys are getting matching dolls.”

Like always, Nora figures it out a moment before I do, her mouth falling open, her head snapping over to her mother. “ Mom ! Really?”

Phina is smiling, bringing her hand to her mouth, and I glance between them, trying to figure out what’s going on.

Then it hits me, and I look down at the little firefighter’s helmet in my hand, realizing it’s the perfect size for a tiny little human.

“Oh, gods!”

I stand instantly, walking to my wife, throwing my arms around her and drawing her in closer to me. I want to squeeze her, then I force myself to relax in case I hurt her.

Pulling back, I look her in the eyes, joy zipping through me like the bubbles rising to the top of a drink. “We’re having a baby?”

Phina nods, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Technically, I’m having a baby, but yes—”

“I’m getting a little sister?” Nora practically squeals, appearing at our side, throwing her arms around Phina, not concerned at all with how hard she squeezes. “Thank you! That’s exactly what I wanted, but I didn’t think it would happen! That’s why I asked for a shark instead!”

Felix snorts, which leads to everyone else laughing. I just shake my head, pulling Nora and Phina closer, shutting my eyes, feeling the sun against my skin and vibrating with the future I know is ahead.

A baby.

Our baby.

This is happiness, I realize. This chaotic, imperfect, absolutely perfect life we’ve built together.

And it’s only going to keep getting better, and better, and better.

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THE END