







# Brutal Alpha's Forced Mate (Starfire Hollow Alphas #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** First, the Alpha banished me. Now, he forces me to marry him.

As a witch, I was always the outcast in the pack, the lowest in the hierarchy.

When he banished me, I ended up as a slave in an underground black market.

When he finds me, he buys me and becomes my new owner.

The endless bullying and mocking in my youth caused my powers to overreact.

That's when the accident happened. The accident that made him expel me.

His betrayal broke my heart and drove me into darkness.

Now he's back, offering my owner a huge amount of money to make me his personal slave.

He rushes me into a mating ceremony, and I wake up in his bed.

He demands that I open myself to him, even though I'm afraid.

I'm afraid of the things he does to me, of the way he lays me bare.

I'm afraid of the way he owns my body, of the way he makes me beg.

Is my owner my fated mate?

The Starfire Hollow Alphas always get their way. They rule their packs the way they want, claim their mates the way they want, and never make excuses because they know you want them anyway

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

## Ten Years Earlier

The first time I accidentally blew up a tree, it didn't seem like such a big deal. But by the fourth explosion, the whispers started: witch, freak, time bomb . And now, as I stand in the middle of the pack's training grounds with magic still buzzing around my fingertips, I'm pretty sure they're about to add banished to the list.

Witches aren't exactly beloved by shifters. Centuries-old grudges run deep, tangled in wars and betrayals no one alive even remembers, but everyone insists on hating each other for, anyway.

The only reason I'm even here is because of my mother, a shifter who made the mistake of falling for a warlock. She died bringing me into this world, and the pack only let me stay because of her legacy. My father? He bolted the moment he found out my mom was pregnant, taking his magic and any chance I had at guidance with him.

So here I am, figuring this witch thing out on my own while the pack watches, waiting for me to fail. And if today's any indication, they won't have to wait much longer.

"You're a menace, Jaslyn," Madison, one of the she-wolves a year above me, sneers at me over her shoulder. "Why don't you just go back to whatever hole you crawled out of before you kill someone?"

I clench my fists and force myself to look at the dirt instead of her smug face. She's not worth it. None of them are. But the laughter that comes over the group burns

more than the magic searing under my skin. It's frenzied, untamed, and desperate to lash out. If I had any idea how to control it, maybe I could show them all exactly what I'm capable of. Instead, I'm stuck here, a disaster waiting to happen.

"Enough."

Gray's voice cuts through the mockery, and I swear even the wind stops moving. He steps out from the edge of the field, and his broad shoulders and sapphire-blue eyes command attention like nothing I've ever seen. The rest of the pack straightens instinctively as his presence smothers their jeering.

Gray Reed. Alpha of the Red Arrow Pack. He's young for an alpha—too young. At nineteen, he's only two years older than me, and already the man is carrying the weight of the pack on his shoulders after his father's sudden death.

He shouldn't even be here—he's got way more important things to deal with than me accidentally setting someone's hair on fire again. But here he is, walking toward me with that breezy confidence that makes my chest tighten and my stomach twist from just one look.

"Back to training," he barks at the others. "Now."

Madison shoots me one last glare before slinking away with the rest of them, and I finally let out the breath I've been holding. The tension in my shoulders fades with the pack's departure, and within seconds, it's just Gray and me standing in the wreckage of my latest magical misfire.

"Jaslyn, what happened?" His voice is softer now, but it still makes my spine straighten.

I don't want to meet his eyes, but I do, anyway, because it's impossible not to when

he looks at me like that. Like I'm not a total disaster. Like I'm not one wrong move away from burning this whole place to the ground.

"I—I didn't mean to," I stammer. "It just... happened. Again."

Gray sighs and scrubs a hand through his blond hair. The sunlight catches on the strands, making him look even more untouchable than usual. He's too perfect for this place, too perfect for me. And yet, here he is, standing in front of me like he actually cares about what I have to say.

"You've got to get a handle on this, Jaslyn. It's dangerous. Not just for you, but for everyone."

"Don't you think I know that?" The words come out sharper than I mean them to, but I don't care. I'm tired of being treated like some kind of ticking time bomb, even if that's exactly what I am. "Do you think I want to lose control? Do you think I like being the freak everyone's afraid of?"

The muscle in Gray's jaw ticks, and for a second, I think he's going to snap back. But then he surprises me by inching closer, and his gaze softens in a way that makes my breath hitch.

"You're not a freak. You're just... different. And different doesn't have to be a bad thing. In fact, it's often an asset."

I want to believe him. I really do. But it's hard to believe anything good about myself when the pack looks at me like I'm a disease. Even now, with Gray standing so close that I can feel his body heat, all I can think about is how much better off everyone would be if I just disappeared.

"Tell that to Madison and the rest of the pack," I mutter, kicking at a clump of dirt.

“Especially Carter. He’d throw a party if I was gone.”

Gray sighs again, but this time, it’s more of a frustrated huff. “Carter’s a jerk.”

That startles me, and I snap my head up to look at him. “But he’s Beta.”

“Exactly. He shouldn’t act like a damn bully. The only reason he’s beta is because his father was beta before him. The pack will come around once they see what you’re capable of.”

“And what if they don’t?”

His answer is immediate and firm. “Then they’ll answer to me.”

Something in the way he says it sends a shiver needling down my spine—not fear, but something else. Something warm and unfamiliar. It’s the way his eyes hold mine, like he’s pleading with me to believe him. And for a moment, I almost do.

“Come on,” he says, breaking the silence. “Let’s get you out of here before someone else decides to make your day worse.”

I follow him without a word, and my heart is pounding for reasons that have nothing to do with magic. Gray walks with the kind of confidence that only an alpha can pull off. Every step radiates authority. He was born for this role, even if it was thrust on him too soon. But there’s a gentleness to him, too, a quiet strength that makes me feel safer than I probably should.

As we head toward the edge of the training grounds, I catch sight of Madison and her group watching us from a distance. Their whispers are like knives darting through the air. I don’t need to hear the words to know what they’re saying. Look at her, following him around like a lost puppy. She doesn’t deserve his attention. She

doesn't deserve anything.

I clench my fists and keep my head down, willing myself not to react. Not now. Not with Gray right here. But then he glances over his shoulder and sees them, too, and something flashes in his eyes. Something dark and dangerous.

"Is there a problem?" he calls out, his voice carrying across the field like a crack of thunder.

Madison freezes, and her smirk falters for the first time all day. "N-no, Alpha," she stammers as her cheeks flush red. "No problem at all."

"Good." Gray's tone leaves no room for additional commentary. Madison quickly turns away, and her friends scatter like leaves in the wind. I don't think I've ever seen her move so fast.

When Gray turns back to me, there's a hint of a smile tugging at his lips, and for a split second, I forget how to breathe. "See? Not everyone gets away with treating you like crap."

I want to thank him, to tell him how much it means to me that he stood up for me. But the words stick in my throat, tangled up with everything else I wish I could say. Instead, I settle for a small, hesitant smile, hoping it's enough.

"Come on," he says again. "Let's go. You've had enough excitement for one day."

As I follow him back toward the packhouse, I can't stop myself from wondering what it would be like if things were different. If I wasn't a mess of uncontrollable magic. If I was someone worth standing beside him. But deep down, I know it's a fantasy. Gray Reed deserves someone strong, someone capable. Someone who isn't me. And yet, I can't stop the tiny flicker of hope that sparks to life in my chest every time he



looks at me like I'm not a lost cause. Like maybe I'm worth saving.

We don't even make it halfway to the packhouse before Gray gets intercepted. It's a patrol guard, panting and waving his arms like the sky is about to fall.

"Alpha, there's a situation," the guy states. "It's the eastern border. We've got—well, we think it's rogue activity, but there's something weird about—"

Gray raises a hand, cutting him off mid-ramble. "I'm on it," he declares before he turns to me. "Go on ahead, Jaslyn. We'll talk later."

And just like that, he's gone, striding away with the kind of purpose that makes me feel small in comparison. Not in a bad way, necessarily. It's just that he's Gray. Steady, dependable, untouchable. And me? I'm a walking disaster. A problem he's obligated to deal with because I happened to be born to one of his packmates.

I'm still standing there, watching him go, when I hear the first snicker.

"Well, well. Look who's still panting after the alpha like a lost puppy."

I don't even have to turn around to know it's Carter, our new beta, who took his position when Gray took over as alpha. His voice is like nails on a chalkboard—grating and smug, with just enough volume to make sure everyone in earshot hears him.

"Buzz off, Carter," I mutter, quickening my pace. I don't have the energy for this today. Or any day, really.

But of course, he follows. "Everyone sees it, you know. The way you moon over him like he's the sun and you're some pathetic little flower desperate for light."

Sparks start at my fingertips as my magic hums under my skin on its own accord. I convince myself to keep walking, counting every step like it's the only thing tethering me to sanity. One step. Two steps. Don't look back.

"Even if he did notice you, what good would it do? You're a witch. A broken, half-blood freak with no control. He'd never choose someone like you."

I stop. I know I shouldn't, but I do. The words slam into me so hard, I nearly topple forward, cracking through the fragile armor I've built around myself. I spin on my heel, glaring at him with all the fury I can muster.

"Say that again," I challenge. My voice is low and shaking with barely contained magic.

Carter's mouth curls into a malicious grin, and I realize too late that this is exactly what he wanted. "Oh, did I strike a nerve? Poor little Jaslyn. Always so sensitive. Face it—you don't belong here. You never have."

The magic rushes out before I can stop it. It strikes between us like a bolt of lightning, singeing the ground. Carter steps back, just a fraction, but the sneer on his face doesn't break. If anything, he looks pleased.

"Go ahead," he taunts. "Show everyone how dangerous you really are. Prove that you're exactly what they say you are—a threat."

I want to stop. I want to pull the magic back, to stuff it down where it can't hurt anyone. But it's too late. It's already slipping through my fingers like a vicious, chaotic storm I can't control. And Carter—stupid, arrogant Carter—doesn't even flinch. He just stands there, smirking like he's untouchable.

It happens so fast, I barely register it. A burst of light, white-hot with shades of blue.

It snaps out like a whip, curling around him and closing like a vice. And then Carter is on the ground, unmoving.

The world seems to stop. For a moment, I think—hope—that he’s just unconscious. That maybe I only stunned him. But then someone screams, and the sound splits the silence.

“He’s dead,” someone whispers, and the words echo in my head, over and over again. Dead. Dead. Dead.

I stagger back, and my heart pounds so hard I think it might burst. This isn’t real. It can’t be real. But Carter’s lifeless body is right there, a grim and undeniable reminder of what I’ve done.

The crowd closes in with a mix of shocked faces and accusatory stares. I don’t even try to defend myself. What could I possibly say? That it was an accident? That he provoked me? It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. All they’ll see is the witch who killed the pack beta.

But then, when I take a closer look, I’m surprised by what I see. Not anger. Not fear. For some of them, it’s almost...relief. Whispers run through the group, too low for me to catch every word, but enough filters through.

“Finally.”

“About time someone shut him up.”

“He had it coming.”

The comments break through the haze of my panic for a heartbeat. They hated him. I’ve known it for years—the quiet complaints behind his back, the resentment

festering just below the surface—but I never imagined it would be this blatant.

But then there are the others. The ones who glare at me, who don't see a bully lying in the dirt but a Beta. A leader. Someone who, by tradition and rank, was supposed to be untouchable. And now, all they'll see is the witch who broke that unspoken rule.

"Jaslyn." I whip around to see Gray standing at the edge of the crowd, his face hard as stone. There's not one ounce of relief in his expression. Instead, he's looking at me just like I'm a dangerous freak. And it eats me alive. "What did you do?"

"I didn't mean to." The words tumble out in a desperate rush. "I-I lost control. It was an accident, Gray. You have to believe me."

But he doesn't answer. He just stares at me. The warmth I've always seen in those blue eyes is gone, replaced by something that feels like fear.

"Everyone, clear out," he commands.

The crowd obeys without question, leaving just the two of us standing in the aftermath of my mistake.

When he speaks again, his voice is low and even, but there's an edge to it that makes my stomach twist. "You know what this means, don't you?"

I nod, and tears burn at the corners of my eyes. Of course I know. I've always known that this is how it would end. But hearing it from him—hearing the finality in his voice—it breaks something inside me.

"I have to protect the pack," he says, like it's some kind of explanation. Like it's supposed to make any of this okay. "Carter was a bully. And maybe he deserved a good punch in the face. But this?" He gestures to the body on the ground. "This is

something no one can excuse. Not even me. If the other packs find out about this... if they find out about you..."

"I get it," I cut him off. "You don't have to explain. Just... do what you have to do."

His jaw flexes, and for a moment, I think he might say something else. But then he just nods. "You're banished, Jaslyn. Effective immediately."

The words hit me like a blow, knocking the air from my lungs. I want to scream, to beg him to reconsider, but I don't. I won't give him or anyone else the satisfaction of seeing me break.

Instead, I lift my chin and meet his gaze, even as tears blur my vision. "I hope it's worth it," I say, my voice trembling with anger and heartbreak. "Losing me. Losing everything I could have given to this pack."

He flinches, just barely, but it's enough to give me a small, bitter sense of satisfaction. Without another word, I turn and walk away, leaving him—and everything else—behind.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

### Ten Years Later

The latest casualty report hits my desk like a sledgehammer. Two dead. Five injured. Every name on the list is someone I've fought beside, laughed with, shared drinks with around the fire. I fold the paper in half and shove it to the corner of my desk, but it doesn't stop the faces from flashing in my mind.

"Gray, if you keep pacing like that, you're going to wear a hole in the floor." Theo leans back in his chair, his boots propped on the edge of my desk like we're at happy hour and not neck-deep in crisis. He's been my beta for ten years now, ever since I lost Carter. While his laid-back attitude usually balances out my own intensity, today it's driving me insane.

I stop mid-step and glare at him. "Forgive me if I'm not in the mood to sit still while demons tear through our territory and leave bodies in their wake."

Theo raises an eyebrow but doesn't budge. "Losing your cool won't bring anyone back. And it sure as hell won't stop the next attack."

His calm delivery grates, but I can't argue with him. I run a hand through my hair, and the strands catch between my fingers as I blow out a frustrated breath. "We're at a disadvantage, Theo. You know it. I know it. Hell, every pack in the alliance knows it."

Theo swings his boots off the desk and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "We both know how to get ahead of this thing."

“Don’t.” My voice is sharp, but it doesn’t faze him.

Theo’s not the kind of guy who dances around a point. He’s more like a battering ram, and right now, I can see him lining up his swing. “We need a witch, Gray.”

I knew it was coming, but the words still make me sick to my stomach. I drag a hand over my face and drop into my chair. “You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you’ve been avoiding it,” he replies, crossing his arms. “Look, you’ve done an amazing job keeping this pack strong. But we’re outmatched, Gray. The other alphas in the area have an edge that we don’t. Damien and Alec both married witches. They’re personally protected and have magical reinforcements at their backs. Us? We’re relying on claws and sheer stubbornness.”

“And we’re still standing,” I snap.

“For now. How many more attacks can we survive? How many more names are you willing to add to that list before you admit we need help?”

I stare at the casualty report, and my chest pulls tight. He’s not wrong. I hate that he’s not wrong.

“Witches don’t exactly fall out of the sky, Theo,” I finally comment. “And even if they did, what makes you think one would come here? It’s not like we have a stellar reputation when it comes to welcoming witches.”

Theo smirks, but there’s no humor in it. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe we offer them a decent paycheck. Or protection. Or, I don’t know, the chance to not be burned alive in some backwater town. Take your pick.”

“You’re oversimplifying,” I argue. “It’s not just about finding a witch. It’s about

finding one who won't run the second they hear the word 'shifter.' Or worse, one who doesn't decide to curse us all the moment they feel slighted."

Theo's quiet for a moment, and when he speaks again, his voice is lower, almost cautious. "You know someone who wouldn't run."

I freeze, and my pulse ticks in my ears.

"Jaslyn," he says.

Her name alone hits me with more force than the report ever could. It's been ten years, but the memory of her is sharp enough to draw blood. Reddish-brown hair that caught fire in the sunlight. Eyes as green and alive as a forest after rain. She was everything natural and feral, chaos wrapped in a fiery package.

And I banished her.

I lean back in my chair as the weight of the memory settles over me. "She's gone, Theo. I made sure of that."

"Doesn't mean she's dead," he counters. "Look, I'm not saying that what happened was easy. Hell, I agreed with your call back then. But the world's changed, Gray. Witches aren't the enemy anymore. They're allies. Partners."

"She killed my beta," I point out. "Whether it was an accident or not, Carter is dead because of her. And if the other packs had found out we'd been harboring a witch—"

"Would've been game over for us," Theo interrupts. "I get it. I do. But Carter's been gone for a decade, and so has she. And there's no stigma against witches and shifters anymore, obviously. You made the hard choice to protect the pack. But you and I both know there's more to that story."



I draw in a long, heavy breath. He's not wrong, but admitting it feels like a betrayal after she killed one of our own.

"She wouldn't come back," I say, more to myself than to him. "Not after what I did."

Theo shrugs. "Maybe not. But you won't know unless you try. And let's be honest—what choice does she have? A witch without a pack or coven is vulnerable, especially one like her. Either she's scraping by somewhere, or she's..." He trails off, but I know exactly what he's thinking.

The image hits hard: Jaslyn, shackled and broken, her fire extinguished in some underground hellhole. I shake it away. No, not Jaslyn. She was always too resourceful, too fierce to let the world get her. If anyone could've clawed their way back to solid ground after what I did, it was her. She had this way of bouncing back, of staring down every insult, every sneer with defiance in her eyes and a smirk that dared you to try harder.

I look away, staring out the window at the forest beyond. "Even if I wanted to find her, it's been ten years. She could be anywhere."

Theo leans back with a wide grin as if he's already won. "You know as well as I do that witches leave trails. Subtle ones, sure, but they're there if you know what to look for. And if you don't, I bet we could hire someone who does."

I've thought about her over the years—where she ended up, if she learned to control her magic, if she ever forgave me. But thinking about her and dragging her back into this world are two very different things.

Still, Theo's right. If she's out there, she might be our only shot.

I rake a hand through my hair and lean forward, planting my palms on my desk.

“Fine. I’ll look into it. But this stays between us. No one else can know.”

“You’re doing the right thing, Gray.”

“Get out of my office,” I grumble, but there’s no heat behind it.

Theo chuckles as he stands. “For what it’s worth, I think she’ll surprise you.”

As the door closes behind him, I lean back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. The right thing . That’s what I told myself ten years ago, too.

And look how that turned out.

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It doesn’t take long to track her down. Just like my beta said, witches leave traces, and Jaslyn is no exception. A few phone calls and a good sniff around, and I’ve found her.

The irony isn’t lost on me as I stand in the shadow of a rundown, two-story building on the edge of a neighboring town, staring at the peeling paint and crooked sign above the door. Malcolm’s Oddities & Services . The name practically screams “tourist trap,” but then again, I’m not here for sightseeing. I’m here because the trail ended here. Because she is here.

I didn’t expect this.

I thought I’d find her thriving somewhere, maybe running a coven or working with another pack. I imagined her successful, independent, and every bit the spitfire I remember. Instead, I’m staring at the dark window of a shop that smells like old wood, damp earth, and misery. The knot in my chest tightens until it’s hard to

breathe.

When I step inside, the air shifts. It's saturated with the kind of magic that makes my wolf stir uneasily. The place is dim, cluttered with shelves crammed full of trinkets, spell ingredients, and things I don't care to identify. At the far end of the room, a hunched man stands behind a counter, his gray hair greasy and slicked back. Malcolm, I'm guessing. He looks up as the door creaks shut behind me.

"My, my," the man drawls, his voice oily enough to make my skin crawl. "What brings an alpha to my humble establishment?"

I take a step closer, ignoring the way the floorboards groan under my weight. "I'm looking for someone."

Malcolm raises an eyebrow. "This isn't a police station, wolf. We don't deal in missing persons."

"Her name's Jaslyn," I go on. "And I know she's here."

For a moment, Malcolm's face remains neutral. Then he smirks, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to snap his neck. "Ah, Jaslyn," he says, drawing out her name like it's a joke only he understands. "Hard worker, that one. Real good with her hands. Shame she's got a bit of a temper."

My wolf snarls beneath my skin, but I pull myself together enough to continue. "Where is she?"

Malcolm tilts his head, considering me like I'm some kind of interesting puzzle. "Why the sudden interest? You didn't seem too concerned about her ten years ago when you kicked her out."

How the hell does he know about that? My pulse ticks faster, but I keep my expression locked down, giving him nothing. I'm not about to let some slimy, third-rate warlock rattle me. It doesn't matter how he knows.

I narrow my eyes and step closer, letting some of the alpha in my voice slip through. "I'm not here to explain myself to you, old man. Where is she?"

Malcolm doesn't flinch. He just shrugs and gestures toward the back of the shop. "Working, naturally. We usually keep her at the house, but we were short-staffed today. Lucky day for you, it seems."

I move past him without another word, pushing open a door that leads into a narrow hallway. The smell hits me first—sweat, dirt, and the faint metallic tang of blood. It's the kind of smell that clings to the walls, the floors, the air itself. My stomach turns as I follow the hallway to another door, this one slightly ajar.

When I step through, the sight stops me cold.

The room is large, with rows of workstations cluttered with tools, herbs, and half-finished magical trinkets. At the far end, bent over a table, is Jaslyn.

Her hair is longer now, tangled and dull where it used to shine like fire under the sunlight. It spills over her shoulders in thick, unkempt waves, a poor echo of the wild beauty it once was. Her clothes are simple and worn, the kind of fabric that chafes and barely holds together after too many washes. They're too loose on her, hanging off a frame that's thinner than it should be. But even through the threadbare material, I can't help but notice the curves that weren't there before.

She's not the girl I banished. She's a woman now. Her body is fuller in some ways and sharper in others, and there's something striking about the contrast. Despite the obvious toll of her life here, there's a strength to her posture, a stubborn

determination in the way she moves, even when her hands shake. Her skin is pale but still dusted with freckles, giving her a beautiful glow that doesn't belong in a place like this.

It's unsettling. Infuriating. How can she still look this... breathtaking? Even worn down, even hollowed out, she's still the most captivating thing I've ever seen.

She doesn't see me. She doesn't know I'm here. But even from across the room, the sight of her stirs something deep inside me, something overwhelming and protective. She's too good for this place, too strong and too beautiful to be left here, wasting away under someone else's thumb. And she's only here because of me.

I'm going to fix it. No matter what it takes.

I thought I'd prepared myself for this. For the possibility that she might not have had it easy after I banished her. But nothing could've prepared me for seeing her like this. Beaten down. Stripped of the fire that used to define her.

Guilt crashes over me like a tidal wave. This is my fault. I made her vulnerable. I left her to fend for herself, and this is where it got her. Here in this hellhole, working herself to the bone for scraps.

My wolf growls, a low, dangerous sound that I can't suppress. She doesn't deserve this. Not Jaslyn. Not the girl I banished to save my pack. The girl I've thought about every day since.

I turn and storm back into the shop, slamming the door shut behind me. Malcolm looks up, startled, but his smirk returns quickly enough.

"How much do you want for her?" I growl, cutting him off before he can say a word.

Malcolm's smile widens, and I see it for what it is—pure greed. “Everyone's got a price, Alpha,” he says, leaning back against the counter. “But Jaslyn? She's worth more than you can afford.”

The words ignite something in me, a fury so strong that it burns away the guilt and hesitation. I step closer, letting my wolf rise to the surface just enough to make my point. “You have no idea what I can afford. Name your price.”

Malcolm's smile falters, but only for a moment. He straightens, crossing his arms over his chest. “You're the one who threw her out in the first place. She told me all about it, you Red Arrow mutt. Here I thought wolves were ingrained with some sense of loyalty. Now you're here, what, to play the hero? Sorry, wolf, but it's too late for that.”

My hands curl into fists, and it takes everything I have not to lunge at him. “She doesn't belong here. And you're not going to keep her.”

Malcolm laughs, a cold, mirthless sound that makes my skin crawl. “I paid good money for her, Alpha. Besides, she's better off here working for me than with a flippant wolf who can't make up his mind about her.”

The words are like a slap, but I don't let them show on my face. “We'll see about that.”

Malcolm doesn't say anything as I turn and walk out of the shop, slamming the door behind me.

This isn't over. Not by a long shot. If Malcolm thinks he can keep her, he's wrong. Jaslyn may not know it yet, but she's coming back to Red Arrow. Even if I have to burn this entire place to the ground to make it happen.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

There are two things I've learned about Malcolm's son, Wiley, in my time here. One, he's worse than his father. And two, the only thing he likes more than tormenting witches is finding new ways to remind us we belong to him.

So when the housekeeper corners me in the kitchen and says, "You're wanted upstairs," my stomach drops like a lead weight.

I'm halfway to the staircase before I muster the courage to ask, "Upstairs where?"

She gives me a look that says I should know better than to ask. "His room."

Of course. Because the universe can't resist twisting the knife.

The hallway stretches ahead of me like a death march, and every creak of the floorboards under my boots feels louder than the last. I hate going to his room. Hate the way he looks at me like I'm some kind of toy he's deciding whether to play with or smash to pieces. Malcolm may treat me like a tool, but at least there's an air of detachment to his cruelty. His son? He enjoys it.

I make it to the door and raise my fist to knock when a sharp voice cuts through the quiet. "Jaslyn, change of plans."

I whirl around to find one of the maids standing at the top of the stairs, her cheeks flushed and her hair frizzing out of its tight bun. "Malcolm wants you in the parlor," she says, trying to catch her breath. "Now."

Relief washes over me so fast, I have to lock my knees to keep from collapsing. I

don't ask questions. Questions get you punished, and I'm not in the mood to tempt fate. Instead, I duck past her and make my way down the stairs, letting out a shaky breath when I'm sure no one can hear it.

By the time I reach the parlor, whispers of gossip are already thick in the air. The other servants cluster by the door, their voices low and conspiratorial.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Some big shot. Rich, too, from the look of his clothes."

"Malcolm's practically drooling over him. You think he's buying?"

"He wouldn't be here if he wasn't."

The words make my stomach twist. Whoever this guest is, he's important enough to make Malcolm sit up and pay attention, and that's never a good thing. Wealthy visitors mean deals being made, and deals being made mean someone's about to have their life sold out from under them.

I slip into the room quietly, keeping my head down and my shoulders hunched the way I've learned to. The less attention I draw, the better. But the second I step through the door, I can feel the change in the air. It's heavier somehow, charged with something I recognize but can't quite place. My magic stirs, faint and restless, like it senses something I don't.

Malcolm is seated at the head of the room. His posture is unusually straight, and his hands are clasped together in what I'm sure he thinks is an air of authority. Beside him stands Wiley, and the smirk on his face is enough to make my skin crawl. The sight of him sets my nerves on edge all over again in a bitter reminder that I thought I was heading to his room just minutes ago. But his father must have intercepted him



on his way, dragging him down here to play the dutiful heir.

It doesn't make his presence any less unsettling. His gaze lingers on me, full of malice and barely hidden amusement, like he knows exactly how close I came to facing him alone.

But it's the man sitting across from them that makes me pause.

I only catch a glimpse of him before I lower my gaze, but it's enough to set my pulse racing. He's dressed better than anyone I've ever seen set foot in this house—dark, expensive-looking clothes tailored to fit broad shoulders and a strong frame. A wide-brimmed hat hides most of his face, but I catch the edge of a sharp jawline and the faintest shadow of a blond beard. There's something about the way he carries himself—relaxed but alert, like he's sizing up everyone in the room—that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“Ah, here she is.” Malcolm's voice pulls me back to reality, oily and full of false cheer. “Jaslyn, come here.”

I force myself to move, keeping my eyes fixed on the worn rug beneath my feet as I cross the room. Malcolm gestures for me to stand beside him. I obey without a word, though every instinct screams at me to run.

“This is one of my most capable witches,” Malcolm announces, his tone shifting into something I suppose he thinks sounds like pride. “Sharp, obedient, and quite powerful. She's been in my service for years.”

Liar . The word rises unbidden in my mind, but I swallow it down. It doesn't matter. No one here cares about the truth.

The man doesn't respond right away. He leans back in his chair, crossing his legs at

the ankle and tapping a gloved finger against his knee. When he finally speaks, his voice is low, smooth, and oddly familiar.

“How much?”

My breath catches, and I risk a glance at him through my lashes. There’s something about the way he’s sitting, the way his voice curls around the words, that tugs at a memory buried so deep, I almost can’t place it.

Malcolm chuckles, the sound grating on my nerves. “I’m afraid she’s not for sale. She’s far too valuable for that. But…” He pauses as his lips curl into a self-satisfied smile. “I thought you’d appreciate seeing what real quality looks like. Not every witch can handle the kind of control I’ve put on her.”

The man tilts his head, and I feel his gaze sweep over me. It’s not like Malcolm’s son’s. This is something else entirely—sharp, assessing, and just a little too intense.

“No price would sway you?” the man asks, and for a split second, something in his voice cracks the shell of familiarity wide open.

I know that voice. I know it.

I dare another glance, this time longer, and the moment our eyes meet—sapphire-blue beneath the shadow of his hat—my heart stops.

Gray.

Here. In this room. Sitting across from Malcolm as if the last ten years never happened. As if I haven’t been through hell and back because of him.

But it’s him. Those eyes, that same commanding presence, though there’s something

more mature about him now. Harder. I force myself to look away before my expression gives me away, dropping my gaze back to the rug as if it'll save me.

Malcolm's laughter cuts through the air, thick with smugness. "Oh, I see you've taken an interest. She is quite something, isn't she?"

Gray doesn't respond, but the weight of his attention is suffocating. I can feel it, even with my head bowed. Malcolm, of course, doesn't notice. He's too busy preening, basking in the attention of someone he clearly thinks he can impress.

"She's completely under my control," Malcolm continues, leaning back in his chair with the kind of arrogance that makes my stomach churn. "A little unruly at first, but nothing a few lessons couldn't fix. Isn't that right, Jaslyn?"

I nod automatically, though the motion is stiff and robotic. Anything else would invite punishment.

Wiley snorts from his perch by the wall. "You're giving her too much credit, Father. She's only as good as the leash you keep her on."

The room fills with uncomfortable chuckles, and my nails dig into my palms to keep from reacting. I've endured worse. I've endured him.

Gray's voice breaks the tension when he asks, "Under your control, you say?"

Malcolm nods, beaming. "Absolutely. She wouldn't dare harm me. Not with the binding spell in place. It's remarkable what a little magic can do, isn't it?"

I flinch at the word "binding," though I don't dare let anyone see. It's true, of course. The spell is as much a shackle as the cuffs they lock me in when they feel particularly paranoid. My magic is theirs to dictate—how I use it, when I use it, and most

importantly, how I don't use it. Against them.

"Show him," Malcolm orders me suddenly. "Give our guest a demonstration of what you can do."

I freeze. My stomach churns violently as panic surges up my throat. Demonstrate? For Gray? My hands shake at my sides, and I clasp them together to hide it. The last time I "demonstrated" my magic for Gray, I lost everything—my home, my pack, and whatever shred of dignity I'd had left. And now Malcolm wants me to perform for the same man who put me out on the street and doesn't even realize it.

"I—" The word comes out shaky, and I curse myself for it. "What do you want me to do?"

Malcolm waves a dismissive hand. "Something impressive. Don't embarrass me."

I nod again, swallowing hard as I step toward the center of the room. My magic stirs sluggishly under my skin, reluctant and unsteady. I try to focus, to push the memories away, but they crash over me all the same. The training grounds. The jeering faces. Gray's cold, detached stare as he banished me.

I force the thoughts away and extend my hand, trying to pull the faint hum of energy from my core. A spark flares to life in my palm—weak and flickering, like a match struggling against the wind. I try to feed it, to shape it into something more, but the harder I push, the more erratic it becomes. It wavers, snapping and popping unpredictably, until it shoots out, completely out of my control.

The spark leaps from my hand, slamming into a shelf on the far side of the room. Glass jars rattle and crash to the floor, shattering into a glittering mess of shards and spilled powders. One jar explodes outright, sending a burst of smoke spiraling into the air. The force of it almost topples another shelf—one dangerously close to where

the guest is sitting.

The man moves with inhuman precision, jerking to the side just enough to avoid the falling debris. It misses him by inches, but his hat slides off in the commotion, tumbling to the floor.

The silence that follows is deafening.

Malcolm's face darkens, and his smile vanishes like a shadow at dawn. "Is this a joke?" he growls at me, rising from his chair. "I told you to impress him, not fumble around like a child!"

"I-I'm sorry," I stammer, taking a step back. "It's—"

"Excuses," Malcolm growls. He crosses the room in three quick strides, raising his hand before I can register the motion. My body locks up, bracing for the blow, and time seems to slow.

But it never comes.

Gray leaps to his feet, and his hand shoots out, catching Malcolm's wrist mid-swing. The movement is fluid, almost casual, but the force behind it is undeniable. Malcolm freezes, and his face twists in shock and indignation as he glances from his restrained arm to the man holding it.

"That's enough," Gray declares. His voice is calm, though an unmistakable edge cuts through the words. "You've made your point."

Malcolm sputters, yanking his arm free with a forceful jerk and taking a hasty step back. His face shifts from surprise to anger, and his lips curl into a sneer. "This is my house, wolf," he snarls. "You don't get to tell me how to handle my property."

Gray doesn't flinch. His posture remains relaxed, almost bored, but something in his stance shifts ever so slightly—a dangerous stillness settling over him. The tension in the room ratchets up to an unbearable level, and my magic stirs uneasily beneath my skin, as though recognizing the dangerous situation we're in.

Malcolm's eyes narrow as he looks over Gray's now exposed face. "Wait a second... you..."

It happens so fast, I almost miss it—the subtle stiffening of Malcolm's shoulders, the widening of his eyes, and the sharp intake of breath. Recognition hits him, and his face flushes with a mixture of anger and alarm.

"You," Malcolm hisses this time, pointing a trembling finger at Gray. "You're that alpha. From the Red Arrow pack."

I lift my line of sight ever so slightly, just enough to see Gray fully for the first time in a decade. There's no mistaking him now. His golden hair is shorter than I remember, his features sharper, more weathered by time. But those piercing blue eyes? They're exactly the same.

Gray.

The name crashes into me like a freight train, and suddenly, the room feels too small as the walls press in on me from every angle. My legs lock in place as everything I've tried to bury for the last ten years surges to the surface—memories, rage, and a bone-deep hurt I've carried since the day he banished me.

"I knew something was off," Malcolm snarls, his voice shaking with a mix of fury and fear. "You lied your way in here, didn't you? All this talk of money and deals—this was never about business, was it? You came for her."

Gray doesn't deny it. He doesn't say a word as his eyes remain locked on Malcolm. The air around him feels electric, charged with barely restrained fury.

Malcolm's lip curls as he recovers some of his bravado, his chest puffing out. "I should've known you'd try to pull something like this," he spits. "But you're wasting your time. She's mine, Alpha. Bought and paid for. And I don't care who you are—"

Gray cuts him off. "You care about money, don't you, Malcolm? That's what this is about to you. So name your price."

The room falls silent, and the weight of Gray's words hangs heavy in the air. Malcolm's eyes flicker with greed, even as his pride wars with his practical side. But I can barely process any of it.

After all these years, it's him. And he's here. For me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The urge to kill Malcolm is immediate, visceral, and all-consuming. My wolf is pacing, clawing at the edges of my control, demanding retribution for the fear I saw in Jaslyn's eyes and the way her body flinched before Malcolm even raised his hand. She's been through this before. That much is obvious, and the thought settles in my chest like a live grenade.

But I can't kill him. Not here. Not with Wiley lounging against the wall like a smug little snake, watching everything with that smirk, I want to rip off his face. I take a slow, deliberate breath, reining in the rage threatening to tear loose. Malcolm's weakness isn't strength; it's greed. And if I play this right, I won't need violence to walk out of here with Jaslyn.

"You're stalling, Malcolm," I tell him, keeping my tone smooth and cold as I cross the room to stand over him. He flinches slightly, then covers it with a forced sneer. "We both know what this is about, so let's cut the theatrics. I'm here to make a deal. Either name your price, or I can come back here with my pack and you won't end up with a dime."

His face twists, anger warring with the greed I see flickering behind his beady little eyes. "I already told you," he snaps, though there's a slight tremor in his voice. "She's not for sale."

"Everyone's got a price," I counter, letting my voice drop just enough to send a ripple of unease through the room. "Even you."

Wiley snorts from his corner, pushing off the wall with a lazy grin. "Don't take it personally, wolf. Father's just sentimental about his favorite toy."



Malcolm stiffens, shooting his son a warning glare, but I catch the slight twitch in his jaw, the crack in his confidence. Good.

I lean forward slightly, lowering my voice so only Malcolm can hear. “Sentimental doesn’t pay debts, Malcolm. But I do.”

That lands exactly where I want it to. Malcolm’s eyes flicker, the barest hint of panic flashing across his face. He returns to his chair, and his fingers tighten around the armrests as he avoids my gaze. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” I counter, straightening and stepping back just enough to give him room to squirm. “Because I’m fairly certain I know why you’re entertaining buyers at all, Malcolm. Gambling debts are a nasty habit. And from what I hear, yours are piling up faster than you can handle.”

Malcolm’s face goes pale, and his mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. I can practically see the gears turning in his head as he calculates just how much I know and how much I’m bluffing. The truth is, I’ve heard enough whispers to pose a danger to him, but I don’t need to know every detail. His reaction tells me everything I need.

“Let’s make this simple,” I continue, cutting off whatever pathetic excuse he’s about to stammer out. “I’ll pay you double what you’d get from any other buyer. Right here, right now. Enough to clear your debts and then some.”

Malcolm hesitates, and his eyes dart toward Wiley, who shrugs and gives him a look that says, Why not ? I hate him even more for it.

“You’ll pay double?” Malcolm repeats as if he can’t quite believe it.

I nod once, keeping my expression calm even as I feel my wolf clawing to the

surface. “Cash. Immediate transfer. All you have to do is sign her over.”

Malcolm glances at Jaslyn, who hasn’t moved or spoken since this whole exchange began. She’s standing perfectly still, her shoulders tight and her eyes fixed on the ground like she’s trying to disappear. The sight of her like this—beaten-down, silenced—fuels the fire already raging in my chest.

“Fine,” Malcolm says at last, though the word is heavy with reluctance and greed. “You’ve got a deal.”

Relief flickers in me, but it’s quickly doused by the seething anger that I can’t quite push away. He should be groveling for what he’s done to her, not haggling like she’s some piece of furniture he’s outgrown. But I hold it in, because this isn’t about him. It’s about her. And getting her out of this hellhole is all that matters.

The transfer is as sickening as I imagined it would be. The paperwork is quick, transactional, and thoroughly dehumanizing. Malcolm smiles far too much during the process, and Wiley lingers nearby, watching with barely concealed amusement. I keep my focus on the pen in Malcolm’s hand, counting down the seconds until this is over.

When it’s done, Malcolm leans back with a satisfied grin, sliding the papers across the table toward me. “Pleasure doing business with you, Alpha.”

I don’t dignify him with a response. Instead, I tuck the papers into my coat, turn on my heel, and make my way toward Jaslyn. She doesn’t look at me, but I can see the tension in her frame as I approach.

“Come on,” I tell her quietly, keeping my voice as gentle as I can.

She hesitates for a fraction of a second before stepping forward.

We make it out of the house without incident, though I can feel Malcolm and Wiley's eyes burning into my back the whole way. The second we're outside, Jaslyn pulls away, putting several feet of space between us as she rounds on me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she snaps. "Do you have any idea—"

"Saving you," I cut in, turning to face her fully. "That's what I'm doing."

She lets out a bitter laugh, crossing her arms over her chest. "Saving me? That's rich. Where was all this heroism ten years ago, Gray? Oh, wait... you were too busy banishing me to care."

I step closer, lowering my voice. "I didn't have a choice then."

Her eyes narrow, and her voice rises with every word. "You always have a choice. Don't stand there and act like—"

"Keep your voice down," I warn, glancing back toward the house. The last thing we need is Malcolm or Wiley overhearing this.

"Why?" she demands, her voice shaking with anger. "Afraid they'll realize what a hypocrite you are? That the great Alpha Gray Reed has a thing for ruining lives and then swooping in to play the hero when it suits him?"

"Enough," I bark.

She flinches slightly, and guilt slams into me. She's been through enough. The last thing she needs is me barking at her.

I take a breath, forcing myself to calm down. "I know you're angry. You have every right to be. But right now, the only thing that matters is getting you out of here."

Her glare could cut steel, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she storms past me toward my truck parked at the edge of the property. I follow without a word, quickening my steps as I send one last glance over my shoulder.

We'll talk later. We have to. But first, we need to leave.

The silence in the truck is deafening, broken only by the crunch of gravel under the tires and the occasional internal snort from my wolf, who's just as agitated as I am. Jaslyn sits stiffly in the passenger seat, staring out the window like the scenery holds the secrets of the universe. Her arms are crossed, and her entire posture is screaming stay away .

We're not even fifteen minutes into the drive when I notice her shifting in her seat and her eyes darting toward the door. I've been an alpha long enough to know when someone's about to make a move, and we're coming up on a red light.

"Don't even think about it," I warn, not bothering to take my eyes off the road.

She stiffens, and her lips press into a thin line. For a moment, I think she's going to listen. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see her fingers brush the door handle.

"Jaslyn," I say, slamming my hand against the lock button. The click echoes in the cab. "You're not jumping out of a moving truck."

She glares at me, and those green eyes are blazing. "Watch me."

Before I can respond, she lunges for the handle again while she pushes the unlock button with the other. This time, I swerve the truck sharply, and she's thrown back against the seat with a yelp.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I growl, steering the truck back onto the straight

road.

“Let me go!” she spits, twisting in her seat to glare at me. “I don’t want to be here with you. I didn’t ask for your help!”

“No,” I acknowledge as my grip tightens on the wheel. “But you needed it.”

She huffs and turns back toward the window, muttering something under her breath that I’m sure isn’t flattering.

I should’ve known it wouldn’t end there.

The second we stop at a gas station, she tries again. I barely turn my back to the truck when I hear the door creak open. By the time I whirl around, she’s halfway out with her bare feet slapping against the pavement.

“Jaslyn!” I bark, grabbing her arm before she can bolt.

“Let me go!” she shouts, twisting and kicking at me like a feral animal. Her elbow catches me in the ribs, and I grunt, spinning her around to face me.

“Enough!” I thunder in my full-on alpha voice. She freezes, and her chest heaves as she glares up at me with defiance blazing in her eyes. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting away from you,” she snarls, jerking her arm out of my grip. “I don’t need your charity, Gray. I never did.”

My patience snaps. “Charity?” I repeat. “You think this is charity? I just got you out of that hellhole, Jaslyn. I just did you a favor.”

“A favor?” She laughs bitterly, and the sound is sharp enough to cut glass. “You think taking me from Malcolm is a favor? At least with him, I knew where I stood. At least with him, I wasn’t being dragged back to a pack that abandoned me.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at her. “You’d rather be with Malcolm? After everything he’s done to you?”

Her lips curl into a bitter smile. “What’s the difference, Gray? Malcolm owned me outright. You just bought me under the guise of being my savior.”

“I’m trying to help you,” I counter, but even as I say it, the guilt rises in my chest like a tide I can’t control. “You’re angry because I banished you. I get that. But—”

“Get that?” she cuts in, her voice trembling with rage. “You don’t get anything, Gray. You have no idea what it’s been like, what I’ve had to survive because of you.”

She’s right. I don’t know. I’ve thought about her over the years, but I always imagined she’d landed on her feet. Jaslyn was resourceful, tough, the kind of person who could claw her way out of any mess. That’s what I told myself. That she was fine, that she didn’t need me, that banishing her hadn’t ruined her life. But seeing her now, hearing the raw anger in her voice, it’s clear I was wrong. Painfully, unforgivably wrong.

Seeing her in Malcolm’s hands was bad enough. Knowing I played a part in putting her there? It’s a hard pill to swallow.

I take a slow breath, trying to rein in my emotions. “You’re right,” I say at last. “I don’t know what you’ve been through. But I’m trying to make it right. I’m trying to give you a chance.”

“A chance for what?” she snaps. “To go back to the pack that hated me? To prove

myself to the people who treated me like I was nothing? No thanks.”

I square my shoulders, meeting her glare head-on. “You won’t just be going back to the pack,” I tell her. “The truth is, we need your help, and I can promise you things will be different. You’ll be reinstated as a full member of the pack. As a witch. In a position of authority.”

She blinks, caught off-guard for the first time, but it doesn’t last long. Her expression hardens, and she folds her arms across her chest. “Oh, so I’m just supposed to forget everything? Forgive you for throwing me out like garbage?”

“No, but I’m asking you to give me a chance to prove that I’m not Malcolm. That I’m not the same alpha who made that call.”

Her jaw ticks, and for a moment, I think she’s going to argue again. But instead, she turns away and climbs back into the truck. She doesn’t say another word, but the tension between us is so thick, I can barely breathe.

As I slide back into the driver’s seat, I glance over at her, hoping for some sign that I’ve gotten through. But she just stares out the window.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

I've faced down Malcolm's tantrums, Wiley's sadistic games, and more than one magical disaster of my own making. But nothing—and I mean nothing —could've prepared me for the gut-wrenching anxiety clawing at me as we pull into Red Arrow territory.

The forest blurs past the window in a mix of greens and browns that would almost be peaceful if I weren't busy trying not to hyperventilate. My stomach feels like it's been tied in a dozen different knots, and every mile closer to the packhouse is another weight pressing down on my chest.

I force myself to keep my eyes on the horizon, pretending I'm not hyper-aware of Gray sitting in the driver's seat. His hands are steady on the wheel, his jaw set like he's got the whole world figured out. I hate that about him—how he can be so calm while I'm sitting here one wrong thought away from losing it.

"Stop popping your knuckles," he says suddenly, interrupting the silence.

I blink, glancing down at my hands. Sure enough, I'm tugging on each finger without realizing it. I relax them with an annoyed huff. "Maybe don't stare at me while you're driving."

The tiniest twitch takes at the corner of his mouth. "Hard not to notice when you look like you're about to bolt."

"I'm not running. Not that I could, now that you've put the child locks on the damn door."



“Safety precaution. It’ll stay that way now that I know you have a habit of jumping out of running vehicles.”

I glare at him, but it’s not like he’s wrong. After a moment, I turn back to the window, wishing I could focus on anything but the twisting pit in my stomach.

“Relax,” Gray says after a beat. “You’ll be fine.”

“Oh, really?” I shoot back, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “And what makes you think that, Alpha? Did the same pack that treated me like a freak suddenly become witch-friendly while I was gone?”

His hands tighten on the wheel just enough for me to notice, but he doesn’t rise to the bait. “Things are different now,” he says simply.

“Sure they are,” I mutter. “And I’m the queen of shifter diplomacy.”

The truth is, I don’t believe him. Not for a second. Sure, I’ve heard of some of the packs around bringing witches on board, but I can’t imagine Red Arrow being so progressive. I remember the way they used to look at me. Like every mistake I made confirmed their worst fears about witches. And even if Gray’s little rescue mission changed something for him, it’s not going to change the way the rest of them see me.

The truck slows as we pull onto the gravel drive leading to the packhouse. It’s a massive wooden structure nestled deep in the heart of the forest. The building looks almost like it’s part of the landscape, with the way its dark wood exterior blends seamlessly with the towering pine trees that surround it. The roof is steep and shingled, and though it bears the scars of harsh winters and time, the structure still seems as solid as ever.

My heart thuds harder with every bump in the uneven road. The dense forest presses

in on either side, and the canopy above filters the sunlight into shifting patches of gold and shadow. It's a beautiful, secluded spot, but instead of feeling serene, it feels like a cage waiting to close in around me.

By the time Gray parks near the front steps, I'm gripping the door handle like it's the only thing keeping me upright. He has to come around to let me out, and once I hop to the ground, the familiar scents hit me all at once. After all the time I spent in this place, it should feel like home. But it doesn't.

The packhouse looms ahead, bigger than I remember. The last time I stood here, I was being shoved out the door with nothing but the clothes on my back and the sound of my own heart breaking.

"Come on," Gray says, breaking me out of my thoughts. "They're expecting us."

"Great," I grumble. "I'm sure it'll be a warm welcome."

He doesn't respond, just starts walking toward the house with that infuriating confidence of his. I follow, forcing myself to keep my head up despite the knot in my throat. If they're going to stare, I'll give them something to stare at.

But to my surprise, the packhouse isn't teeming with people like I expected. Instead, Gray leads me through a side entrance and down a quiet hallway, and there isn't a shifter in sight.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, looking around.

"Waiting," he tells me without looking back.

"For what?"

“You’ll see.”

His cryptic answer does nothing to calm my nerves. By the time we stop in front of a set of double doors I remember leads to a hall we used for important ceremonies, my pulse is pounding in my ears. Inside, it’s decorated simple but elegant, with rows of empty chairs and a table at the front draped in white.

A middle-aged man I recognize as our old healer is wearing a neat suit as he stands by the ceremonial altar, flipping through a stack of papers that rest on top. He looks up as we enter, not even looking surprised to see me.

“Alpha,” the man says with a nod. “Everything is ready.”

“Good,” Gray replies. He turns to me and extends a hand, which I don’t take. “Come on.”

I hesitate, keeping my feet rooted to the floor as unease snakes through me. “What is this?”

“You’re getting married,” he says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

My brain stutters. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” His tone is calm, but there’s a firmness beneath it that leaves no room for argument. “We’re getting married. Now.”

The words hit me like a slap, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. “You’ve lost your damn mind,” I manage, taking a step back. “There’s no way—”

“You don’t have a choice. You’re safer here as my mate than as a witch on her own. Plus, this way, not a single wolf in this pack will so much as question your return.”

My stomach twists at the mention of the rest of the pack, but it's not enough to drown out my fury. "So this is your big plan?" I hiss. "Drag me back here and slap a ring on me like that fixes anything?"

"It's not about fixing," he says evenly. "It's about protecting you. And protecting the pack."

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "You're unbelievable."

"Maybe," he agrees, stepping closer. "But this is happening. Now, are you going to stand here and argue, or are you going to let me help you for once?"

I glare at him. Every muscle in my body is screaming to fight, to run, to do anything but go along with this. But I can see it in his eyes—he's not budging. And deep down, I know he's right. I hate him for it, but I know. Besides, it's not like I have any other choice. Even if I managed to run away, I wouldn't get far. Between the shifters and Malcolm, my life will never be my own.

"Fine," I bite out, but the word is sour on my tongue. "Let's get this over with."

The ceremony is short, efficient, and devoid of anything resembling romance. The healer recites the necessary words while Gray stands beside me, solid and unmoving. I barely hear him. My mind is a mess of anger, fear, and grief for the life I'll never get to live all because of who and what I am.

When it's over, the officiant hands Gray a document, which he signs with a flourish before passing it to me. I take the pen with shaking fingers, and my chest tightens as I scrawl my name at the bottom.

"Congratulations," the man says, his voice polite but hollow. "You're officially mated."

I don't feel congratulations are in order.

Gray doesn't give me time to ask questions as he leads me through the packhouse. I trail behind him, feeling like a piece of debris caught in a current. The corridors are both familiar and alien, like they belong to a life I've long since left behind. Everything smells sharper, cleaner, like the air here has somehow managed to scrub away the stains of the past.

We pass a few pack members in the hall, and they nod at Gray with a respect that borders on reverence. None of them look at me like I'm an outsider. Not yet, anyway. I keep my head down, waiting for the first glare, the first whispered insult. But it never comes.

When we step into the banquet hall, it's alive with light, laughter, and the smell of roasted meat that makes my stomach churn, though not from hunger. I stand in the entryway, trying to process what I'm seeing: dozens of shifters gathered around long tables, eating, drinking, and chatting like this is some kind of celebration.

What the hell are they celebrating?

I'm still trying to figure that out when Gray gently nudges me forward. The sound of the door clicking shut behind us draws every eye in the room. For a moment, the hall goes silent, and I feel the weight of their stares pressing down on me like a boulder.

And then it happens: they smile.

"Jaslyn!" someone calls from one of the tables. A young man with sandy brown hair and an easy grin waves me over like we're old friends. "Welcome home!"

Home? Did he hit his head?

I glance at Gray, who's watching the scene unfold with his usual calm. He gives me a slight nod as if to say, This is fine. Everything is fine .

But it's not fine. None of this is fine. These people used to avoid me like I was contagious, and now they're acting like I'm some kind of long-lost hero.

"You're finally here!" A tall woman with auburn hair stands from her seat, and her smile is so wide, it looks painful. "We've been waiting for you. You're going to be a game-changer for the pack."

Game-changer? I feel like I've stepped into some kind of alternate reality.

"I—" My voice comes out weak, and I swallow hard, trying again. "I think you've got the wrong person."

The woman laughs, a light, airy sound that grates on my nerves. "Not a chance. You're Jaslyn Kismet, right? The witch who's going to save us all?"

Save them?

My stomach twists violently, and I take a step back, bumping into Gray. He steadies me with a firm hand on my shoulder, but it doesn't do much to calm the rising panic.

Before I can say anything else, a familiar voice draws my attention. "Jaslyn?"

I turn and nearly lose my balance when I see Theo standing near the head of the main table. His dark hair is shorter than I remember, his frame broader, but it's unmistakably him. The last time I saw him, he was just another pack member. One of the kinder ones, I'll give him that. Now, he's wearing a beta's insignia on his jacket.

"You're beta now?" I blurt before I can stop myself.

Theo grins, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “It’s been ten years. A lot’s changed.”

No kidding.

“I can’t believe it,” I mutter, shaking my head. “You, a beta. What happened? Did you lose a bet?”

Laughter ripples through the room, and Theo chuckles. “Still sharp, I see. Good. You’ll need that.”

From somewhere behind me, someone pipes up, “At least we finally got a beta people actually like.”

A few more snickers follow, and Theo’s grin widens as a touch of color creeps into his cheeks. “Yeah, well, it wasn’t hard to improve on Carter’s example. I figure not being an arrogant jerk gave me a head start.”

I blink, caught off guard, as statements of agreement spread through the crowd. It’s strange, hearing them speak so openly about Carter—especially in a way that suggests they were just as relieved as I was to see him gone.

I don’t have time to unpack that before another voice cuts in, one I recognize immediately and wish I didn’t.

“Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence.”

I whip around to find Madison standing a few feet away, her arms crossed and her lips curled into a familiar smirk. The sight of her sends a cold shiver down my spine. She hasn’t changed much—still tall, still striking, still oozing arrogance. But there’s something different in her tone, something almost... friendly? No, that can’t be right.

“You look good,” Madison comments, and for a second, I think I’ve imagined it. But no, there it is—a compliment. From Madison. The same Madison who once told me I’d never amount to anything.

“Thanks,” I manage, though my voice sounds strained even to my own ears.

“It’s good to have you back,” she adds, and her smile softens into something that looks suspiciously like sincerity. “We’ve all been looking forward to this.”

I blink, utterly baffled. Is this some kind of elaborate prank? Did Gray pay them to act like this? Because there’s no way these people are genuinely happy to see me. Not after the way they treated me before.

The noise of the room swells again as people return to their conversations, and I seize the opportunity to step closer to Gray. “What the hell is going on?” I hiss, keeping my voice low.

He tilts his head and responds, “They’re welcoming you.”

“Welcoming me?” I repeat, incredulous. “They used to hate me.”

“Things change,” he says simply, but the look in his eyes tells me there’s more to it than that.

Before I can press him further, someone clinks a glass, and the room quiets. A man at the far end of the table stands, raising his glass in my direction.

“To Jaslyn,” he says, his voice carrying easily over the crowd. “Our savior.”

The word bounces around the room, and my breath catches. The room erupts into cheers and applause, and I feel like I’m going to be sick. Savior ? These people are



calling me their savior? What the hell have I done to earn that title?

My magic stirs uneasily beneath my skin, a low hint of energy that matches the rising panic in my chest. I try to shove it down, to keep it buried where it belongs, but the weight of their eyes, their expectations, is too much.

It happens before I can stop it.

The hint ignites into a spark, and the spark becomes a flash of light that crackles across my hands. Gasps ripple through the room as the air grows heavy with static. Plates rattle, and the flames on the candles flicker wildly. Someone whispers my name, half in awe, half in fear.

I shove my hands behind my back, clenching them into fists to smother the energy, but the damage is done. The room is silent again, but their stares are even heavier now.

“Jaslyn,” Gray says softly, stepping closer. There’s no judgment in his voice, but I can’t bear to look at him.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper with a trembling voice. “I can’t—” I break off, swallowing hard as the tears threaten to spill. “Please, Gray. Get me out of here. Now.”

I don’t wait for his response. I can’t. My heart is pounding, my magic is teetering on the edge of control, and all I can think about is getting out of this room before I break something—or someone.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Jaslyn doesn't say a word as I lead her out of the banquet hall, though the tension rolling off her could probably level a forest. Her shoulders are stiff, and her arms are crossed like she's holding herself together by sheer force of will. I know better than to push her right now. She's a storm barely contained, and the last thing I need is her magic going off again while we're surrounded by the pack.

The path to the lake is quiet, save for the crunch of gravel beneath our boots and the faint rustle of wind through the trees. The air is cooler here, fresher, and the faint scent of water grows stronger with every step. It's always been my go-to spot for clearing my head, though I'm pretty sure Jaslyn isn't interested in the therapeutic scenery right now.

"Would you stop it?" she snaps suddenly, her voice cutting through the silence.

I blink, caught off-guard. "I haven't said anything."

"Exactly." She spins on her heel to glare at me, her green eyes blazing. "You've been silent this whole time, and it's driving me insane. If you've got something to say, say it. Otherwise, quit acting like you're leading me to my execution."

"I'm not—" I stop myself and take a calming breath. "I thought you could use the quiet."

"Oh, because you're so thoughtful now?" Her voice drips with sarcasm, and she throws her hands up. "Fantastic. I guess we're all just supposed to forget that you didn't give a damn about me for the last ten years."

My jaw tightens, but I don't rise to the bait. Instead, I keep walking, gesturing for her to follow. "Come on. We're almost there."

She mutters something under her breath but falls into step behind me. The trees thin out as we reach the edge of the lake. Its surface is as smooth as glass under the pale moonlight. The sight is serene, almost surreal, but I can feel Jaslyn's anger crackling in the air like static electricity.

"This is it?" she asks, crossing her arms. "What, you're hoping a scenic view will fix everything?"

"No," I reply evenly. "But it might help you calm down before you blow something up. I heard that water can absorb magic, so..."

Her eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think she's going to argue. Then she exhales sharply and stalks toward the water's edge, kicking off her boots as she goes. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

I stay back, giving her space as she steps into the shallows. The water laps at her ankles, and she closes her eyes as her hands curl and uncurl at her sides. A faint shimmer of light pulses around her, almost too subtle to notice, but I feel it—a shift in the air, like the lake is holding its breath.

Her magic flares, and the water ripples in response. She tilts her head back, exhaling slowly, and I watch as the tension drains from her shoulders. The shimmer fades until it's replaced by an almost eerie stillness, and for the first time all night, she looks... peaceful.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding before stepping closer to the edge of the water. "Better?"

She doesn't answer right away. She just keeps her gaze fixed on the moonlit ripples around her feet. When she finally looks at me, her expression is guarded but calmer. "You brought me out here just so I could vent my powers?"

"It's part of it," I admit, shoving my hands into my pockets. "Figured it might help."

Her lips twitch, but it's not quite a smile. "Well, congratulations. You did one thing right tonight."

"Glad to hear it." I keep my tone light, though the weight of what I need to say next is already settling on my shoulders. "But we need to talk."

Her brows knit together, and I don't miss the suspicion flickering in her green eyes. "About what?"

I hesitate and run a hand through my hair as I search for the right words. "About why I brought you back. Why we need you here."

She snorts and flips her red hair over her shoulder. "Oh, this should be good. Let me guess—you missed having me around? Needed a scapegoat to blame when things go wrong?"

"Jaslyn." My voice is sharper than I intend, and she blinks, startled into silence. I soften my tone and continue. "It's not about that. It's about the pack. About what's been happening to us."

She studies me for a moment as her gaze searches mine for answers. "I'm listening."

I take a deep breath, and the words are heavy as they leave my mouth. "We've been under attack. Not just Red Arrow, but Starfire Hollow and East Hills, too. Demons. They've been hitting us harder and more frequently than ever before."

Her face doesn't change, but I see the slight shift in her posture—the way her shoulders tense, the way her fingers twitch at her sides. “Demons,” she repeats, her voice flat.

“Yes. Two attacks on Red Arrow territory in the last six months. The last one killed two of our pack members and injured five others. And every sign points to another attack soon.”

She shakes her head slowly, like she's trying to piece it together. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“It's not just the attacks,” I explain, stepping closer. “It's how they're targeting us. They're going after the packs without magical protection. Damien and Alec—” I stop, realizing she might not recognize the names. “The alphas of Starfire Hollow and East Hills. They've both married witches, and their packs have wards in place. Red Arrow doesn't. We're the most vulnerable.”

“So, what? You bought me because you think I can slap some wards on your territory and make the problem go away?”

“It's more than that. You're not just some random witch, Jaslyn. This is your home. Your mother was Red Arrow, and that makes this pack a part of you, whether you want to admit it or not. It's in your blood, and that makes this personal for you, too. We need you—your magic, your knowledge, your strength. Without you, we're fighting a losing battle.”

I can see the questions brewing in her eyes, the doubts she doesn't want to voice. And I know that no matter what I say next, it won't be enough to erase the past.

But I have to try.

“Let me get this straight,” Jaslyn says. “You brought me back because the pack needs magical protection, and you thought I’d just... what? Jump into a leadership role like nothing happened just because my mother was one of you?”

I suppress a sigh. “It’s not that simple.”

“Of course it’s not,” she snaps, crossing her arms. “Nothing with you ever is. What aren’t you telling me, Gray?”

There’s no point in dodging it. She’s too sharp for that. “The marriage,” I admit, meeting her gaze. “It’s part of it.”

Her brows shoot up, and for a second, I think she might actually laugh. “Part of it?” she repeats, her tone incredulous. “You mean I had to marry you for this to work? It wasn’t about helping the pack accept me at all. Was that some kind of magical prerequisite, or are you just making up rules as you go?”

“It’s not a rule,” I say quickly. “It’s about optics. The pack—”

“Optics,” she cuts in, shaking her head. “You mean you needed to make sure no one questioned why you brought me back after everything. Got it.”

“That’s not—” I stop myself, exhaling slowly. “Yes, it helps with the pack. I didn’t lie about that. But that’s not the only reason.”

“Oh, this should be good,” she mutters, glaring at me. “Go on. Enlighten me.”

I take a step closer, lowering my voice. “I married you to protect you, Jaslyn. Not just from the pack, but from anyone who might see you as a threat—or a tool. As my mate, you’re untouchable. No one can challenge your place here. No one can try to use you against us.”

Her expression falters for a moment, and something unreadable moves across her face. But just as quickly, her walls go back up. “So, what? I’m your charity case now? Your personal damsel in distress?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I reply, keeping my tone calm despite the frustration building in my chest. “This isn’t about pity. It’s about making sure you’re safe. I couldn’t protect you back then, but I can now.”

She lets out a bitter laugh, shaking her head. “You think this makes up for what you did? For what you let happen to me?”

“No,” I state, stepping closer. “I don’t. But it’s a start.”

The silence that follows is heavy, the kind that presses against your ribs and makes it hard to breathe. She stares at me like she’s trying to decide whether to yell at me or walk away. Finally, she exhales sharply, breaking the tension.

“Fine,” she says. “You want my help? You’ve got it. But I have conditions.”

I arch a brow. “Conditions?”

“That’s right. First, this marriage? It’s only on paper. No playing house, no pretending we’re something we’re not. Clear?”

I nod slowly, though the words sting more than I want to admit. “Clear.”

“Second,” she continues, ticking the points on her fingers, “I’m here to help with the demon problem. That’s it. As soon as they’re dealt with, I’m gone. No strings, no obligations. I will no longer be a slave to you or the pack or to Malcolm. I will be my own person. Agreed?”

Every instinct in me screams to argue, to fight for something more permanent, but I bite it back. Pushing her now will only make things worse. “Agreed,” I say.

She narrows her eyes like she’s waiting for me to slip up, to say something she can use as ammunition. When I don’t, she lets out a breath and crosses her arms again. “Good. Because I’m not here to play the role of perfect little mate. I’m here to do a job, and that’s all.”

The words are harsh, but I nod, anyway. “Understood.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks. The air between us is thick with tension, but there’s something else, too—an undercurrent of understanding, fragile and tentative. She may not trust me yet, but agreeing to her terms feels like the first step toward something better.

“I’ll be upfront with you from now on,” I promise. “About the pack, about what we need, about everything. No more surprises.”

“Good. Because I’m done being kept in the dark.”

I nod, and for the first time since this whole mess started, I feel like we’re on the same page. Or at least, in the same book.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The scent hits me first—woody and sharp, clean in a way that feels intrusive yet comforting all at once. It clings to the sheets, the air, the furniture. Slowly, I realize why. I'm not in my room.

I sit up quickly, and the thick blankets slide down to pool in my lap. The bed beneath me is huge, far too large for one person and infinitely more comfortable than I'm used to. It takes my sleep-addled brain a second to catch up, but when it does, my stomach twists.

Gray's room.

A quick glance around confirms it. The furniture is heavy and rustic, the floor scuffed in a way that only years of use can create. His boots are lined up perfectly near the door, and his scent is woven into every inch of the place.

I groan, threading my fingers through my hair as the events of the previous night flood back. The tension in the banquet hall, my magic flaring out of control, Gray leading me out before I could embarrass myself further. And then his insistence that I take the bed while he slept on the couch.

I glance toward the door, half-expecting him to barge in, but it's quiet. Too quiet.

The knob rattles just as the thought crosses my mind, and the door creaks open.

"Morning," Gray says, stepping inside with a steaming mug of coffee in hand. His blond hair is damp, and he's wearing a worn t-shirt that clings in ways I'd rather not notice. He leans casually against the doorframe as if he owns the place—which, of

course, he does.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, sharper than I intended.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed with my tone. “This is my room.”

I scowl, pulling the blanket tighter around me. “Then why am I in it?”

“You needed rest,” he says simply, setting the coffee on the nightstand. “The couch wasn’t an option for you.”

“And yet it was for you?”

“Obviously.”

His nonchalance grates on me, and I swing my legs over the side of the bed, grabbing my boots. “You’re unbelievable, you know that?”

“Thanks,” he replies dryly, but as I move to brush past him, he holds up a hand, stopping me in my tracks. “Wait a second.”

I pause halfway to the door, narrowing my eyes at him. “What now?”

Without a word, he steps over to the dresser, pulls open a drawer, and lifts out a neat stack of folded clothes. He holds them out to me, his expression unreadable.

“What’s this?” I ask, not reaching for them.

“Clothes,” he says plainly. “You can’t keep walking around in...” He gestures vaguely toward the shapeless, threadbare dress I’ve been stuck with since Malcolm decided witches shouldn’t look presentable. “That.”

I glance at the clothes in his hands—a mix of well-worn jeans, t-shirts, and sweaters. “Where did you get these?”

“From the women in the pack. I asked around. Told them it was for someone who needed it. No one asked questions.”

I blink, caught off-guard. “You... what?”

“I figured you’d want something that actually fits,” he says, shrugging like it’s no big deal. “And something that doesn’t look like it’s one wash away from disintegrating.”

The knot in my chest tightens, and I hate that it feels like gratitude is threatening to surface. I glance at the clothes again, noting the care in how they’re folded, the variety of sizes. They’re not just hand-me-downs, they’re a gesture. A thoughtful one. And that only makes it worse.

“I don’t need charity,” I say.

“Would you quit saying that? It’s not charity, Jaslyn. It’s practicality,” he replies, stepping closer and placing the clothes on the edge of the bed. “You’ve got enough to deal with. At least wear something that doesn’t look like it’s been dragged through the mud.”

The softness in his voice catches me off-guard, and I look away quickly, focusing on the pile of fabric instead of the man standing far too close for comfort. “Fine,” I mutter, reaching for the clothes. “But don’t think this makes up for anything.”

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t argue. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

I clutch the clothes to my chest, avoiding his gaze as I turn toward the door. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get dressed without an audience.”

He steps back with a small nod. “I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready. Coffee’s on the nightstand.”

I wait until the door clicks shut behind him before letting out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Looking down at the clothes in my arms, I feel a flicker of something I can’t quite name. Something I’m not ready to acknowledge.

For now, I push it aside, focusing on the simple act of changing into something that doesn’t make me feel like a prisoner anymore.

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Over the next week, life in the packhouse becomes... routine, which is a word I never thought I’d associate with my time here. The place is bigger than I remember, sprawling with endless hallways and hidden nooks that will take time to rediscover. I try to stay out of everyone’s way, but Gray makes that impossible.

He’s everywhere.

At first, I think it’s intentional—him hovering to make sure I don’t bolt in the middle of the night. But the longer it goes on, the clearer it becomes that this is just how he operates. He’s always moving, always checking in on someone or handling some issue. And somehow, he always manages to show up when I least expect it.

Like when I’m in the library, poring over an old book on wards, and he drops a plate of food next to me without a word. Or when I’m trying to carry an armful of supplies upstairs, and he wordlessly takes half of them.

It’s not just the little acts of kindness that irritate me. It’s the way he does them so naturally, like it’s no big deal. Like he hasn’t spent the last decade being the reason I learned to live without help.

But the worst part is how aware I am of him.

He moves through the packhouse with a quiet confidence that draws attention whether he wants it or not. During training sessions, he spars with the younger wolves. His movements are so precise and controlled, it's almost hypnotizing. He never raises his voice, but his presence commands respect in a way that makes me grind my teeth.

And yet, I can't stop watching him.

I tell myself it's because I'm trying to figure him out. To understand what kind of alpha he's become since I've been gone. But deep down, I know it's more than that.

Like now.

We're standing at the edge of the training field, watching the wolves run through drills. The sun is warm against my back, but I can't focus on anything except Gray. He's leaning against the fence beside me with his arms crossed and his attention fixed on the trainees.

"They've improved a lot over the last few days," I comment, mostly to distract myself.

"They have," he agrees.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, studying the sharp line of his jaw and the way the sunlight catches in his hair. I hate that my gaze lingers, that I notice the faint sheen of sweat on his brow or the way his shirt stretches across his shoulders.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks suddenly.

I snap my attention back to the field, heat rushing to my cheeks. “Nothing.”

He hums, unconvinced, but doesn’t press the issue. Instead, he pushes off the fence and moves toward the sparring ring.

I tell myself I’m not watching him as he squares off with Theo, but my eyes betray me.

The two of them move like they’ve done this a hundred times. Their strikes and counters are perfectly in sync. Gray ducks under Theo’s swing, delivering a sharp jab to his ribs that earns a grunt of approval. It’s almost like a dance, the way he moves—calm, controlled, and so damn confident.

“Careful,” Theo calls out to me as he catches my gaze over Gray’s shoulder. “You keep staring like that, and people might start talking.”

“I wasn’t staring,” I protest, but my voice wavers.

Theo grins, dodging Gray’s next strike. “Whatever you say, Jaslyn.”

Gray glances back at me, and my stomach flips. I turn away before he can say anything, heading toward the packhouse with my heart pounding in my chest.

I tell myself it’s frustration, not something else. But I’m not sure I believe it anymore.

By the time we fall into a routine, the packhouse feels less like a looming prison and more like... well, something tolerable. I wouldn’t call it home—not yet—but the weight in my chest eases bit by bit.

Gray is everywhere, and his presence is like the static of a storm on the horizon. It’s impossible to avoid him, though I’ve stopped actively trying. It’s not because I trust

him—not entirely, anyway—but because every time I push, he doesn’t push back. He doesn’t try to force my cooperation or prod me into gratitude. It’s unsettling in its own way, his quiet patience.

But if there’s one thing I can’t ignore, it’s the way the rest of the pack watches him. They look at him with respect, trust, loyalty. It’s disarming to see, and a tiny part of me wonders if maybe there’s more to him than I’ve allowed myself to see.

Still, when I finally approach him with my request, I’m braced for a fight.

“Take me to the last demon-sighting,” I say, crossing my arms and leaning against the doorframe of his office.

Gray looks up from his desk, his pen pausing mid-signature. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

He sets the pen down and leans back in his chair. “Why?”

“Because if you’re serious about me helping, I need to see it for myself. I can’t just throw wards at a problem I don’t understand.”

He studies me for a long moment, and I resist the urge to fidget under his gaze. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

“I’m not a child, Gray.”

“No,” he agrees, standing and grabbing his jacket. “You’re not. But that doesn’t mean this won’t be dangerous.”

“I think I’ll manage.”

He doesn't argue. Instead, he gestures for me to follow, and we head out into the crisp morning air.

The drive to the last demon-sighting area is quiet, the kind of silence that feels heavy with unsaid things. Gray keeps his eyes on the road, drumming his fingers lightly against the steering wheel. I keep mine on the horizon, but the knot in my stomach tightens the closer we get.

When the truck finally rolls to a stop, the forest around us feels different. It's still, but not in a peaceful way. The air feels saturated with something dark and heavy, and I can't shake the sensation of being watched.

"This is it," Gray announces, stepping out of the truck.

I follow with my boots crunching against the dry leaves as I scan the area. It looks ordinary enough—a clearing surrounded by towering pines, sunlight filtering through the branches. But the moment I step forward, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"There's something here," I comment, closing my eyes and reaching out with my magic. The energy in the air is faint, like a shadow of something long gone, but it's there. Dark and cold, clinging to the edges of the clearing.

"Still a threat?" Gray questions.

"I don't think so," I reply, though my tone lacks certainty. "Whatever it was, it's not here anymore. But the residue... it's strong."

Before he can respond, the sound of footsteps draws our attention. I turn to see two women approaching—a tall brunette with russet-colored eyes and a shorter, curvier woman with black hair and blue eyes. Their presence radiates magic, and I



immediately know they're witches.

"Gray," the brunette greets him with a nod. "This must be Jaslyn."

"Jade," Gray says, his tone warmer than usual. He gestures to the girl with the black hair. "And Isadora. They're the witches from Starfire Hollow and East Hills."

I blink, stunned. I knew other packs had witches, but seeing them here, standing side by side with Gray like equals, feels surreal.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Jade says, offering her hand.

I hesitate before shaking it, unsure how to respond. "You... work with the packs?"

"Of course," Isadora chimes in, her grin widening. "Why wouldn't we? We're part of them."

"Because..." I trail off, unsure how to voice the years of prejudice and hostility I'd endured without sounding like I'm accusing them.

Jade seems to sense my hesitation and offers a small, understanding smile. "Things have changed, Jaslyn. The alliance between the packs wouldn't be possible without witches. We're not just tolerated anymore. We're valued."

Isadora snorts. "Took them long enough to figure out we're not the bad guys."

I glance at Gray, half-expecting him to contradict them, but he just watches me with that blank expression of his.

"How?" I ask the women, my voice barely above a whisper. "How did that happen?"

“Necessity,” Jade says simply. “The demons forced us to work together. Once the packs realized how much they needed us, the old prejudices didn’t hold up anymore.”

The words hit me harder than I expect. For so long, I believed there was no place for me here—that my magic made me an outcast, a threat. Hearing otherwise feels like someone’s flipped my world upside down.

“Look,” Isadora says, stepping closer to me, “I know what it’s like to feel like you don’t belong. But you’re here now, and trust me, these packs? They’ll have your back if you give them a chance.”

I don’t know how to respond, so I just nod, though my thoughts are a tangled mess.

Jade studies me for a moment before speaking again. “The energy here—it’s old. Whatever caused it isn’t coming back anytime soon, but it’s a good place to start building wards. Between the three of us, we should be able to reinforce the borders.”

“Agreed,” Gray says, his tone brisk. “We’ll need to coordinate with Damien and Alec to cover all territories.”

As they discuss logistics, I step away, letting their voices fade into the background. My mind is spinning, torn between disbelief and cautious hope.

Valued. Needed. Trusted.

For the first time in years, I wonder if I can belong here after all.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Jaslyn's magic is something else entirely.

It's not just the raw power. It's the precision, the way she wields it like an extension of herself. Watching her now, I'm struck by how much I underestimated her when we were younger. This isn't the girl who used to struggle to keep her magic in check, who once accidentally sent a tree up in flames. This is a woman in control, focused and sharp, with a level of skill that's downright intimidating.

Not that I'll admit that out loud.

We're deep in the northern part of Red Arrow's territory, where the trees grow dense and the shadows stretch long. Jaslyn is kneeling on the forest floor with her hands hovering over a set of alarm stones that we've been using to monitor demon activity. The stones are simple enough, enchanted to alert us with energy when something crosses their threshold. But they're no match for what she's doing now.

"Pass me the quartz," she says without looking up.

I reach into the pouch slung across my chest and pull out a chunk of rough, cloudy quartz. She snatches it without a word, placing it carefully at the center of the arrangement. Her fingers twitch as she murmurs something under her breath, and I feel the air shift, crackling faintly with energy.

The stones begin to glow. Softly at first, then brighter until they're pulsing in unison. Jaslyn tilts her head, studying them like she's listening to something I can't hear. Then, with a flick of her wrist, the light stabilizes, and the magic settles into a steady thrum.

“That should do it,” she states, standing and dusting off her hands.

I cross my arms, nodding toward the stones. “What’d you change?”

“They’re linked now,” she explains, brushing a stray strand of reddish-brown hair out of her face. “If one gets triggered, the others will amplify the signal and carry it back to the main ward line. You’ll get a warning faster, and it’ll be harder for anything to slip past unnoticed.”

I let out a low whistle, impressed despite myself. “Not bad.”

She arches a brow. “Not bad? You do realize I just saved your pack from another potential ambush, right?”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Kismet.”

Her lips twitch like she’s trying not to smile, and she turns away before I can catch her expression. “Come on,” she says. “We’ve got more ground to cover.”

Before she gets too far, I step up beside her, and my curiosity gets the better of me. “How’d you learn to do all this, anyway? Last time I saw you, you were struggling just to control a spark.”

Her expression tightens for a fraction of a second, so quick I might’ve missed it if I hadn’t been watching her so closely. “I didn’t have much of a choice.”

I wait, sensing there’s more. When she glances at me and sees I’m not letting it drop, she sighs. “Malcolm. He had me working in a... well, let’s just call it what it was: a sweatshop for witches. He used witches to mass-produce charms, potions, trinkets. Whatever he could sell. Most of the witches he brought in were experienced, people who’d been at this their whole lives. I was... not.” She hesitates, brushing her hands

off on her jeans before continuing. “I had to pick things up fast if I wanted to keep up.”

“And if you didn’t?”

She shrugs, but the motion is too casual, too forced. “Then he made sure I regretted it.”

My hands curl into fists at my sides, the image of her—barely more than a kid, forced into that hellhole—rattling around in my mind. “I didn’t know,” I say quietly, though the words feel hollow even to me.

“Of course you didn’t.” Her voice is matter-of-fact, not cruel, but it still stings. “Anyway, the witches there didn’t have much choice but to teach me. If one of us failed, we all paid for it. I learned by watching them, by practicing when no one was looking. After a while... it just clicked.”

She doesn’t look at me as she speaks, but I can hear the undercurrent of pride in her voice. Yet, it’s buried under something heavier—bitterness, maybe. Regret.

“You shouldn’t have had to go through that,” I say, and the words are low, almost guttural. “None of it.”

Her gaze snaps to mine, and for a moment, there’s something raw and unguarded in her eyes. But then she laughs, a sharp, humorless sound. “That’s the thing about survival, Gray. It doesn’t care about should or shouldn’t. It just is.”

She turns away again, starting toward the next marker without waiting for me to follow. I trail after her, and my thoughts are a storm of guilt and anger. Whatever I expected her answer to be, it wasn’t that.

But one thing's clear: Jaslyn Kismet is stronger than I ever gave her credit for. And she learned that strength the hard way.

We move through the forest, falling into a rhythm that's surprisingly natural. Jaslyn leads the way, her magic flowing around her like a second skin. Every now and then, I catch her glancing at the trees, her green eyes narrowing as if she's sensing something just out of reach.

She stops suddenly, holding up a hand. "Here. This spot's weak."

I look around, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. "How can you tell?"

"It feels... thin," she explains, frowning. "Like the boundary here is stretched too far. If anything's going to break through, this is where it'll happen."

I trust her judgment, even if I can't feel what she does. Jaslyn steps forward, kneeling once again to draw a circle in the dirt. Her movements are quick and precise as her fingers trace symbols that glow faintly as she works.

"What's that?" I ask, crouching beside her.

"A reinforcing sigil," she replies without looking up. "It'll bolster the ward line and keep it from collapsing under pressure."

"Pressure like... a demon?"

"Exactly."

She finishes the sigil and places a small charm at its center, an iron medallion etched with runes. Her magic flares again, bright and sharp, and the sigil pulses before fading into the ground.

“There,” she says. “That should hold.”

I glance at the spot, still unable to see or feel anything different. “How long will it last?”

“A few weeks, maybe longer if the energy doesn’t get disturbed. I told you I know what I’m doing.”

I smirk. “Never said you didn’t.”

She starts walking again, and I follow, letting the quiet stretch between us. It’s not an uncomfortable silence, though. If anything, it feels... steady. Like we’re finally starting to figure out how to work together without snapping at each other every five minutes.

Still, I can’t help but notice how different she is out here. She’s not the guarded, defensive Jaslyn I’ve been dealing with since she came back. Out here, she’s in her element—confident, capable, and utterly unshakable.

“Why are you staring?” she asks suddenly, not breaking stride.

“Just making sure you’re not about to set the forest on fire,” I reply smoothly.

She snorts. “That was one time.”

“Four, actually.”

She spins to glare at me, but there’s no real heat in it. “You’re lucky I’m feeling generous today or I’d hex you for that.”

“Generous? Is that what you call it?”

She rolls her eyes and turns away, but I catch the faintest hint of a smile before she does.

We spend the next few hours moving from one weak spot to another, reinforcing ward lines and upgrading traps with her magic. Each time, I'm struck by the sheer precision of her work. She doesn't just rely on brute force or flashy displays. Everything she does is deliberate, planned, and efficient.

By the time we reach the southern edge of the territory, the sun is beginning to dip below the horizon. Jaslyn stands at the edge of a clearing as she surveys the area.

"This is the last one," she says quietly.

I nod, watching as she steps forward and kneels once more. Her hands move steadily, drawing a complex sigil in the dirt that glows brighter than the others. The air hums with magic, and for a moment, it feels like the forest itself is holding its breath.

When she finishes, she stands and looks at me, her expression unreadable. "That's it. The ward line's secure."

I take a step closer, nodding toward the glowing sigil. "You're sure it'll hold?"

"It'll hold," she says firmly. Then, after a beat, she adds, "As long as no one does anything stupid to disrupt it."

"I'll make sure the pack knows not to mess with your handiwork."

"Good," she responds, brushing past me. "Because if they do, it's their funeral."

As we make our way back through the forest, something changes between us, though I can't pinpoint what. Jaslyn hasn't so much as glanced my way since we left the last



ward site.

“Are you going to ignore me the whole way back?” I finally ask when I can’t take it anymore.

Her pace doesn’t falter, but she throws me a look over her shoulder—cold and dismissive. “Why? Is it bothering you?”

“Yes,” I reply bluntly, lengthening my stride to catch up to her. “And it should bother you, too. What’s your problem? I thought we had a nice day out here.”

“My problem?” She whirls around so fast, I almost run into her. Her green eyes blaze with fury, and I can feel the anger rolling off her in waves. “You’re asking me that after everything?”

“I’m asking because you won’t talk to me. What the hell did I do this time?”

She lets out a bitter laugh, crossing her arms. “What haven’t you done, Gray? That’s the real question.”

I run a hand through my hair, trying to keep my temper in check. “If you’re angry, say it. Tell me what’s going on instead of shutting me out.”

Her eyes narrow, and she takes a step closer, her voice low and trembling with suppressed rage. “You want to know why I’m angry? Fine. Let’s talk about it.”

“Finally,” I mutter, but the glare she shoots me makes me regret it instantly.

“You banished me, Gray,” she says, her voice cutting like a blade. “Without so much as a second thought. Without even bothering to ask me what happened.”

I blink, caught off-guard by the raw pain in her tone. “You lost control of your magic,” I say slowly, carefully. “You killed—”

“Don’t,” she snaps, holding up a hand to silence me. “Don’t you dare say his name like you actually care about what happened.”

My jaw tightens, but I hold my ground. “I had to protect the pack. It wasn’t an easy decision—”

“Stop lying to yourself,” she cuts in. “It wasn’t about the pack. It was about saving face. You didn’t even try to find out what caused me to lose control, did you? You just saw the aftermath and decided I wasn’t worth the trouble.”

“That’s not fair,” I argue. “I did what I thought was best at the time.”

“For who? You? The pack? Because it sure as hell wasn’t what was best for me.” Her voice cracks, and the sound slices through me. “You didn’t even ask, Gray. Not once. You didn’t ask why I snapped, why my magic went wild. You didn’t care.”

“I cared,” I protest. “I cared more than you realize.”

“Then why didn’t you do anything?” she demands, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Why didn’t you see what was happening to me? Or were you too busy playing the perfect alpha to notice?”

“Notice what?” I demand. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She shakes her head. “You really didn’t see it, did you? All the times they laughed at me, whispered behind my back, pushed me around like I was some pathetic joke. Your precious pack, your friends—they made my life a living hell, and you didn’t even notice.”

“Who?” I ask, my voice low and dangerous. “Who did that to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she snaps, turning away from me.

“The hell it doesn’t,” I say, grabbing her arm and spinning her back around to face me. “I knew they would tease you sometimes, but I didn’t realize it was that bad. If they were tormenting you, I need to know who.”

“Why?” she demands, yanking her arm free. “So you can storm back there and play the hero? It’s too late, Gray. You can’t fix this. You can’t undo what they did, or what you did.”

Her words leave me reeling. I thought I’d prepared myself for her anger, for the consequences of my choices, but this... this is something else entirely.

“Jaslyn, tell me who it was. Please.”

She stares at me for a long moment, her chest rising and falling with uneven breaths. Then she shakes her head, and her expression hardens. “You think knowing their names will make you feel better? Will it ease the guilt? It won’t. And I’m not here to make this easier for you.”

Her words sting, but I can’t blame her. She’s right—this isn’t about me. It’s about her, about the pain I failed to see, the pain I caused.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

She freezes, and her eyes widen in surprise. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, meeting her gaze. “I was nineteen. Barely old enough to call myself a man, let alone an alpha. My father had just died, and suddenly I was

supposed to hold this entire pack together. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Everyone was looking at me like I had all the answers, like I could somehow fill the void he left. And I—" My throat tightens, but I push through. "I was drowning, Jaslyn. Trying to balance a grieving pack, my own loss, alliances, threats. I was in way over my head."

Her expression doesn't soften, but there's a hint of something in her eyes. Understanding? Pity? I can't tell, and I don't deserve either.

"That doesn't excuse what happened," I admit. "But maybe it explains why I didn't notice. Why I failed you. You weren't just another member of the pack to me, Jaslyn. You mattered. But I was so caught up in trying to keep everything from falling apart that I didn't see what was right in front of me."

She studies me for a moment, her gaze sharp and unrelenting. "Do you really think that changes anything?" Her voice is quieter now, but no less cutting.

"No," I say honestly. "I don't. I just... I need you to know that it wasn't because I didn't care. I cared too much, and I was too young and too stupid to handle it."

Her shoulders drop slightly, but her walls don't come down. "You had an entire pack depending on you," she says after a long pause. "And I was just the expendable witch who couldn't get her magic under control."

"That's not true." My voice is firm, desperate. "You were never expendable."

She lets out a bitter laugh. "That's rich, coming from the man who threw me out like I was nothing."

The words sting, but I don't flinch. I've earned them. "You're right," I say softly. "I made a mistake. A huge one. And if I could go back and change it—"

“But you can’t,” she interrupts, her tone as sharp as a blade. “You can’t undo any of it. You can’t take back the years I spent scraping by while your pack thrived without me.”

Her words hang in the air between us, heavy and unyielding. She takes a step back, her expression unreadable. “You want to make this right? Start by letting me do my job. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

“Jaslyn—”

“No,” she cuts me off. “I don’t want your apologies, Gray. I don’t want your guilt. I just want you to stay out of my way.”

She turns and walks away before I can say anything else, her steps quick and deliberate as if she’s afraid I’ll try to stop her.

I don’t. I just watch her go before I follow silently, giving her space but staying close enough to remind her that I’m here. That I’m not going anywhere this time.

Even if it takes the rest of my life, I’ll prove to her that I’m worth trusting. That I’m not the same man who banished her all those years ago.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The chains are cold against my wrists, biting into my skin like icy fangs. They're heavy, unyielding, and with every futile twist of my arms, the iron seems to tighten as if mocking my efforts. I strain against them, and my muscles burn and tremble with exertion, but it's no use. The weight of the chains presses against my chest, against my throat, until it feels like I'm being swallowed whole by the darkness surrounding me.

I can't see anything—no walls, no floor, no sky—just an endless void that wolfs down the sound of my ragged breathing. The only thing that exists is me, the chains, and the voice.

That voice.

It starts as a low chuckle, slithering through the dark like smoke curling into the cracks of my mind. Then it sharpens, familiar and cruel, until I know exactly who it belongs to.

“You belong to me now,” Wiley taunts. The darkness shifts, and his silhouette is there, towering over me like a shadow given form. His face remains obscured, but I can feel the weight of his gaze, the sick satisfaction radiating from him like a physical force. “No one's coming for you. No one even cares.”

“I don't belong to you!” My voice tears out of me in raw desperation. I yank at the chains again, harder this time, but they only dig deeper into my skin. Blood drips down my forearms, hot and sticky, but the pain is drowned out by the wave of panic crashing over me.

“Don’t you?” Wiley’s tone is almost amused. The sound scrapes against my nerves, setting my teeth on edge. “Look around, Jaslyn. Where else would you go? You’re nothing. A stray dog without a home. Even your precious pack couldn’t wait to get rid of you.”

I shake my head, clenching my teeth against the tears threatening to spill. “That’s not true.”

“No?” His shadowy figure leans closer, until I can feel the icy chill of his breath against my cheek. “Then why did they throw you out like garbage? Why did no one come to find you?”

The words are a dagger, twisting deep into wounds I thought I’d buried. I open my mouth to argue, to deny, but the words won’t come. The chains tighten, pulling me down to my knees, and the cold seeps into my bones like poison.

“Face it, Jaslyn,” Malcolm whispers behind his son. “This is all you’ll ever be. A tool. A prisoner. A weapon for someone else’s gain.”

“No!” I scream again, but it’s weaker this time. The darkness presses in closer, suffocating and endless, and the weight of his words crushes the air from my lungs. “I’m not—”

A sudden jolt shoots through me, breaking the haze. A new voice cuts through the oppressive silence, distant but insistent, like a lifeline pulling me out of the abyss.

“Jaslyn, wake up,” it says, low and steady. A hand grips my shoulder, warm and grounding. I claw at the sound like it’s my only way out.

The chains loosen, the darkness recedes, and Wiley’s laughter fades to nothingness as the dream dissolves into the pale gray light of dawn. I sit up abruptly, my chest

heaving as I gasp for air, the phantom cold of the chains still clinging to my skin. My hands grip the sheets tightly, where the ghosts of the chains are still wrapped around my wrists. I don't even realize I'm shaking until a warm hand covers mine.

"Jaslyn." Gray's voice pulls me out of the haze, grounding me. "You're okay. Just breathe."

I shake my head as the panic still claws at the edges of my mind. "I-I can't—" The words stick in my throat, and I paw at my chest, desperate to get the air in.

"Yes, you can," he says as his other hand comes to rest on my shoulder. "Look at me."

I manage to lift my eyes to his. His face is calm, but there's a sharpness in his gaze, a focus that anchors me. "In through your nose, out through your mouth. Like this." He exaggerates the movement, drawing in a slow, deep breath and releasing it just as slowly.

I try to mimic him, but my breath catches, and a sob escapes instead. His grip on my hand tightens. Not enough to hurt, just enough to remind me that he's here. "You're safe, Jaslyn. No one's going to hurt you."

It takes a few tries, but eventually, my breathing evens out. The tightness in my chest loosens, and the room comes back into focus. I blink, realizing my vision is blurred from tears I hadn't noticed falling.

"There you go," Gray coos. He doesn't move his hand from mine, and for once, I don't pull away. "Better?"

I nod, though the residual tremor in my limbs betrays me. "Yeah. Thanks."



He studies me for a moment before he probes, “Nightmare?”

I glance away, wiping at my eyes. “Something like that.”

“You get them often?”

I hesitate, then nod reluctantly. “More than I’d like. It’s... worse some nights.”

His brows furrow, and I can see the questions brewing, but to his credit, he doesn’t push. “You don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready.”

I take a shaky breath and clutch the blanket around me like it’s a shield. “Sometimes they trigger... this.” I gesture vaguely to my still-trembling hands. “Anxiety attacks.”

His expression softens, and for a moment, I see something like guilt flicker across his face. “When did they start?”

“When Malcolm got me.” I press my lips together, debating how much to say. But the dam has already cracked, and the rest of it tumbles out before I can stop it. “When he first took me in, I was a mess. My magic would flare every time I got upset, and the attacks only made it worse. He couldn’t risk me hurting anyone, so he started locking me in a cell whenever he wasn’t using me.”

Gray’s face darkens, and I can feel the tension radiating off him. “A cell?”

“Don’t.” My voice comes out sharper than I intended, and I force myself to soften it. “Don’t do the whole righteous anger thing. It doesn’t help.”

He doesn’t reply, but the muscle in his jaw ticks as he waits for me to continue.

I swallow hard, keeping my gaze fixed on the blanket pooled in my lap. “The first

time I had an attack, I blew out a window. Just... shattered it into a million pieces. Malcolm was furious. Said if I couldn't control myself, I was going to cost him too much. So, he started putting me in that cell whenever he didn't need me. Said it was safer that way—for everyone." My laugh is bitter and hollow. "What he really meant was that if I lost control again, I'd be the only one who got hurt."

Gray exhales sharply, and I glance at him. His hands are clenched into fists at his sides, and there's a look in his eyes that I can't quite place. Something between anger and sorrow.

"It worked, though," I add with a shrug. "The cell. It kept me contained. Kept everyone else safe."

"Safe," Gray repeats with a tight voice. "You're telling me he locked you away like some kind of animal and called it safety?"

I meet his gaze, daring him to argue. "That's exactly what it was."

He curses under his breath, running a hand through his hair. "Jaslyn..."

"It doesn't matter," I cut in. "It's over now. I survived."

"That's not the point. You shouldn't have had to survive that. No one should."

I blink, startled by the heat in his tone. "Why do you care so much?"

"Because I should've been there. I should've known."

"It wasn't just the cell. Malcolm had ways of keeping me tied to him. Ownership marks, magical binds—things I couldn't break, no matter how hard I tried. And there were others. People who wanted to take me for themselves. Malcolm kept a tight

leash on me, not because he cared, but because I was useful to him. And if anyone else got their hands on me, he'd lose his investment."

Gray's face is unreadable, but the tension in his shoulders hasn't eased. "Who were these others?"

"Buyers, mostly. Or competitors. Witches are rare enough as it is, and one with magic like mine?" I shake my head. "I was a prize. Something to be bought, sold, or stolen."

"And Malcolm just... let that happen?"

"Not exactly," I reply. "He didn't care about me, but he cared about his profit. He made sure no one else could take me. Not permanently, anyway. But it didn't stop them from trying."

The memories bubble to the surface—dark, chaotic flashes of struggle and desperation. I shove them down before they can take hold. "It wasn't just the anxiety attacks that got me locked up," I continue. "It was insurance. If he kept me contained, no one could get to me. Not without going through him."

Gray's fists tighten, and for a moment, I think he might explode. But when he speaks, his voice is eerily calm. "How did you survive that? All of it?"

I smile faintly, though it doesn't reach my eyes. "You don't survive something like that, Gray. Not really. You just... adapt."

He looks like he wants to argue, to tell me I'm wrong, but he doesn't. Instead, he leans forward and tells me, "You're stronger than anyone I've ever met, you know that?"

The sincerity in his voice catches me off-guard, and for a moment, I don't know how

to respond. "I don't feel strong," I admit finally.

"You are," he insists. "Whether you see it or not."

I look away, unable to hold his gaze. The silence stretches between us, heavy and loaded, but this time, it feels different. Not suffocating, but not comfortable, either.

Gray's presence looms in the small space of his room, filling it with a warmth I didn't realize I needed until now. He sits across from me with his elbows resting on his knees, his eyes never leaving mine. There's a steadiness there. A quiet intensity that's disarming in its sincerity.

"You're stronger than you give yourself credit for," he says again, his voice softer this time. "But you shouldn't have had to be."

The words linger, wrapping around me like a blanket that's both comforting and suffocating. I fidget with the edge of the blanket on my lap, avoiding his eyes. "You've been different lately," I mutter, unsure why I'm saying it out loud. "From what I remember."

"Different how?"

"Kind," I admit reluctantly. "More than I expected. More than I deserve."

His brows knit together, and I can practically see the frustration brewing behind his calm exterior. "What makes you think you don't deserve kindness?"

I shrug, but the motion feels hollow. "I killed your beta, Gray. I ruined everything for you and your pack."

"Don't," he says sharply. "Don't you dare put that on yourself. You're not

responsible for him, Jaslyn. And if I'm being honest? No one liked Carter. He was a bully, plain and simple. His position as beta didn't come from merit; it came from legacy. His father had the role before him, and when Carter inherited it, most of the pack just...tolerated him."

I blink, taken aback. "You're saying no one cared that he died?"

Gray exhales and drags a hand through his hair. "I'm not saying it didn't matter. Of course it mattered. He was still part of the pack, and I'm not happy about how it happened. But was the pack devastated? Were they grieving his loss like they might've for someone else? No. They weren't. Carter's death shook them, it wasn't out of love or admiration for him. It was because what his death represented; the fact that a witch could take one of us down so easily. That's it. That's why they accepted you back so easily."

I don't know whether to feel relieved or horrified. "So, what? Everyone was just waiting for him to screw up? To get out of the way?"

Gray's mouth tightens, and he shakes his head. "Not exactly. But no one's been in a hurry to bring him up in conversation, if that tells you anything. People move on quickly when there's not much worth holding onto. You're still carrying this like it's all on you, but Carter wasn't your burden to begin with. He was mine. I'm the one who let him stay in that role. I'm the one who failed to see the damage he was causing."

"Carter's dead because of me . If I hadn't—"

"He's dead because I failed you. Because I didn't see what was happening, didn't protect you when I should have. You think you're the one who has something to apologize for? You think you're the one who has to carry that weight? Jaslyn, I'm the reason you ended up in Malcolm's hands. I'm the reason you suffered for all those

years. So if anyone owes anyone an apology, it's me."

He looks at me like he's baring his soul, like he's been carrying this burden for as long as I have. And for the first time, I see it—his guilt, his regret, laid bare for me to witness.

"I don't blame you," I whisper.

"You should."

"I don't. Not really. You were a kid, Gray. A teenager thrown into a role you weren't ready for. And yes, you made mistakes, but so did I. If I'd been better at controlling my magic—"

"Stop." His voice is softer now, but no less resolute. "This isn't on you, Jaslyn. None of it. You didn't choose any of this. You didn't choose to be born with magic, or to be abandoned by the people who should have stood by you. You didn't choose Malcolm, or the hell he put you through. And you sure as hell didn't choose to lose control that day. You were provoked. Bullied. Hurt. That's on them. And it's on me for not seeing it."

"But why do you care so much now? After so long?"

"Because I see you now, Jaslyn. I see everything I missed before. And I want to fix it. I don't know if I can, but I want to try."

The room feels too small, too warm. I can't look away from him, even though every instinct tells me to run. He's too close—not physically, but emotionally. He's stripping away every wall I've built, leaving me exposed in a way I haven't been in years.

“Gray...” My voice wavers, and I hate how fragile I sound. “I don’t know how to let you do that.”

“You don’t have to know right now. But you can let me start.”

His eyes search mine, and for a moment, the rest of the world fades away. I’m hyper-aware of the space between us, the way his breath brushes against my skin, the way his hand inches closer to mine.

I should move. I should say something, do something to break the spell. But I can’t. I’m frozen, caught in the pull of his gaze, and for the first time in years, I feel like I’m not alone in my pain.

His hand brushes mine. Barely a touch, but it sends a jolt through me that makes my breath hitch. He leans in, and his eyes flit to my lips. For a heartbeat, I think he’s going to kiss me.

I think I might let him.

But then he pulls back abruptly and practically jumps to his feet. “Let’s go for a run.”

The words are so unexpected, so out of place, that I blink at him in confusion. “What?”

“A run,” he repeats, already standing and heading toward the door. “You need fresh air. Movement. Something to take your mind off... everything.”

I narrow my eyes at his back, suspicious of his sudden change in demeanor. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious,” he says over his shoulder, flashing me a small, crooked smile. “Come

on, Kismet. I'll race you."

I scowl, but there's no heat behind it. Begrudgingly, I push the blanket aside and stand, following him to the door. Whatever this is, whatever he's trying to do, I'll play along.

For now.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Jaslyn trails a few steps behind me as we move deeper into the forest. She hasn't asked where we're going. Her silence isn't biting like it usually is. It's more reserved, almost like she's trying to decide if this detour is worth her time.

"You always this quiet during a walk?" I ask, glancing back at her.

"Didn't realize I was supposed to fill the silence."

"Not fill it, but a little commentary wouldn't hurt. What do you think? Trees tall enough? Moon bright enough?"

Her lips twitch, just slightly, but I don't miss it. "Yeah, great job on the ambiance. A solid seven out of ten."

"Seven?" I mock offense. "Come on, I thought I was leading us through prime forest real estate."

"Don't push your luck," she grumbles, but the corner of her mouth curves upward despite herself.

We walk in quiet for a bit longer before I finally bring it up. "When's the last time you shifted?"

That stops her cold. She doesn't look at me, doesn't move, but I can feel the way her energy shifts and tightens like a spring coiling too hard. "Why?"

"It's a fair question," I reply, turning to face her. "You're part wolf, Jaslyn. But given

the circumstances you've been in the last few years, I figured maybe it's been a while."

She tugs at the cuff of her sleeve. "I don't see how that's your business."

"Maybe it isn't," I admit. "But if it's been a while, I thought it might help. You and I both know this isn't like riding a bike."

"What's the point of this, anyway?" she deflects. "Running around on all fours isn't the answer to my problems."

"Not all of them," I concede. "But like I said, it might take the edge off."

She hesitates, glancing at the trees like they might offer her a way out. When she finally looks back at me, I see the fear there. "I haven't shifted in years," she admits. "Not since Malcolm bought me."

"Why?"

Her gaze flits away, and for a moment, I think she's not going to answer. Then she lets out a sharp exhale. "Malcolm didn't just control where I went or what I did. He used magic to stop me from shifting altogether."

All the blood rushes to my toes, and I can't do much more than blink. "He what?"

"He said it was for his own safety. A wolf is harder to control. Stronger. Faster. He couldn't risk me shifting and trying to fight back—or run. So he bound that part of me. Suppressed it. I couldn't shift, not even if I wanted to."

"Jaslyn..." The words catch in my throat. The thought of her being cut off from such a fundamental part of herself makes my chest ache. She may be half witch, but she's

also half wolf, and that means something.

She shakes her head, brushing off my sympathy before it can take root. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s over. But after so many years of being forced to suppress it, I don’t even know if I can shift anymore.”

“It doesn’t have to stay that way,” I tell her gently, my voice steady. “You can work through it.”

“You think it’s that easy? My wolf side doesn’t come as naturally as yours, Gray. It never did, but now... it’s messy and hard, and half the time, it feels like it’s not even mine. Shifting... hurts.”

“That’s because you were forced to deny it for so long. But it’s still there, Jaslyn. It’s still a part of you. You just need to reconnect with it.”

Her green eyes flash, and for a moment, I think she’s going to argue. But then she looks away, and her shoulders slump. “What if I can’t? What if I try, and I just fail?”

“Then you try again. And again. And as many times as it takes. You’ve got no audience here, Jaslyn. No one to judge you. Just me. And I’m not going to let you fail.”

She stares at me for a long moment, her green eyes searching mine for something. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but she must find it because she lets out a sharp breath and nods. “Fine. But if this goes sideways, it’s your fault.”

“I’ll take that deal.” I step back, giving her space. “Start slow. Focus on the shift. Don’t try to force it.”

Jaslyn takes a deep breath and shakes out her hands at her sides. “Right. Just...

focus.”

Her tone’s dismissive, but the tension in her shoulders betrays her. She closes her eyes, and for a moment, nothing happens. Then the air around her shifts, faint but unmistakable. I can feel her magic stirring. Not the sharp, electric crackle I’ve seen when she’s using her spells, but something quieter, deeper. It’s her wolf, waking up after years of being buried.

“Good,” I say. “Keep going.”

Her eyes snap open, and she glares at me. “Would you stop narrating? It’s distracting.”

I hold up my hands in mock surrender. “Fine. I’ll shut up.”

She closes her eyes again, and this time, I stay quiet. Slowly, her breathing evens out, and the tension in her posture eases. The shift begins subtly—a pulse of energy that moves over her frame, and a soft glow beneath her skin.

Her hands flex, and I catch the first sign of change: her nails lengthening into sharp claws. Her muscles ripple beneath her skin, and her frame shifts as bones reshape and fur sprouts along her arms. She gasps, and her body shudders. I can see the strain it’s putting on her. Shifting is never easy, but for someone out of practice, it’s brutal. I can only imagine that’s magnified in someone who is just half wolf.

“You’re doing great,” I say, unable to help myself.

She grits her teeth but doesn’t snap at me this time. Instead, she doubles down. The transformation moves faster now as her form bends and breaks in ways that would make anyone else scream. But Jaslyn doesn’t. She’s tough—tougher than she gives herself credit for—and she powers through the pain like it’s nothing.

Finally, with one last shuddering breath, the shift is complete.

Where Jaslyn stood moments ago is now a wolf. Her coat is a deep reddish-brown, streaked with lighter tones that catch the moonlight. She's smaller than I expected, but there's power in the way she stands. Her head is held high, and her ears twitch at every sound.

I crouch down and give her a broad smile. "There she is."

Her wolf turns to look at me, and her green eyes are tired and wary. For a moment, I wonder if she's going to collapse, but then her tail flicks, and she shuffles toward me.

I reach out with our pack connection and tell her, It's like breathing, Kismet. Stop trying so hard and just run .

Her ears flatten against her skull, and her head swivels away from me. I'm not overthinking it.

Right. That's why you're moving like a newborn fawn.

Bite me, Gray.

I huff out a laugh before standing upright again and letting the shift take over. The first thing I feel is the familiar pull, like an invisible tether yanking me down to my core. My muscles contract, then stretch as my body begins to reshape itself. Heat flares beneath my skin, not unpleasant but intense, like standing too close to a roaring fire. There's a moment of resistance—a brief, fleeting ache as bones crack and realign. My limbs lengthen, and my fingers curl inward until they're paws. When I fall forward, claws press against the ground instead of hands.

The fabric of my shirt gives way, splitting across my back with a sharp tear, followed

by the ripping of my jeans. I vaguely register the scraps of cloth fluttering to the ground around me. It's a small price to pay for the freedom that comes with the shift.

Fur ripples across my skin, gray and shiny, as my senses explode into sharp clarity. The earthy scent of pine fills my nose, mingling with the faint musk of Jaslyn's wolf. Every sound becomes clearer—the rustle of leaves, the scurry of small creatures in the underbrush, the distant call of an owl.

The world feels different like this. Larger, yet somehow more manageable. Instincts kick in, grounding me in the primal rhythm of the forest.

I stretch out my legs, relishing the ripple of power that comes with my wolf form, then flick my tail.

You'll have to catch me first , I tell Jaslyn .

I take off without warning, and the forest blurs around me as I push into a full sprint. The wind tears past my ears, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel free. No responsibilities, no threats—just the ground beneath me and the thrill of the chase.

It doesn't take long for her to follow. Her footfalls are lighter, and her pace is uneven at first, but she picks up speed quickly. I glance back to see her weaving between the trees, and her reddish coat is a blur against the greens and browns of the forest. She's fast—faster than I expected—and there's a grace to her movements that surprises me.

Not bad , I tell her, letting her close the distance between us.

I'm just getting started , she replies with a confidence I haven't heard in years.

She darts past me suddenly, and for a moment, I forget everything else. This is the

Jaslyn I remember, the girl who used to take risks, who never backed down from a challenge. Seeing her like this, free and unburdened, stirs something in me that sends my heart soaring.

We run together, and the forest opens up around us. She doesn't need me to guide her—she knows these woods as well as I do. And as she runs ahead with her head held high and her tail swaying with every stride, I can't help but admire the strength and determination inside her.

When we finally slow, the moon is high on the horizon. Jaslyn stops in a field, and her ribs heave as she catches her breath. Her ears swivel toward me as I approach, and there's something in her eyes that makes my chest tighten. With pride, maybe, or something close to it.

You've still got it , I tell her, lowering myself onto my haunches.

Of course I do , she replies as her tail gives a single, satisfied flick. You doubted me ?

Not for a second .

We shift back at almost the same time, and the transition from wolf to human seems to come much easier for her. But the ease of it doesn't stop the awkwardness that follows. We're standing there, both completely naked and trying not to look too closely at each other as we make our way back to the way we came.

“You're good at that,” I tell her. “Better than I expected after so long.”

“I guess I had a decent coach.”

The words catch me off-guard, and I glance at her, trying to gauge whether she's being sincere or sarcastic. Her expression gives nothing away, but there's a lightness

in her tone that wasn't there before.

"Don't let it go to your head," she warns, smirking.

"Too late."

When she peers up at me through her lashes, there's a flicker there, something unguarded that sends a jolt straight through me. Her wolf form was striking, but as a human, with her hair tousled, her cheeks flushed, and the moonlight dancing over her skin, she's breathtaking.

I should look away. I should move. But I don't.

Her lips part like she's about to say something, but no words come out. My gaze dips there—just for a second—and the heat in my chest rages into an inferno. Her breath hitches. I hear it, feel it, like it's tied to my own. And that small sound is enough to undo the fragile thread of control I've been holding onto.

I take a step closer without thinking, and her throat works as she swallows. She doesn't back away, doesn't look away. There's a vulnerability in her expression that twists something deep inside me—a need to protect her, to comfort her, and something else entirely.

I want her.

The realization slams into me, both unrelenting and unwelcome, because I know I shouldn't. Not now. Not like this. She's been through hell. She's still navigating her way out of it, and the last thing she needs is me crossing a line.

I force myself to stop, to pull back before my thoughts betray me. The space between us feels suffocating, but I know I can't close it. Not now.



“Jaslyn...”

Her name comes out sounding like a plea, and she blinks as she presses her lips together like she’s bracing for something.

I’m an idiot.

I take a long step back, and the air rushes back into my lungs like I’ve been holding it for too long. “We should go,” I say. “Before the pack starts wondering where we are.”

She blinks again, and whatever was lingering between us dissipates like smoke in the breeze. She nods stiffly and brushes past me as she heads for the trail without a word.

I stay where I am for a moment, clenching my fists to ground myself, to shove down the heat that lingers in my chest. The way she looked at me...

No.

She’s been through enough. I won’t let myself be another person who takes more than she’s ready to give.

With a deep breath, I follow her down the trail, keeping a deliberate distance between us. For now, that’s where I need to stay.

When we reach the house, I hold the door open for her, and she steps inside without a word.

“Jaslyn,” I say softly, and her eyes snap to mine.

She arches a brow. “What?”

I hesitate and run a hand through my hair as I try to find the right words. “I need to say something. And I need you to listen, even if it’s not what you want to hear.”

She leans against the edge of the couch, crossing her arms again. “Sounds ominous.”

“It’s not,” I say. “It’s just... important.”

She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t leave, either. I take that as permission to continue.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about everything,” I begin. “About what you said, about what I’ve done. And you were right. I made choices that hurt you. Choices I thought were best at the time, but they weren’t. I know that now. And I know that no apology can fix the years you lost because of me.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and I can see the walls going up again. I step closer, not letting her retreat into herself.

“But I’m not going to stop trying to make it right,” I continue. “Starting now.”

She tilts her head, watching me with both curiosity and suspicion. “What do you mean?”

Instead of answering, I cross the room and rummage through a drawer in one of the end tables to pull out the small charm I’ve been carrying since the day I brought her back. A token of ownership, tied to the magical contract Malcolm used to bind her. She sees it and goes rigid. “Why do you have that?”

“It’s what Malcolm used to control you, right?” I hold it up for her to see. “When I bought you, this became mine. It’s how he ensured you couldn’t leave, how he forced you to obey. And as long as I have it, you’re still technically bound to me.”

Her fists clench at her sides, and I can feel the anger radiating off her in waves. “Why are you showing me this now? To remind me that I’m still just someone else’s property?”

“No,” I say quickly, shaking my head. “I’m showing you because I’m letting you go.”

Her breath catches, and for a moment, she just stares at me like I’ve grown a second head. “What?”

I step closer, holding the charm between us. “You’re free, Jaslyn. Completely free. No ties, no contracts, no strings. This—” I nod toward the charm—“This doesn’t control you anymore. It’s over.”

Then, with a flick of my wrist, I shatter the charm against the edge of the coffee table. The magic in it fizzles and dies, leaving nothing but a faint wisp of smoke.

“Why now?” she asks after a long pause. “Why would you do this? We made a deal. I said I would help you if—”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I say simply. “Because you deserve to make your own choices. And because I can’t ask you to stay here—to help us, to help me—if it’s not your choice.”

She swallows hard, and her gaze drops to the floor. “And what if I decide to leave?”

I force myself to keep my tone even, though the thought of her walking away twists something deep in my chest. “Then that’s your decision. I won’t stop you.”

She looks up at me, seeming to search my face for some sign of deceit. “You mean that?”

“I do.”

For a long moment, neither of us says anything, and I can't tell if the silence between us is a good thing or not. Finally, Jaslyn blows out a long breath through pursed lips and straightens.

“I made a promise,” she says. “I told you I'd stay until the demon situation is dealt with, and I meant it. That hasn't changed.”

Relief floods through me with such force that I almost stumble under the weight of it. But I keep my expression neutral and nod once. “Good. We need you.”

“You do,” she agrees. “And to be clear, I'm staying for them, not for you. There are a lot of innocent pups in this pack, and they don't deserve to live in fear.”

“Understood,” I reply, though a small part of me doesn't quite believe it. The fact that she's staying at all feels like a victory, no matter her reasons.

She moves toward the stairs, but she stops halfway and glances back at me. “Thank you,” she says quietly.

“For what?”

“For giving me a choice,” she replies. Then, without waiting for a response, she heads upstairs, leaving me alone in the living room.

I sink onto the couch, tilting my head back and closing my eyes as the tension in my shoulders finally eases. She's staying. She's free, and she's staying. And though I'll never say it out loud, I'm more grateful than I have any right to be.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

It's unsettling how quickly I've gotten used to Gray being everywhere. His voice carries through the hallways when he's delegating orders. His scent lingers in rooms long after he's left. It's not that he's overbearing, exactly. It's more that everything here revolves around him, like he's the sun and the pack orbits him without even realizing it.

I'd call it arrogance if it weren't for the fact that he doesn't seem to notice it himself. Watching him now, striding through the packhouse with that unshakable confidence, I can't decide if I'm impressed or irritated. Probably both. The pack looks up to him, and for good reason. He's steady, decisive, and surprisingly patient—qualities I wouldn't have pegged him for ten years ago.

But there's tension beneath the surface, too. It's in the way he's constantly on alert, in the quick glances he shoots toward the edges of the forest every time we step outside, like he's expecting demons to come crashing through the trees at any moment. He's carrying the weight of everything—his pack, their safety, me—and he doesn't even seem to realize how much it's wearing on him.

He's waiting for the other shoe to drop. And honestly, so am I.

From the corner of the training field, I watch him run drills with some of the younger wolves again. The wolves eat it up, hanging on his every word like he's a living, breathing manual on how to survive. And honestly, he kind of is. He doesn't just bark orders; he shows them, sparring when necessary, correcting stances, making jokes that set them at ease.

Gray's a good leader. A great one, even. It's not just the wolves on the field who

respect him. Every shifter I've encountered in Red Arrow territory has spoken about him with admiration, even affection. That's not a common thing for an alpha. Most packs follow out of obligation or fear, but these wolves? They'd follow Gray into hell if he asked them to. And it's not hard to see why.

His leadership is the reason I'm here. The reason they've accepted me as one of their own. Well, mostly accepted me. There are still a few outliers who eye me like I might set their fur on fire if they breathe wrong, but it's nothing I can't handle. For the most part, the pack has been surprisingly... welcoming. And I know that's because of Gray.

I owe him for that. And for more than that, really. He freed me. He gave me back my life. The least I can do is try to make his a little easier.

When he calls an end to the session, I slip away before he can notice me watching. I've already made up my mind to head into town, and the last thing I need is him asking questions. He'd probably insist on coming with me or try to convince me to stay put. And I don't want to give him the chance to talk me out of this. Not when I'm trying to do something nice for him.

The town is quiet this late in the afternoon, with most of the shops winding down for the day. A few shifters pass me on the sidewalk, nodding in polite recognition. I keep my head down, scanning the storefronts for anything that might catch my eye. What do you get for an alpha who has everything? More importantly, what do you get for the man who broke your chains and gave you your freedom back?

A book? Too impersonal. Weapons? Too impersonal in the opposite direction. Maybe something practical, like new clothes or... no, that's ridiculous. Why is this so hard?

I'm so caught up in my internal debate that I almost don't see him until it's too late.

Tim.

He steps out of a small café just ahead of me, holding a to-go cup and chatting with another wolf I don't recognize. My stomach drops, and I freeze mid-step, debating whether I should turn around before he notices me.

Tim was one of the worst back then, the kind of bully who didn't just throw insults but twisted the knife so deep, you'd feel it for weeks. He'd make snide comments about my magic, call me a freak loud enough for everyone to hear, and once even "accidentally" knocked over a potion I'd spent hours perfecting. He wasn't subtle about it, either; he seemed to take genuine pleasure in watching me squirm. Since coming back, I've made it a point to avoid him. Pack gatherings, training sessions, even a simple walk through the halls—I've always managed to keep my distance. Until now.

"Jaslyn," he drawls, dismissing his companion with a wave. "I was wondering when I'd run into you."

I force myself to keep walking, pretending I didn't hear him. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll let it go.

No such luck.

"Hey, don't be like that." His voice follows me like a shadow, smooth and falsely friendly. "You've been avoiding me, haven't you?"

I stop, cursing myself under my breath, and turn to face him. "I've been busy."

"Busy," he repeats, taking a slow sip from his cup as he steps closer. "Right. Too busy to say hello to an old friend."

I bite back the urge to laugh. “Friend? Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Come on, Jas. Don’t be like that. We’ve got history.”

“And most of it involves you making my life miserable.”

He chuckles like this is all some kind of joke. “Still holding a grudge, huh? That’s cute. I thought our luna would be above that. But you’ve got to admit, you weren’t exactly easy to get along with back then.”

My magic stirs uneasily beneath my skin, and I clench my fists to keep it in check. “What do you want, Tim?”

He shrugs, his gaze roaming over me in a way that makes me want to claw his eyes out. “Just wanted to catch up. You’ve been back for a while now, and I figured it was time we had a little chat. Clear the air.”

“There’s nothing to clear. Whatever you’re trying to do, I’m not interested.”

“Relax,” he says, holding up his hands like he’s some kind of saint. “I’m just saying it’s funny how you waltz back in here like nothing ever happened. Like you’re one of us again. You really think the pack’s just going to forget what you did?”

“I don’t need their forgiveness.”

“Maybe not, but you need their trust. And trust me, Jaslyn, that’s not something you’re going to get.” His tone loses the false friendliness, and his eyes narrow. “You don’t belong here. You never did.”

The words sting, but I refuse to let him see it. Instead, I take a deep breath and summon my magic, letting it pool in my palms. A shimmering barrier of energy



forms between us, crackling faintly as it holds him at bay.

“You’re not going to intimidate me, Tim. Not anymore.”

For a moment, he just stares at the barrier. His lips curl into a sneer. “Cute trick. But we both know you can’t keep that up forever.”

“I don’t have to,” I reply.

His jaw tightens, and I see the moment he considers testing the barrier. But before he can make a move, a low growl cuts through the air.

“Tim,” Gray’s voice is quiet, but it carries enough authority to make Tim freeze. He steps out of the shadows, his expression calm but lethal. “Is there a problem here?”

Tim glances between me and Gray, his bravado faltering. “No problem, Alpha. Just catching up with an old friend.”

Gray’s eyes flit to me, then back to Tim. “I think you’ve done enough catching up. Leave.”

Tim’s gaze lingers on me for a fraction too long. Then he mutters something under his breath and stalks away, his shoulders stiff with barely concealed anger.

Gray waits until Tim is out of sight before turning to me. “You okay?”

I nod as I let the barrier dissolve. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. What happened?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. He was just trying to get under my skin.”

“And did he?” Gray asks, his eyes searching mine.

I hesitate, then shake my head. “Not as much as he used to.”

A faint smile tugs at his lips, and he nods. “Good. Because you handled that exactly right. Don’t let him bait you into anything. He’s not worth it.”

I pinch my eyebrows together, surprised. “You’re not mad that I used my magic in town?”

“Mad?” He arches a brow. “At you? For standing up for yourself? No, Jaslyn. I’m proud of you.”

The words catch me off-guard, and I look away, unsure how to respond. Heat creeps up my neck as I grumble, “Thanks.”

“Why were you out here, anyway?”

“It’s nothing,” I say quickly, but he doesn’t let it go.

“Jaslyn.”

I sigh and brush my hair over my shoulder. “I was looking for something. For you.”

“For me?”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it,” I warn. “I just wanted to get you a thank-you gift or something. For... you know. Everything.”

Gray shakes his head, and a small smile plays on his lips. “You don’t need to do that.”

“I wanted to,” I insist. “But now it’s ruined, so forget it.”

He chuckles softly. “It’s not ruined. And since we’re here, how about I make it up to you?”

I frown, suspicious. “Make what up?”

“This,” he says, gesturing to the street. “Dealing with Tim. Let’s enjoy the night. My treat.”

I take the time to study him for a moment. He looks relaxed for the first time all day, and there’s a hint of mischief in his smile that makes me wonder what kind of treat he has in mind. God help me, I want to find out.

“All right, Alpha. Make it up to me.”

“Good,” he replies, his grin widening. “Let’s start with dinner.”

As Gray leads the way with his ever-confident swagger, I realize that maybe this night doesn’t have to be about the past, or even the pack. For once, it can just be about us.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The bar is louder than I expected, even for a Saturday night. Laughter and the clatter of glasses blend into an old country song playing in the background while the scent of beer and fried food wafts through the air. It's not the kind of place I'd normally bring Jaslyn. Not because she couldn't handle it, but because I wasn't sure she'd even want to bother. She's not exactly the bar-scene type.

Her gaze sweeps over the crowd, taking in everything with a focus that makes it clear she's already sized up the exits and the potential threats. That's Jaslyn for you. Always prepared for the worst.

"You good?" I ask, leaning closer to make sure she hears me over the noise.

She quirks a brow at me, and her lips twitch like she's holding back a smirk. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." I straighten up, watching her as she looks around again. The glow of the neon sign above the bar throws a faint green light across her face, and for a second, I forget why we're here.

"Are you going to get me a drink or just stand there gawking?" she asks, snapping me out of it.

"Right. What's your poison?"

"Whiskey. Neat."

I nod and weave through the crowd to the bar, throwing a glance over my shoulder to

make sure she hasn't disappeared. She hasn't, but she's already drawn a few curious stares from some of the locals. Most of them are harmless enough, but one guy—tall, dark-haired, and clearly too interested—makes his way toward her.

Fantastic.

By the time I get back with the drinks, the guy has parked himself right in front of her, leaning in like he's got some big secret to share. Jaslyn's expression is somewhere between bored and annoyed, but she's letting him talk. That tiny hint of irritation in her eyes, though, is all I need to see.

"Here you go," I say, sliding her drink into her hand as I step between them just enough to make a point.

"Thanks," she responds, flashing me a quick smile before turning back to the guy. "What were you saying?"

I grit my teeth and take a sip of my beer, letting the burn settle my nerves.

"Just that it's nice to see a new face around here," the guy offers, grinning like he's auditioning for a toothpaste commercial. "I'm Mason, by the way. From Starfire Hollow."

"I'm Jaslyn."

"Jaslyn," he repeats, like he's trying the name on for size. "So you're the luna of Red Arrow now? Lucky pack."

I snort into my beer before I can stop myself, earning a sharp look from Jaslyn. Mason doesn't even seem to notice.

“You’ve got a good alpha, though,” Mason continues, glancing at me for the first time. “Tough. Fair. I’ve heard a lot of good things.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly. “Appreciate the endorsement.”

Mason grins, clearly missing the sarcasm. “Just calling it like I see it.” He turns back to Jaslyn, and his voice drops a little, like he’s trying to sound smooth. “But if you ever feel like exploring other options, Starfire Hollow’s not too far. I could show you around.”

I stiffen, but before I can say anything, Jaslyn beats me to it.

“Tempting, but I think I’ll pass.”

Mason chuckles, either oblivious or too cocky to care. “Well, the offer’s open.”

“Noted,” she replies, taking a sip of her whiskey. Her eyes flit to me, and there’s a hint of amusement there, like she’s enjoying watching me squirm.

When Mason finally wanders off, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “You’ve got a way with people,” I say.

“Jealous, Gray?”

“Not in the slightest,” I lie, finishing my drink.

The rest of the night plays out much the same way. Jaslyn moves through the room with a kind of effortless confidence that draws people to her like moths to a flame. She chats with wolves from Starfire Hollow, East Hills, and even a few of the older Red Arrow members. Every single one of them seems captivated by her. I tell myself it’s a good thing. She’s winning them over, proving that she’s not just some outsider

forced into our pack.

But then there are the looks. The way some of the guys linger a little too long, their gazes dipping just a fraction too far. I clench my jaw every time, fighting the urge to step in and remind them who she is. Who she belongs to.

Except she doesn't belong to me. Not really. And that's the problem, isn't it?

"You're quiet tonight," Theo mentions as he sidles up next to me, nursing a beer. "Something on your mind?"

"Not really," I say dismissively.

He follows my gaze to Jaslyn, who's laughing at something one of the East Hills wolves said. "Ah. Got it."

"There's nothing to get," I snap, but he just grins.

"Sure, there isn't," he says.

I glare at him, but he doesn't seem to care. "Go bother someone else, Theo."

"Gladly," he says, clapping me on the shoulder before wandering off.

I watch as Jaslyn finishes her conversation and starts making her way back to me. Her cheeks are flushed, either from the whiskey or the heat of the room, and there's a lightness in her step that I haven't seen before. She looks happy. Relaxed.

"Enjoying yourself?" I ask when she stops in front of me.

"More than I thought I would," she admits. "This place isn't half bad."

“High praise,” I comment with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue. Instead, she leans against the bar and glances up at me. “Take me home, Gray.”

The words catch me off-guard, and for a moment, I can’t read her tone. She doesn’t seem upset or tired. Just... ready. For what, I’m not sure.

I nod, setting my glass down. “Let’s go.”

She walks beside me in silence, and for once, I don’t feel the need to fill it. Whatever this night was, whatever it meant, I know one thing for sure: Jaslyn Kismet is an enchanting wolf.

And that might just be my undoing.

The ride back to the packhouse is different than any other ride we’ve taken together. Jaslyn leans against the passenger window. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are slightly parted as she watches the trees blur by. She’s been babbling off and on since we left the bar, and her usual sharp edges have been dulled by the whiskey.

“Did you know,” she begins, her words just a little too loud, “that the first spell I ever cast went completely wrong? Like, spectacularly wrong.”

I glance at her, fighting back a smirk. “Can’t say I did.”

She twists in her seat to face me, and her hands flop into her lap with the kind of dramatic flair only a tipsy person can manage. “It was supposed to be this little charm for good luck. Harmless, right? Instead, I turned my aunt’s kitchen knives into boomerangs.”



“Boomerangs?” I repeat, trying and failing to hide my amusement.

“Yup. Straight-up whirling death traps.” She giggles, then quickly sobers, and her eyes go wide with mock seriousness. “I almost decapitated my uncle.”

Her words tug at a memory I hadn’t thought about in years. Jaslyn was raised by her aunt and uncle after her mother died giving birth to her, a fact that always struck me as both tragic and complicated. I used to wonder how they felt about raising a child so different from themselves. Were they proud of her magic, or did they see it as a burden they never asked for? The boomerang knives probably hadn’t helped much with that.

Still, imagining a teenage Jaslyn wreaking havoc with enchanted cutlery almost makes me laugh out loud. “I’m guessing that didn’t win you any points with them?” I remark.

“Not exactly. But it definitely made them invest in plastic knives for a while.”

“You’re full of surprises, Kismet.”

“Damn right I am.” She leans back with a content sigh. “But you have to admit, I’ve gotten better. You saw me out there with the wards. That was impressive, right?”

“It was,” I admit, and it’s not just flattery. She’s come a long way since the girl who used to set things on fire by accident.

She hums, clearly satisfied with my answer. Then she mutters something I don’t quite catch, and her voice trails off as her head lolls against the window.

When we finally pull up to the packhouse, I glance over to find her half-asleep, her lashes fluttering against her flushed cheeks. She’s never looked so unguarded, so

utterly human. It does something strange to my chest, and I have to force myself to move.

“Come on, lightweight,” I tease, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She mumbles something incoherent as I open her door and crouch down. “What was that?”

“I said,” she slurs, “I’m not a lightweight. I’m compact. There’s a difference.”

“Sure there is.” I slip an arm under her knees and another behind her back, lifting her easily. She wraps her arms around my neck. Her face presses into my shoulder, warm and soft and entirely too close.

“You’re so strong,” she whispers, and her breath tickles my neck. “Is that an alpha thing or a Gray thing?”

“Definitely a Gray thing,” I reply, hoping to keep the mood light because if I think too hard about how good she feels in my arms, I might lose my mind.

Her head tilts back, and she gives me a lopsided smile. “I think you’re lying. But it’s okay. I forgive you.”

“Generous of you.”

The packhouse is quiet when we enter. Most of the other wolves are already asleep. I carry her up the stairs and into my room, nudging the door open with my foot. She doesn’t protest as I set her down on the edge of the bed, but when I move to step back, her grip tightens around my neck.

“Don’t go,” she murmurs, her voice small and pleading.

“Jaslyn—”

“Stay.” Her green eyes meet mine, and I nearly buckle under their weight. “Just... stay.”

My throat tightens, and I know I should walk away, should tell her she doesn’t mean it, not really. But the warmth of her hands against my skin makes it impossible to move.

“Okay,” I finally say. “But you need to lie down.”

She lets me guide her back onto the bed, but her fingers still clutch at my shirt like I might vanish if she lets go. When I try to pull away again, she tugs me down with surprising strength. “You too.”

“Jaslyn—”

“Please.” Her voice is barely a whisper, but it’s enough to break through my resolve.

With a resigned sigh, I kick off my boots and settle onto the bed beside her, careful to keep a respectable distance. But she’s not having it. She shifts closer, curling her body into mine, and I swear I forget how to breathe.

“Thank you,” she tells me as she rests her head against my shoulder. “For everything.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I say. “I owe you.”

She doesn’t respond, and her breathing evens out like she’s already drifting off. But then she shifts again, and her hand brushes against my chest, and I’m suddenly hyper-aware of every point of contact between us.

“Jaslyn...”

She looks up at me with her eyes half-lidded and impossibly green. “Gray.”

Before I can think better of it, I lean down, and her lips meet mine. The kiss is tentative at first, soft and searching, but it deepens in the blink of an eye. The heat sparks between us, raging through me like wildfire, and her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer.

Her heartbeat pounds against my chest, and my body responds instinctively. I pull her closer, running my hands over her curves, tracing every line and contour. She tastes like whiskey, and her scent fills my senses until all I can think about is her, only her.

Her hips roll against mine, and a groan rumbles in my chest. My control slips, and I grab her, pushing her onto her back. She looks up at me with her pupils blown wide and her cheeks cherry-pink, and the sight is nearly enough to break me.

I want her. I need her. And dammit, she wants this, too.

But if I’m going to have Jaslyn, I’m going to do it right.

It takes everything in me to pull back, to put space between us before this goes too far. “Jaslyn,” I breathe, my voice ragged. “We can’t.”

Her brows knit together, confusion flickering across her face. “Why not?”

“You’re...” I trail off, searching for the right words. “You’ve had a lot to drink. I don’t want you to wake up tomorrow and regret this.”

“I wouldn’t,” she insists, and her voice is firm despite the haze in her eyes.

“You don’t know that.” I cup her cheek and brush my thumb over her bottom lip.  
“You deserve better than this. Better than me.”

“You’re wrong,” she whispers. Her lips part to continue, but I shake my head.

“Go to sleep, Jaslyn.”

She hesitates, and for a second, I think she might press the issue. But then she sinks back against the pillows, and her eyes close. A few minutes later, her breathing deepens, and her body relaxes as sleep takes her.

I stay there, watching her, listening to the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat. I tell myself this was the right decision, that she would have hated herself—and me—in the morning. But as I lay beside her, with her scent all around me, I know it’s a lie.

The truth is, I’m afraid.

Afraid that if we take this step, I’ll never want to let her go. And when the time comes and she realizes her mistake, the pain will be too much for either of us to bear.

I’ve never been good at letting go. And Jaslyn Kismet will ruin me if I’m not careful.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Waking up in Gray's bed is disorienting enough. Waking up wrapped around Gray like some kind of human octopus takes it to a whole new level of mortifying. His arm is slung over my waist, his chest is pressed to my back, and his breath skims the curve of my neck.

My heart's racing, and I can't seem to stop hyper-focusing on how solid he feels against me. On the way, his hand rests on my hip, just heavy enough to remind me of the sheer size of him.

What the hell happened last night?

I shift in the bed, trying to untangle myself without waking him, but the movement only brings me closer to him. His arm tightens instinctively, and he mumbles something unintelligible into my hair. My breath hitches, and I freeze, willing my brain to focus on anything but the fact that Gray is basically cuddling me.

The details of the night before are hazy, but flashes of memory start to surface—the bar, the whiskey, Gray carrying me upstairs. And then... the kiss.

My face flames at the thought of it, of how intense it was, how desperate. But he stopped, didn't he? He pulled away, told me it wasn't the right time. And now, he's snoring softly into my hair like nothing's changed. Typical.

A sharp, blaring sound shatters the moment, cutting through the stillness like a knife. I bolt upright, my heart lurching, and Gray jerks awake beside me.

"What the hell is that?" I ask, scrambling to untangle myself from the blankets.

“The alarm,” Gray states, already on his feet and moving. He rubs a hand over his face, shaking off the last traces of sleep. “Something’s triggered the ward lines.”

Adrenaline floods my system, washing away any lingering embarrassment as I follow him to the window. Outside, the packhouse is already stirring. Wolves dart across the grounds, shifting as they go.

“We need to move,” Gray declares, grabbing his boots and pulling them on in record time.

“I’m coming with you,” I state, not waiting for permission as I reach for my own shoes.

He doesn’t argue, which is probably a sign of how serious the situation is.

By the time we reach the site, the forest is alive with activity. Shifters move in organized chaos with their attention locked on a section of the ward line that shimmers with residual magic.

“What’s the situation?” Gray demands as we stomp into the field.

Theo steps forward and explains, “Something’s breached the outer perimeter. It’s big, but it’s not giving off any demonic energy.”

Gray frowns, and his gaze shifts to the ward line. “Where is it now?”

Before Theo can answer, a deep, guttural growl echoes through the trees. My magic prickles to life in response, and I scan the shadows, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound.

“Over there,” someone comments, nodding toward a cluster of trees.

The figure that emerges is massive—sleek and muscled, with dark fur that ripples in the dappled sunlight. A panther. Its yellow eyes gleam as it surveys the crowd, probably trying to determine if it should fight or flee.

The tension in the group ratchets up instantly. A few of the wolves bristle, and their postures change into something more predatory.

“Hold your positions,” Gray barks. “It’s just a cat. No one does anything unless I say so.”

The panther snarls, and its ears flatten as it crouches low to the ground. It’s not attacking yet, but it’s clearly not happy about being surrounded.

“Great plan,” I mutter, stepping up beside him. “Do we just stand here until it decides to maul someone?”

Gray shoots me a warning look. “You have a better idea?”

“As a matter of fact...” I trail off, already letting my magic seep into my palms.

“Jaslyn,” he starts, but I cut him off with a sharp glare.

“Relax,” I say. “I’m not going to hurt it.”

Before he can argue, I step forward, raising my hands slowly to show the panther I’m not a threat. Its eyes lock onto me, and a low growl rumbles from its throat. My heart pounds, but I keep my voice steady as I speak.

“Easy there,” I say softly as I weave a soothing note of magic into my words. “No one’s going to hurt you. You’re just a little lost, aren’t you?”



The panther's growl quiets, and its ears twitch like it's listening to me. I reach out with my magic, brushing against its mind gently, careful not to push too hard. The energy it gives off is wild and chaotic, but not hostile. Not really. It's just afraid.

"You're not supposed to be here," I tell him, channeling a calming spell through my hands. "But it's okay. We'll help you find your way out."

The panther hesitates, and its gaze flits between me and the shifters behind me. I pour more magic into the air, a soft hum of reassurance, and slowly, it begins to relax. Its muscles loosen, and it takes a cautious step back, then another.

"That's it," I coax, keeping my voice low. "Just keep going. You're almost there."

After a tense moment, the panther turns and melts back into the shadows, and its massive frame disappears into the trees. The collective sigh of relief behind me is almost comical.

"That was reckless," Gray complains from nearby. "You could've been hurt."

"But I wasn't," I counter. "And no one else was, either."

He opens his mouth to argue, but Theo cuts in before he can. "She's right, Alpha. That was impressive."

Gray's scowl deepens, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he turns back to the group. "All right, let's secure the area and make sure the ward line's intact. Dismissed."

As the crowd disperses, I feel the weight of Gray's gaze on me. I glance at him, expecting another lecture, but his expression is unreadable.

"Good work," he says finally, his voice gruff.

The compliment catches me off-guard, and for a moment, I don't know how to respond. My stomach twists, and a quiet, traitorous part of me wonders if maybe this is his way of breaking the ice, of opening the door to talk about what happened last night. My heartbeat quickens at the thought, and I glance at him, searching for some hint of vulnerability, some sign that it's been weighing on him the way it's been eating at me.

But his expression is as calm and collected as ever, like nothing's changed. Like we didn't kiss. Like I wasn't wrapped up in him just minutes ago, feeling more alive than I have in years.

His words from last night come rushing back— we can't —and the sting of them makes my chest ache. He's not going to bring it up. Not now. Maybe not ever. And as much as I try to convince myself that it doesn't matter, that I shouldn't care, the disappointment settles in, anyway, heavy and unwelcome.

"Thanks," I say shortly, turning away before he can see the flicker of hurt in my eyes. Because if Gray's determined to pretend nothing happened between us, then fine. Two can play that game.

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I spend the rest of the day keeping myself busy, reinforcing some of the weaker ward lines and helping with minor repairs around the packhouse. But my mind keeps circling back to the same thought: Gray is avoiding me.

It's not obvious to anyone else. To the pack, he's just doing what alphas do—managing problems, keeping everything running smoothly. But I know better. Every time I enter a room, he's suddenly got somewhere else to be. Every time I try to catch his eye, he's already looking away.

It started when we got back from the ward lines. Normally, he'd make some excuse to hang around, always within earshot, always keeping an eye on me like I might spontaneously combust if left unsupervised. But not today. Today, he said something about needing to check on pack patrols and disappeared before I could even ask if he wanted help.

At first, I brushed it off. I told myself he's busy, that the alarm this morning probably put him on edge. But as the hours drag on and he manages to dodge me at every turn, it becomes clear: Gray is avoiding me.

And I'm done pretending it doesn't bother me.

By the time the sun starts dipping below the horizon, I've had enough. I find him in the packhouse office, hunched over a stack of papers with a pen in hand. He looks up as I step inside, panic entering those blue eyes when he sees me.

"Jaslyn," he greets, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "What's up?"

I close the door behind me, leaning against it with my arms crossed. "You tell me."

He sighs, setting his pen down. "I've been busy."

"Don't lie to me." My tone is sharper than I intend, but I don't care. "This isn't you being busy. This is you running."

"Running? From what?"

"From me," I snap, stepping closer. "From what happened last night."

His jaw works as he looks away, and the sight of it only fuels my frustration. "Jaslyn, you were drunk. What happened... it shouldn't have happened."

“You’re right. It shouldn’t have. Not because I was drunk, but because you don’t have the guts to deal with it.”

His head snaps back to me, and his eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I take another step until I’m leaning over his desk. “You keep pretending like you’re the noble one, like you’re doing me some kind of favor by holding back. But the truth is, you’re just scared.”

“I’m not scared,” he growls, standing abruptly. He towers over me, but I’ll be damned if I’ll shrink away. “I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“And what’s that, Gray? Pretending nothing happened? Pretending there’s nothing between us?”

“You were drunk, Jaslyn. I wasn’t about to take advantage of you.”

“So what?” I demand. “If I hadn’t been drunk, would you have kept going?”

The silence that follows my question is deafening, and the look in his eyes answers for him. A lump forms in my throat, but I need to hear him say it. “Would you?”

“Yes. Yes, dammit. Is that what you want to hear? Because it doesn’t matter. You were drunk, and I wasn’t going to make that choice for you. I won’t ever make that choice for you.”

My stomach clenches, and his words settle in, sinking deep. The anger leaves me all at once, and suddenly, all I can think about is the way his lips felt on mine. The way his hands gripped my waist. The way his voice broke when he spoke my name.

For a moment, neither of us moves. We just stare at each other, caught in this

impasse, both of us stubbornly refusing to bend.

I'm not sure who moves first, but suddenly, I'm climbing over the desk and into his lap, and his arms are around me, pulling me closer. He kisses me hard, and his tongue slides against mine as his hands tangle in my hair.

This is reckless. It's stupid. But it feels too good, and I can't stop myself from leaning into him.

The first time was a mistake, a drunken impulse. This... this is a choice.

His fingers dig into my hips, and the pain sends a bolt of heat straight to my core. I grind against him, and the sound that rumbles in his chest only makes me want more. His hands slip under the hem of my shirt, and his fingers skim across my bare skin, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

Every nerve in my body is screaming, begging for him to touch me, taste me, claim me. And in this moment, with his hands roaming my body and his tongue exploring my mouth, I would give him anything. Everything.

My head is spinning, and my heart is pounding, and all I can think is more, more, more.

His fingers move lower, tugging at the waistband of my pants, and the anticipation nearly breaks me. He stands, shifting my weight onto the desk as he kisses me harder, deeper. My legs wrap around his waist, and I'm pulling him closer, desperate to feel his weight against me.

He groans, his breath hot on my neck, and his hips roll into mine. I gasp, and my head falls back as his lips explore the column of my throat. His stubble scrapes my skin, and his teeth graze my collarbone, and the sensation is so overwhelming, so

intoxicating, that I can't think about anything else.

"Gray," I breathe, unable to keep the need out of my voice.

His hand grips my thigh, and his touch is searing as he slips his fingers beneath the fabric. I shudder as his fingers work at the button on my pants, and a fresh wave of heat blooms in my core. He makes quick work of the zipper, and he yanks the fabric down. His lips find mine again, and I'm kissing him back, clinging to him like a lifeline.

His growl echoes through the office, and his hands move lower, sliding down the curve of my ass. I can't seem to catch my breath, and the scent of him—of musk and earth and wolf—is intoxicating.

I can feel him straining against the confines of his pants, and the knowledge that he wants me, that he's as desperate for me as I am for him, sends another thrill through my veins.

When he hooks his fingers into the waistband of my panties, I don't protest. When he pulls them down, baring me to him, I don't even think twice. And when his hand slides between my thighs, brushing against the most sensitive part of me, I don't hesitate to let him in.

My legs part on their own accord, and his fingers move lower, tracing the curve of my entrance. A strangled moan escapes my throat, and I grip his shoulders, anchoring myself.

"Gray," I breathe, arching into his touch. "Please."

He doesn't need any further encouragement. He slips a finger inside, and I cry out, overwhelmed by the sensation. His lips capture mine again, swallowing the sounds,

and his tongue slides against mine.

The heat in my core is unbearable, and I writhe against him, desperate for more. He adds another finger, and his thumb finds the spot where I need him most, circling the bundle of nerves in a maddening rhythm. My legs are shaking, my breathing is ragged, and every nerve in my body is alight with desire.

“Gray,” I gasp, and my nails dig into his shoulders. “Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t. He picks up the pace, pumping his fingers deeper, curling them just right. The pressure is building, and my whole body is wound tight, waiting, aching, for the release.

I can’t form words anymore. I’m moaning incoherently, lost in the pleasure, and I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on.

And then, just when I think I can’t take it anymore, the wave crashes over me, and my orgasm rips through my body. I cry out, and my muscles tense, and every nerve in my body pulses. The world fades away, and for a moment, there’s nothing but the sweet oblivion of release.

Gray holds me as the aftershocks ripple through me, his arms strong and steady around me. I sag against him, spent and blissful. His lips brush a tender kiss to my temple before he reaches down to undo his own pants.

On instinct, I scoot back, and when he looks back up at me, he must see the hesitation in my eyes because he stops, his expression softening.

“Jaslyn...”

“It’s not you,” I manage, my voice coming out strained and weak. “I just... I’ve never

done this before.”

His eyes go wide as saucers, and in that instant, I regret admitting it. Because all I want is for him to keep touching me, but now he’s frozen, looking at me like he’s been hit by a truck.

“Are you serious?” he asks, and the disbelief in his tone stings. “Jaslyn you’re a... you’re a virgin?”

I avert my gaze. I feel myself retreating back behind my walls, locking away the vulnerability, the embarrassment, and replacing it with anger.

This was a mistake.



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

I thought I'd misheard her. Hell, I hoped I did. But as Jaslyn sits there, watching me with a look of embarrassment and defiance, the words echo in my head like a bomb going off.

She's a virgin.

The room feels like it's tilting, and I grip the edge of the desk to steady myself. Out of all the things she could've said, out of all the ways this conversation could've gone, this was nowhere on my list of possibilities.

"You're serious?" My voice comes out rougher than I intend, but I can't help it. My brain is still trying to catch up.

Jaslyn crosses her arms and glares at me, her cheeks flaming. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"It's not—" I stop myself because, clearly, that's the wrong thing to say. "It's just... unexpected."

"Why? Because I'm so charming and irresistible?" Her tone drips with sarcasm, but there's a defensive edge underneath.

"No," I say carefully, straightening up and close her legs without thinking. "Because I figured... I don't know, that you'd had a chance. That someone..." I trail off, realizing there's no way to end that sentence without sounding like an idiot.

"Yeah, well, being a slave doesn't exactly leave much room for dating. Shocking, I

know.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. The heat of embarrassment is gone, replaced by something colder. Darker. “Jaslyn—”

“And before you ask,” she cuts in, her voice hard, “no, Malcolm didn’t—” She pauses, and her expression shifts into something unreadable. “But his son tried.”

The room goes dead silent. For a second, I don’t think I heard her right. But the way her jaw tightens, the way her hands clench into fists at her sides, tells me I did.

“What did you say?” My voice is low, barely more than a growl.

“Wiley,” she says flatly, like the name itself is a curse. “He thought owning me gave him the right to—” She cuts herself off and exhales sharply. “But he didn’t get anywhere. Thankfully, his dad thought I was more valuable intact.”

My vision goes red. “What do you mean, ‘He didn’t get anywhere?’ Did he touch you?”

“Gray, stop.” She holds up a hand. “It doesn’t matter. He’s not here. He can’t hurt me.”

“That’s not an answer,” I snap. The rage is building like a storm in my chest, and I have to stop myself from throwing a fist into the wall. “Did. He. Touch. You?”

“Why does it matter? It’s over. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” I growl, pacing away from her. My heart is pounding, and my wolf is snarling just beneath the surface, begging to be let loose. “You’re telling me that bastard, Malcolm’s son, tried to—” I can’t even say it. The words taste like poison in

my mouth.

“And he failed. His father stopped him. End of story.”

But it’s not. Not for me.

I turn on my heel and head for the door, rage coursing through me like fire.

“Where are you going?” she demands, her voice rising as I reach for the handle.

“To find them,” I say, my voice cold. “And to make sure they never try anything like that again.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Watch me,” I bark, yanking the door open and storming down the hall. The packhouse feels too small, too suffocating. I need to be out, moving, doing something to expel the fury building in my chest. My wolf is clawing at the surface, demanding action, demanding blood.

I don’t stop as I hit the front porch and leap down the stairs, heading toward the forest. The air is cold, biting at my skin, but it does nothing to cool the fire raging inside me.

“Gray!” Jaslyn calls after me, but I don’t turn around. I can hear her footsteps, quick and light, as she struggles to keep up with my longer strides. “You can’t just run off and—what? Kill them? You think that’ll fix anything?”

“It’ll fix the part where they’re still breathing.” The shadows of the trees stretch long in the fading light, and I push further into the woods, letting the primal pull of my wolf guide me.

“They’re not here!” she reminds me. “You’re charging off like some unhinged vigilante, and for what? Revenge?”

“For justice!” I whirl around to face her, throwing my hands in the air. “They hurt you, Jaslyn. They tried to take something from you, something they had no right to even touch. And they’ll pay for it.”

Her breath is coming fast, and her cheeks are flushed from the effort of keeping up with me. “Do you hear yourself right now? This isn’t about justice. This is about your guilt.”

“Maybe it is,” I admit, the confession tearing out of me like a growl. “Maybe I can’t stand the thought of them getting away with it. Of them walking around alive and untouched, after everything they did to you.”

“And you think this will make it better?” She steps closer, her voice softer but no less firm. “Killing them won’t undo the past, Gray. It won’t take away what they did to me. And it won’t take away your guilt.”

Her words cut deep, and I clench my fists at my sides, trying to fight back the storm of emotions swirling in my chest. “What am I supposed to do, then? Just let it go? Pretend it didn’t happen?”

“No. You’re supposed to stay here. With your pack. With me.”

My breathing is ragged, my wolf still thrashing against the walls of my control, but something in her tone pulls me back from the edge. She steps closer, reaching her hand out to brush against my arm. Her magic simmers under her fingertips, warm and soothing, and I feel the tension in my muscles start to ease despite myself.

“You’re here now,” she says. “I’m here now. Isn’t that enough?”

Her touch sends a jolt through me, and the fire in my chest shifts, no longer anger but something else entirely. Something that burns just as hot, but in a way that makes me want to pull her closer instead of push her away.

Her hand lingers on my arm, and I find myself leaning into her touch without thinking. Her magic ignites again, wrapping around us like a cocoon, and my wolf—once raging and restless—goes quiet, soothed by her presence.

“Jaslyn...” Her name escapes my lips, rough and unsteady. I don’t even know what I’m trying to say.

She tilts her head up to meet my gaze, and the look in her eyes is my undoing. There’s no anger there, no judgment. Just something soft and vulnerable, something that strips away every wall I’ve built.

“You don’t have to go anywhere,” she murmurs, tugging me closer to her. “Just stay.”

Before I can talk myself out of it, my hands are on her waist, pulling her flush against me. Her lips crash against mine. There’s nothing gentle about the way she kisses me. It’s desperate, hungry, like we’re both trying to drown out everything else—the past, the pain, the rage—with this one moment.

Her hands tangle in my hair, and her body presses against mine, soft and warm and perfect. I back her against a nearby tree, and my lips move against hers with a ferocity I can’t control. She gasps into the kiss, and the sound sends a thrill straight through me.

I know I’m walking a dangerous line, but I can’t bring myself to stop.

When we break apart, we’re both breathing hard, our foreheads pressed together. Her

green eyes are wide and full of something that looks a lot like wonder. I don't know if it's her magic or something else entirely, but suddenly, the only thing I want in the world is to make her feel like this all the time.

Honor be damned, I need this woman.

"Come with me," I rasp.

She doesn't resist as I lead her deeper into the woods. There's a small hunting hut nearby, and when we reach it, I don't waste a second. I push the door open, pull her inside, and capture her lips again, losing myself completely.

Every cell in my body is humming, and I feel drunk on the feeling of her against me. The heat from her touch, the scent of her hair, the softness of her skin. She's everywhere, and it's not enough.

My hands find the hem of her shirt, and she breaks the kiss just long enough to lift her arms and let me strip it off her. The moonlight pours in through the window, illuminating the curves of her body, and the sight nearly stops my heart.

She's stunning.

She reaches behind her back and unclasps her bra, letting it fall to the floor. The cool night air brushes across her skin, and her nipples harden. I swallow hard, and I can feel myself straining against the confines of my pants, already desperate for her.

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to keep my hands off her.

When I lean down and close my mouth around one of her nipples, her head falls back and a small moan escapes her lips. My hand comes up to cup her other breast, kneading gently, and the sound she makes sends a fresh wave of heat rushing to my

groin.

She tugs at my shirt, pulling it over my head and discarding it. Her fingers explore my bare skin, tracing the contours of my chest and abs, and the sensation sends a shiver down my spine.

“Fuck, Jaslyn,” I groan.

Her hand drops lower, brushing against the bulge in my pants, and the contact is so sudden, so unexpected, that I can’t stop the groan that bubbles out of my throat. Her touch is light and teasing, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to lose myself right then and there.

She tugs at the zipper, and the sound echoes in the quiet of the room. The fabric pools around my ankles, and the sudden rush of cool air on my bare skin only heightens the feeling.

Her hand closes around me, and the heat of her skin is enough to send my head spinning. She strokes me, slowly, experimentally, and I’m struggling to keep a level head.

My hands find her hips, and my fingers hook around the waistband of her pants, pulling them down. I can see the goosebumps rippling across her skin, and she shivers against me as I tug her underwear off.

She’s naked. Vulnerable.

Mine.

I lift her, and her legs wrap around my waist as I walk her back to the bedroll in the corner. Her hair spills out around her, her eyes are dark and wanting. She looks so

damn gorgeous, it hurts.

When her back hits the bedroll, I follow her down, pinning her beneath me. Her arms circle around my neck, pulling me closer, and her lips find mine again, kissing me hungrily. Her legs spread, and the feeling of her wet heat against my thigh sends another shockwave through me.

She's slick and ready, and I'm pulsing.

My lips find her neck, her collarbone. Her hands grip my shoulders, nails digging into my skin. I can hear her breathing, short and ragged, and the sound only serves to fuel the fire burning in my veins.

When I slide a hand between her thighs, she bucks against me. Her hips rock into my hand, and her fingers tighten around my biceps as I work her, rubbing slow circles against her most sensitive spot.

Her legs spread wider, and the heat of her sex is scorching against my fingers. She's writhing under me, gasping and moaning, and it's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen.

I lower my head, capturing her nipple between my lips for just a second before I descend her body, dropping a trail of hot, open-mouthed kisses as I go. When my mouth meets the apex of her thighs, her hips buck again, and her breathing picks up.

I don't give her a chance to catch her breath. I dive into her, devouring her, and the taste of her is so damn intoxicating that I never want to stop. She lets out a moan, loud and uninhibited, and her hand finds the back of my head, holding me in place. Her hips roll against me, and I slip a finger inside her, curling just right. She cries out, and her thighs tense around me, and I can tell she's close.



Her back arches off the floor. Her whole body is wound tight, her muscles coiled like a spring. She's panting, begging, and the sounds are a drug to my senses.

"Gray... fuck..."

My tongue flicks across the spot where she needs me most, and her entire body seizes as the climax rolls through her. She gasps, her nails digging into the back of my head. I can't help but smirk against her skin as her muscles clench and spasm around my fingers.

Her hips grind against me, drawing out the pleasure, and she rides the wave until the very last shudder. When she finally goes limp, her body spent and boneless, I rise, trailing kisses up her body. She's drenched in sweat, her eyes are heavy-lidded, and her hair is a tangled mess.

She's perfect.

I'm throbbing, desperate, and the sight of her—sated and spent and splayed out in front of me—doesn't do anything to help the situation.

I've never wanted anyone this badly.

"Jaslyn, are you—"

"Gray," she cuts me off, reaching up and fisting her hand in the hair at the nape of my neck. Her eyes are clear, bright, and her voice is a low growl when she speaks. "Stop asking if I'm sure and fuck me already."

My restraint snaps, and the animal inside me comes roaring to the surface. I'm on her in a second, kissing her roughly as I line myself up with her entrance.

There's no turning back now.

I inch inside her, and her nails dig into my shoulder. Her body is like a vice, clenching and quivering around me. She's impossibly tight, and I grit my teeth, forcing myself to keep still and give her a moment to adjust.

She's trembling, and her chest is heaving. The look on her face is a mixture of bliss and discomfort.

"You okay?" I manage, the words coming out strangled.

"Just move," she rasps, rocking her hips.

I oblige, sliding deeper inside her, and her legs wrap around my waist, urging me forward. There's no stopping the groan that slips out as I sink into her. She's like velvet, so warm and slick and soft, and she's surrounding me, enveloping me, and I never want this feeling to end.

I can feel her body adjusting, getting used to the intrusion. Slowly, the tension eases, and she starts rocking into me. Her hands roam my body, her touch greedy and hungry. I can feel her magic buzzing between us, wrapping around us like a shield, and it's an indescribable feeling, being buried inside her and surrounded by her at the same time.

She moves against me, and her breathing turns ragged again. My mouth finds her neck as her nails scrape along my back. The feeling is electric. Every inch of my body is humming with energy.

I want to savor this. I want to draw it out and make it last. But the way she's grinding against me, the way her walls are squeezing and pulsing, is too much.

The dam breaks, and I lose myself in her, pounding into her with wild abandon. Our bodies are tangled together, moving in perfect sync. Her moans mingle with mine in the quiet room.

She's panting, her body shaking, and the look on her face is pure ecstasy. Her fingers twist in the bedroll, and her breathing turns shallow and quick. She's close again, and I can feel the pressure building inside me, the pleasure mounting like a storm.

I can't hold back any longer.

I thrust into her, fast and deep, and she arches against me, crying out as another climax surges through her. The sound, the feeling, is enough to send me over the edge. My release barrels through me, making my vision blur, and I can't help but let out a primal, animalistic roar as I bury myself inside her.

My cock pulses. She clenches around me, drawing out every last ounce of pleasure. It feels like hours, days, lifetimes before we come down from the high, and when I finally collapse next to her, both of us are panting and shaking.

I pull her against me, and she burrows into my side, nestling her head in the crook of my shoulder. She smells like sweat and sex, and her skin is slick and flushed. Her eyes are bright, her cheeks are pink, and her lips are curled into a satisfied smile.

In that moment, with her pressed against me, I feel like a king.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The first thing I notice is the chill.

I blink awake, groggy and disoriented, and it takes me a moment to remember where I am. The hard surface beneath me isn't a bed but the worn bedroll inside the hunting hut. Sunlight filters weakly through the cracks in the wooden walls, sending pale streaks across the room.

And Gray is gone.

The realization hits me like a splash of cold water. I sit up, pulling the blanket tighter around me as I glance around the tiny space. The air still carries his scent, rich and warm, but there's no sign of him.

My heart sinks, even though it shouldn't. I mean, what did I expect? For him to still be here, watching me sleep like some over-dramatic romance scene?

Still, the absence stings, especially after last night.

I press a hand to my chest, trying to tamp down the memory of how his lips felt against mine, how his hands made me feel things I've never felt in my life. Things I wasn't sure I even knew how to feel.

But now he's gone. And maybe that's for the best.

I push the thought aside and focus on finding my clothes. They're scattered across the room like a reminder of just how reckless I was willing to be. With a groan, I drag on my jeans and shirt, then zip up my jacket, steeling myself for whatever comes next.

That's when I hear it—a shrill, ear-piercing alarm that makes my magic spike involuntarily.

Not again.

The sound sends a jolt of adrenaline through me, and I rush to pull on my boots, fumbling with the laces in my hurry. The alarms only go off when something crosses the ward lines. Yesterday, it was just a panther. Please let it just be another panther.

The moment I step outside, I know it's not.

The smell hits me first—sharp, acrid, and sulfuric, so thick it makes my eyes water. It's nothing like the earthy musk of the forest or the faint animal scent I've come to expect. This is something else entirely. Something wrong.

This isn't an animal.

The sulfuric stench intensifies as I step farther into the forest, making my stomach churn. My magic buzzes under my skin, reacting to the wrongness in the air. My palms start to heat, readying for a fight before my brain even catches up.

And then I see it.

It's twice the size of any wolf I've ever encountered, with black, gleaming scales that reflect the weak sunlight in sickening patterns. Its massive horns curl upward like something out of a nightmare, and its reptilian yellow eyes lock onto me with a predatory focus. Saliva drips from its open mouth, viscous and smoking as it hits the ground.

A demon.

The stories didn't do it justice. It's monstrous, and its presence exudes a malignancy that crawls over my skin and makes my magic practically explode. My heart pounds in my chest, but I force myself to stay rooted, summoning my magic to my hands as the demon's gaze sharpens.

It charges without hesitation.

I hurl a burst of magic toward it. The energy crackles through the air and slams into its side. It staggers, but it doesn't fall. Instead, it whirls toward me with a guttural roar that shakes the ground under my feet.

"Shit," I spit, dodging as it lunges. Its claws swipe inches from my face, and I hit the ground hard, rolling to avoid another blow. My magic crackles around me, forming a weak barrier as the demon snarls in frustration.

I push to my feet, forcing the panic down. "All right, big guy. You want to play? Let's play."

With a flick of my wrist, I send a pulse of energy toward the demon's legs. It growls as the magic wraps around its limbs, tangling it in place. But the triumph is short-lived. It thrashes violently, snapping the magical bonds like they're nothing.

"Fantastic," I grumble as the demon barrels toward me again. I throw up another barrier, but it only slows the creature down. My breath comes in sharp, frantic bursts as I scramble to come up with a plan.

"Jaslyn!" a familiar voice shouts, cutting through the chaos.

I glance over my shoulder just in time to see Tim and his girlfriend, Amber, running toward me. Relief floods through me for half a second—until I realize how poorly this is about to go.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” I yell, dodging another swipe from the demon.

“We heard the alarm!” Tim shouts back. “Thought you might need some backup!”

“Yeah? Well, unless you’ve got a magic nuke in your pocket, I’d suggest staying back!”

Tim growls as he takes a step closer to the fight, his muscles rippling with the strain of starting his shift. I can see the faint shimmer of his magic as it tries to force the change. His claws elongate, and his jaw begins to reshape.

“We’re not leaving you to handle that thing alone!” he snarls, his voice already deepening as his body prepares for the transformation.

“Tim, stop!” I yell, panic spiking in my chest. He’s not shifting fast enough, and that thing won’t wait for him to finish. “You don’t know what you’re dealing with—”

The demon’s head snaps toward the new arrivals. The transformation process seems to enrage it further, the sight of a shifting wolf igniting something primal and furious in its already chaotic energy.

My stomach twists as the demon rushes toward them. I may not like the guy, but that doesn’t mean I want to see him eviscerated.

“Tim, get her out of here!” I scream. “Now!”

But it’s too late.

The demon closes the distance in a heartbeat, slamming into Tim with enough force to send him flying to the ground mid-shift. His half-formed claws scrape against the

dirt as he struggles to push himself up, but the demon is already pivoting, shifting its focus to Amber.

She shrieks as the creature looms over her, and its massive jaws snap inches from her face. Her terror freezes her in place as the beast prepares to lunge.

“No!” My magic bursts forward, stronger than before, and I hurl it toward the demon with everything I have. The blast slams into its side, knocking it away from Amber and sending it skidding across the forest floor. It shakes off the hit with little more than a whimper, but the effort leaves me dizzy and my knees threatening to buckle.

The demon shakes off the hit and turns on me, snarling with renewed fury. I barely have time to react before it’s on me, and its claws rake across my side. Pain explodes through my body, and I cry out, stumbling as blood seeps through my shirt.

“Jaslyn!” Amber’s voice is panicked, but I can’t focus on her. All I can see is the demon circling me like a predator scenting its kill.

My vision blurs as I summon the last of my strength, forcing my magic to the surface. The demon lunges again, and I throw up a barrier, buying myself a precious few seconds.

This is it. If I don’t end this now, it’s over.

I channel every ounce of power I have left, shaping it into a lance of energy. The demon roars as I hurl it forward, and the lance pierces its chest and sends it reeling. It stumbles, and its movements become sluggish as my magic weakens it further.

But it’s not enough.

The demon struggles to regain its footing, and I realize with a sickening clarity that I



don't have the strength to finish it off.

"Get away from her!" Gray's voice booms.

My heart leaps as he barrels into the clearing in wolf form. His massive frame crashes into the demon, sending it sprawling.

He doesn't hesitate. With one powerful swipe of his claws, he tears into the demon's throat, ripping through scales and sinew with brutal efficiency. The creature lets out a final, gurgling roar before collapsing, its body twitching as the life drains from it.

I sink to my knees as the adrenaline fades and the pain in my side throbs with a vengeance. Gray shifts back into his human form and is at my side in seconds, his hands steadying me as I sway.

"Jaslyn, you're hurt," he says.

"I'm fine," I mutter, though the blood soaking through my shirt tells a different story.

"You're not fine." His tone leaves no room for argument as he scoops me into his arms.

"I can walk," I protest weakly, but the truth is, I'm too drained to fight him.

From my new vantage point, I see Amber huddled a few feet away, her wide eyes fixed on the demon's crumpled body. Tim crouches beside her, breathing hard and clutching his ribs as if his half-finished shift has taken a toll. Both of them look shaken but alive.

Amber glances up and asks, "Is it... is it really dead?"

“Yes,” Gray confirms. “Theo and the others will be here soon to get you back to the packhouse.”

Tim’s voice is gravelly, still caught somewhere between human and wolf. “What about her? She’s bleeding—”

“I’ve got her. Get yourself patched up, Tim, and make sure Amber’s safe.”

Tim nods reluctantly, and Amber murmurs a shaken “thank you” as she leans on him for support.

Gray’s attention shifts back to me, his gaze softening. “Let me take care of you,” he almost pleads. “Please.”

I don’t have the strength to argue, so I let my head rest against his chest. My body sags into his warmth as the forest around us blurs into the background.

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Gray doesn’t leave my side once we’re back at the packhouse. His presence is a constant, steadying force, even as my world tilts and blurs at the edges. I barely register the warm press of his hand on my arm or the sound of his voice uttering reassurances as I’m carried through the hallways.

When he lays me down on a bed, the motion sends a fresh jolt of pain tearing through my side, dragging a sharp cry from my lips. My vision swims, and the room comes in and out of focus. I feel hands on me—steady, firm—but the sensation is distant, like it belongs to someone else.

“You’re going to be okay,” Gray tells me, as if his sheer force of will can make it true. “Just stay with me.”

I try to respond, but my tongue feels thick, and my head rolls to the side. Darkness creeps in, pulling me under.

When I surface again, the pain is sharper, more insistent. I blink, disoriented, as Gray's face comes into view. He's leaning over me with a damp cloth in one hand and a bottle of antiseptic in the other. The gash in my side burns as he works, and I can't stop the whimper that escapes my throat.

"You're lucky it didn't go deeper," he comments. "Next time, wait for backup."

I try to summon some of my usual snark, to tell him that I didn't exactly have a choice. But the concern etched into his face stops me cold. Instead, I manage a weak, "Noted."

He finishes bandaging the wound with a gentleness that surprises me. His hands are steady even as blood stains his fingers. When he's done, he presses a cool hand to my forehead, brushing my damp hair back with a touch so tender, it makes my chest ache.

The pain is endless, and every small movement feels like knives slicing through my ribs. I lose track of time, slipping in and out of consciousness as Gray's presence becomes my only constant. When the worst of it hits, he's there, holding my hand tightly in his own. His thumb brushes over my knuckles in a soothing rhythm, grounding me when I feel like I might drift away entirely.

"Breathe, Jaslyn," he urges me. "Just breathe."

At some point, I wake from a restless dream to find him still there. His hand is warm in mine, his head bowed as he rests against the edge of the bed. His hair is mussed, and the lines of tension on his face tell me he hasn't slept.

“Gray...” My voice is barely more than a whisper, raw and cracked.

His head snaps up, and relief floods his expression. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

It’s intimate in a way that leaves me feeling exposed in a way I’m not used to. But I can’t bring myself to push him away, not when his touch feels like the only thing keeping me tethered to the present.

When the pain drags me under again, I catch him watching me with those soft blue eyes. They’re filled with something I can’t quite name. It’s not pity; it’s deeper than that. Stronger. Something that settles into the cracks of my heart like a salve, even as the darkness pulls me back under.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

There's a reason I avoid council meetings unless absolutely necessary. Put three alphas in a room, and the testosterone practically starts oozing out of the walls. Add in high stakes, like demonic invasions, and it's a miracle we haven't killed each other yet.

"I'm telling you, we need to focus on fortifying the existing wards," Damian insists as he grips the edge of the conference table like it's the only thing keeping him from flipping it. "There's no point in going on some wild chase if our borders aren't secure."

"And I'm telling you," I counter, leaning back in my chair with deliberate calm, "that sitting on our asses waiting for the next portal to spit out a demon is a waste of time. We need to find where it's going to happen next and take the fight to them."

Alec, the youngest and least experienced of the three of us, but no less stubborn, runs a hand through his brown hair and glares at the stack of papers in front of him. "I'm inclined to agree with Gray. If these things can breach a warded territory, it means they're learning. Fortifying the wards won't do much if they're already figuring out how to bypass them."

Damian's glare swings to Alec. "You think it's that simple? Witches aren't exactly a dime a dozen, Alec. And most of them don't play with shifters."

"Which is why we need to use the witches we have," I cut in. "Jade, Isadora—they've both proven they can handle themselves in a fight. Their magic is strong enough to make a difference. We bring them in on this, combine their skills with our trackers, and start hunting the portals."

Damian crosses his arms and levels me with a look that could peel paint. “Jade isn’t just my luna, she’s my mate. And I’m not going to risk her life chasing something we don’t even fully understand.”

“That’s her decision to make, not yours,” I shoot back, the edge in my voice hardening. “Jaslyn is a witch, too, and you don’t see me locking her away.”

Yet .

I shove the thought aside before it can root itself too deeply.

“She’s not your mate,” Damian points out, and my fists itch with the urge to make contact with his nose.

“Enough.” Alec’s voice slices through the room like a whip, and both Damian and I turn to him. “We’re not going to get anywhere if we’re already at each other’s throats. Let’s focus on the facts. The last portal opened in Gray’s territory. We’ve all agreed that’s not a coincidence. Jaslyn may be a witch, but she’s the greenest witch in the area, meaning Red Arrow is most vulnerable. What we haven’t agreed on is how to prevent the next one.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say,” I groan. “Waiting won’t prevent anything. These demons are organized. They’re targeting us for a reason. If we don’t figure out where they’re coming from and stop them at the source, we’ll be picking up the pieces for years.”

Damian doesn’t respond immediately, but I can see the gears turning behind his dark eyes. Finally, he exhales and sits back in his chair. “All right. Let’s say we do this your way. Who’s leading the hunt?”

“We all are,” Alec states. “This affects all of us—Starfire Hollow, East Hills, Red

Arrow. We work together, or we don't stand a chance."

"And Isadora and Jade?" Damian presses.

"They're in," Alec says without hesitation. "Isadora's been itching for an excuse to do more than reinforce the wards. She'll jump at the chance to get proactive."

I nod. "Jade, too. She's already proven she can hold her own against these things."

"And Jaslyn?" Damian's tone is pointed, like he's daring me to suggest bringing her along.

I hold his gaze, unflinching. "Jaslyn will decide for herself."

Damian shakes his head, muttering something under his breath, but he doesn't argue further.

"There's one other issue we need to address," Alec says, breaking the silence. "Two or even three witches aren't enough. We need more firepower."

"Good luck with that," Damian grumbles. "Most witches would rather hex us than help us."

"But there are still covens out there," I counter. "Some of them might be willing to talk if we can offer something in return."

"And if they don't?" Damian asks, arching a brow. "What then? Beg? Threaten them?"

"We don't have to threaten anyone," Alec insists. "We appeal to their survival instincts. Demons don't discriminate between wolves and witches. If these attacks

escalate, they'll be just as at risk as we are."

Damian snorts. "That's assuming they care. Most of them have been in hiding for decades. Why would they risk coming out now?"

"Because it's not just about them anymore," I tell him. "This is bigger than packs or covens. It's about survival. If we don't unite now, there won't be anything left to fight for."

The room falls silent as my words hang heavy in the air. Damian's scowl deepens, but he doesn't argue. Alec taps his fingers against the table, staring at a spot on the glass.

"Fine," Damian finally relents. "But if this blows up in our faces, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Duly noted," Alec replies dryly. He looks to me. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," I say. "If we're doing this, we do it right. No half-measures, no pulling punches. We find the witches, we find the portals, and we end this. Agreed?"

Alec nods. "Agreed."

Damian hesitates, but eventually, he nods as well. "Agreed."

The tension in the room eases a bit as the three of us rise from the table. The meeting might be over, but the weight of what's ahead is heavier than ever.

As the others file out, I linger as my mind races with the next steps. This isn't just about protecting my pack anymore. It's about protecting Jaslyn. Protecting her magic, her strength, her future.



Because if these demons want a war, we'll damn well give them one.

We've agreed on the witches we'll need, the packs that will send warriors, and the urgency of the hunt, but one question keeps clawing at me: what to do about Jaslyn.

By the time I return to the packhouse, the debate is still raging in my head. Logic says she shouldn't be involved, not after what she's endured. But the part of me that knows her—truly knows her—understands that keeping her away won't just be a battle with her temper. It'll be a fight with her spirit, and that's a fight I'm not sure I can win.

Which is exactly what Theo is going to tell me the second I bring it up. Still, I find him in the den with a glass of whiskey in hand, half-reclined in his usual chair. He's been made aware of the situation, as has most of the pack at this point.

"You look like hell," he observes without looking up.

"I feel like it," I admit, collapsing into the seat across from him. And before I can stop myself, the words come spilling out. "I don't know if I should let her do this. Not after what happened. Not after everything she's already been through."

Theo takes a slow sip of his whiskey, and the silence stretches out as he watches me with that infuriatingly knowing look. "You mean Jaslyn."

"Who else would I mean?" I snap, though it's more from frustration with myself than him. "She's tough, I know that. Hell, she probably has more raw power than most witches I've ever seen. But she's still—"

"Recovering," Theo finishes for me. "From both the demon attack and everything else."

“I don’t want to hold her back, but if something happens to her...”

Theo sets his glass down with a deliberate clink. “You can’t protect her from everything, Gray. If you try, all you’ll do is push her away.”

I open my mouth to respond, but a quiet creak stops me cold. My wolf stirs uneasily as my gaze snaps to the doorway. Jaslyn is standing there with her arms crossed. Her green eyes are sharp enough to cut glass.

“How considerate of you,” she says, her voice sweet as honey but laced with venom. “Deciding what’s best for me without bothering to ask how I feel about it.”

“Theo, leave,” I say through gritted teeth, not taking my eyes off her.

Theo stands, clearly amused. “You two have fun,” he says, slipping out and shutting the door behind him.

“Jaslyn—” I start, but she holds up a hand to cut me off.

“Don’t even try it,” she snaps, stepping further into the room. “You’re not going to bench me, Gray. Not after everything.”

I let out a slow breath, trying to keep my voice calm. “It’s not about benching you. It’s about making sure you’re not put in harm’s way again.”

Her lips twist into a humorless smile. “And who exactly is supposed to fight these demons if not me? I’m a witch. You need witches. Isn’t that what you told the council? That’s what everyone is saying.”

“That’s different,” I argue. “Jade, Isadora... they haven’t been—” I stop myself, biting back the words.

“Been what? A slave?” she challenges, taking another step closer. “You think that makes me weaker? You think that makes me less capable?”

“That’s not what I meant.” My voice drops, softer now. “But you’ve been through enough. You shouldn’t have to keep fighting.”

“And what if I want to fight? What if I need to? You don’t get to make this decision for me, Gray.”

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“And I’m trying to protect this pack,” she counters. “Just like you are. Just like everyone else who’s going to be out there. Why am I any different?”

“Because you matter to me, dammit!” The words slip out before I can stop them, and the silence that follows is deafening.

Her eyes widen, just for a moment, before her expression softens. She steps closer, and the scent of her—warm and intoxicating—wraps around me like a vice. “Gray, I’m not asking you to stop caring about me. But you have to trust me, too.”

“I do trust you. It’s everyone else I don’t trust. And those demons? They don’t care how strong you are, or how much magic you have. They’ll rip you apart if they get the chance.”

Her lips curve into a small, knowing smile. “Then don’t give them the chance. Come with me.”

I blink, caught off-guard. “What?”

“You said you want to protect me, right? So do it. Join the hunt.” She steps even

closer, until there's barely any space between us. Her hand brushes against my arm, and the contact sends a spark through me.

"Jaslyn—"

"Please, Gray," she whispers, tilting her head to look up at me through her lashes. "You're the alpha. You're the strongest wolf in the pack. If you're by my side, what could possibly go wrong?"

Everything, I think, but the words get caught in my throat. She's so close now, her scent and her magic swirling around me. I can feel the walls I've built around myself start to crumble.

"You're impossible," I finally grumble.

Her smile widens, and she leans up, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth. "And you like it."

It's not fair, the way she does this—disarms me with a smile, a touch, a kiss. But I don't resist when her lips find mine again, firmer this time, coaxing and teasing until I can't think about anything else.

My hands find her waist, pulling her closer, and she lets out a soft sigh that sends a jolt straight through me. She tastes like fire and defiance, and I'm drowning in her, unable to pull away even if I wanted to.

When she finally pulls back, her green eyes are bright and full of triumph. "So, what's it going to be, Alpha?"

I exhale a shaky breath, already knowing I've lost this battle. "Fine," I say reluctantly. "But if you're going, I'm going, too."

Her smile is radiant, and for a moment, it almost makes me forget the weight of everything looming over us. Almost.

As she steps back, her fingers trailing down my arm, I can't help but wonder how the hell I let myself get here—wrapped around her finger and willingly throwing myself into danger just to keep her safe.

But then I see the fire in her eyes, and I realize I'd do anything for Jaslyn.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

I'm not sure what surprises me more—the pile of supplies stacked outside the packhouse, or the fact that all of it is for me.

For a moment, I just stand there, staring at the assortment of weapons, tools, and neatly bundled packages of food like they might sprout legs and start walking around. The shifters bustling about don't seem to think this is weird at all. If anything, they look proud of themselves, like they're packing me off for some grand adventure.

“Uh, what is all this?” I finally ask, half expecting someone to pop out with a clipboard and start taking inventory.

Madison beams at me as she hands off a tightly wrapped loaf of bread to a teenager, who zips it into a satchel. “Provisions,” she says like it's the most obvious thing in the world. “You'll need food that won't spoil, tools for the journey, and a few extras for good luck.”

“Extras?” I echo, glancing at a cluster of small cloth pouches tied with string. The faint hum of magic tells me they're charms—protection, maybe, or something more specific. Either way, someone went to a lot of trouble making them.

Madison shrugs. “You can never have too much luck.”

Another shifter walks by with an armful of spears, nodding at me like this is totally normal. I blink, trying to wrap my head around what I'm seeing. This isn't just a few thoughtful gestures. This is a full-on effort to outfit me for survival.

And it's... weird. Not bad weird, but definitely unexpected. Most of my life, these

people barely tolerated me. Some of them openly hated me. And now they're sending me off like I'm one of their own.

Like they want me to come back.

"Okay," I say slowly, dragging my gaze back to Madison. "Who put you all up to this? Was it Gray?"

Madison's laugh is warm and genuine, the kind that makes her eyes crinkle at the corners. "This is all us, honey."

"All you?" My eyebrows shoot up, and I cross my arms. "You expect me to believe that?"

She winks. "Take it as a compliment, Jaslyn. You've made an impression."

I don't know how to respond to that. Compliments from the pack aren't exactly something I'm used to. Instead of arguing, I let my gaze drift back to the supplies. There's a small bow and quiver among the weapons, a set of throwing knives, and even a coil of sturdy-looking rope. These aren't cheap, spur-of-the-moment gestures. Someone put real thought into this.

The warmth in my chest is uncomfortable, and I shift my weight, trying to brush it off. "Well, I guess I should say thanks."

Madison pats my shoulder like I just passed some kind of test. "You're welcome, babe. Just make sure you bring yourself back in one piece."

I'm saved from having to respond by the sound of someone clearing their throat behind me. Turning, I find Tim standing a few feet away with his hands shoved into his pockets and his shoulders hunched like he's bracing for impact. He looks

awkward, which is... new. Tim isn't usually the awkward type. Smug, sure. Overconfident, definitely. But this?

This is different.

"Can we talk?" he asks, glancing at the others like he's hoping they'll suddenly disappear.

I fold my arms and arch a brow. "That depends. Are you about to say something that'll piss me off?"

He winces, but there's a hint of something that might be a smile. "I'll try not to."

Madison gives me a knowing look before bustling off, leaving Tim and me alone in the middle of the pack's impromptu supply depot.

"Look," he begins, rubbing the back of his neck, "I owe you an apology."

I blink. That was not what I expected. "For what?"

"For a lot of things," he admits. "For being a jerk when we were kids. For treating you like an outsider when you came back. And for not stepping up sooner when..." He hesitates, and I know he's thinking about the demon. About Amber.

"I should've done more," he says quietly. "But you, you saved her. You didn't have to, and you did it, anyway."

I don't know what to say. Tim has never been one for self-reflection, and hearing him lay it all out like this is almost disorienting.

"It wasn't just for her," I say. "I did what I had to."



“Well, thank you,” he replies. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for how I treated you. I was wrong.”

I study him for a long moment, searching for any hint of insincerity. But all I see is a man who’s trying to make things right, even if he’s not sure how.

“Okay,” I finally respond. “Apology accepted.”

He lets out a breath like he’s been holding it for hours, and the tension in his shoulders eases. “Thanks, Jaslyn. That means a lot.”

Before I can respond, Amber appears at his side and slips her hand into his. She offers me a shy smile, and I nod in return. They’re a picture of contrasts: Tim, the brash, confident wolf who’s suddenly learning humility, and Amber, the quiet, steady she-wolf.

As they walk away, I feel a strange sense of closure. Maybe things really can change. Maybe people can surprise you.

I glance back at the pile of supplies and brush my fingers over the smooth wood of the bow. For the first time, I feel like this pack isn’t just tolerating me. They’re rooting for me.

And damn if that doesn’t make me want to prove them right.

Before long, the supplies are sorted, the goodbyes are exchanged, and by morning, we’ll be on the road. But I can’t shake the knot of tension coiled in my chest. The uncertainty over what lies ahead.

I find myself wandering toward the edge of the forest, my steps heavy and aimless. The air is crisp and cool, carrying the faint scent of pine and earth, but it does nothing

to ease the restlessness gnawing at me.

Maybe running will help. Shifting always cleared my head when I was younger, grounding me in the primal rhythm of my wolf. It's simple, instinctual. Just me and the wild.

But when I close my eyes and reach for the wolf, nothing happens.

My magic stutters, faltering like a flame caught in the wind. I grit my teeth and try again, focusing on the familiar pull, the heat, the shift. Still nothing.

Dammit. Not now.

"What are you doing?" Gray's voice cuts through the quiet, and I whirl around to find him leaning against a nearby tree. How long has he been there?

For a moment, my heart skips—not from surprise, but from the sight of him. The way the fading sunlight catches the sharp angles of his face, the casual confidence in his stance, the way he seems to fill the entire forest with his presence. It's maddening. Infuriating. And far too distracting for someone who's supposed to be preparing for a demon hunt.

"Trying to shift," I admit. "It's not working."

He doesn't respond right away, just watches me with that steady, assessing gaze that makes me feel like he sees more than I'm ready to share. My fingers curl into fists at my sides as I try to ignore the way my pulse quickens under his scrutiny.

Because the truth is, it's not just the shifting that's bothering me. It's him. It's the way his voice wraps around me like a promise, the way his presence grounds me and unravels me all at once. It's the way my feelings for him are starting to slip past the

boundaries I've tried so hard to keep in place.

Feelings I can't afford right now.

Not when we're about to walk into the unknown. Not when there's every chance we might not come back. Letting myself care about Gray—really care—feels like inviting pain. Like reaching for something that might not be there when this is all over.

But as much as I try to remind myself of that, my traitorous heart doesn't seem to care.

He pushes off the tree and strides toward me. "You're overthinking it again."

"Thanks for the groundbreaking insight, Alpha," I snap, but the edge in my voice doesn't faze him. If anything, it makes the corner of his mouth twitch like he's trying not to smile.

"Seriously, Jaslyn," he says, stopping in front of me. "You're too wound up. Shifting isn't just physical, it's mental. If your head's not in the right place, your wolf won't come out."

"How can I relax when I'm about to head into demon-infested territory?"

He chuckles, low and warm, and the sound sends a shiver down my spine. "There are other ways to relax, you know."

I narrow my eyes at him, searching for any hint of teasing. But his gaze is steady, intent, and it sends a different kind of tension coiling through me. The air between us shifts, charged with something I can't quite name but can definitely feel.

“Other ways, huh?” I say, my voice softer now, almost a challenge. I tilt my head, letting the moment linger. “You seem on edge, too,” I murmur. “Maybe we should both take a moment to... relax.”

His blue eyes darken, and for a second, I think he might actually give in. But then he steps back, running a hand through his hair and breaking the spell. “Jaslyn—”

“No.” I close the distance between us, placing my hand on his chest. His heartbeat is strong and steady beneath my palm, but I don’t miss the way it quickens slightly at my touch. “Don’t overthink it.”

He swallows hard. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Why not?” I press, my voice dropping to a whisper. “Because you’re scared? Or because you want me too much to stop?”

His resolve falters, just for a moment, and it’s all the encouragement I need. I lean in and brush my lips against the line of his jaw. His breath hitches, and I feel a surge of satisfaction at the way his hands flex at his sides like he’s fighting not to touch me.

“Jaslyn...” It’s a warning, but it sounds more like a plea.

I smile against his skin. “Relax, Alpha.”

With that, I close the gap between us, and my lips find his in a kiss that’s anything but tentative. It’s bold and demanding, and he responds with a heat that sends sparks racing through my veins. His hands grip my waist, pulling me closer as his control snaps, and the world tilts beneath me.

Gray’s lips are fire and sin, and I lose myself completely as his hands roam over my body. His touch is both possessive and gentle. Every brush of his fingers, every press

of his mouth, ignites something inside me that I didn't even know was there.

The rest of the world fades away, leaving just the two of us and the raw, unrelenting pull that binds us together.

When his hands slide down to my hips and lift me effortlessly, I wrap my legs around his waist, my fingers tangling in his hair as he carries me deeper into the forest. His lips never leave mine, and I'm vaguely aware of the rough bark of a tree against my back as he presses me against it, his body anchoring me in place.

"I told you," I whisper against his mouth, my voice breathless. "There are other ways to relax."

His laughter is low and rough, and it vibrates through me in a way that makes my head spin. "You're impossible," he mutters before claiming my lips again.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Jade and Isadora are talking about herbs, and I'm pretty sure Jaslyn is two seconds away from offering to set the whole conversation on fire. Not that she says anything—her jaw is locked, and her green eyes are moving between the two witches like she's watching a tennis match, but the irritation is practically radiating off her.

I've learned enough about Jaslyn to know she doesn't like feeling out of place. Walking next to two witches who could probably weave spells in their sleep has her magic bristling under her skin like a cornered wolf.

"Yarrow can amplify protective wards," Jade comments, gesturing with a sprig of the stuff like she's in the middle of a lecture. "But too much of it, and you'll end up weakening the energy lines. Balance is key."

Isadora hums in agreement, and her dark hair bounces as she nods. "True, but you can counteract that with a touch of vervain. It stabilizes the flow."

Jaslyn arches a brow, clearly unimpressed. "Or," she cuts in, "you could just use basil and avoid the headache altogether."

Both witches stop dead in their tracks, turning to stare at her like she just told them their favorite spellbook was trash. I bite back a grin, already knowing where this is going.

"Basil?" Jade repeats, skeptical. "That's... unorthodox."

"Doesn't make it wrong," Jaslyn fires back. "Basil's got natural protective properties, and it doesn't interfere with energy flow. It's simple and efficient."

Isadora tilts her head, studying Jaslyn with renewed interest. “You’re not wrong. But that’s a very instinctive approach to magic. Did someone teach you that?”

Jaslyn straightens her spine. For a moment, I think she’s going to shut the conversation down entirely. But then she squares her shoulders and lifts her chin. “No one taught me. Not officially. I had to figure it out on my own.”

The admission is quiet but charged, like a storm cloud ready to burst. Jade and Isadora exchange a look, and something unreadable passes between them before Jade speaks again.

“That’s impressive,” she says. “Most witches would struggle without guidance. Magic can be unforgiving.”

“Tell me about it,” Jaslyn mutters under her breath, but there’s less venom in her voice now. Her gaze flits to me for a fraction of a second, as if checking to see if I’m paying attention. I am. I always am when it comes to her.

“Figuring it out on your own must’ve been hard,” Isadora comments. “But it sounds like you’ve got a good handle on it now.”

Jaslyn shrugs. “You do what you have to.”

I step closer, keeping my voice casual as I interrupt. “Are we done swapping potion recipes, or should I break out the campfire and marshmallows?”

Jade smirks. “What’s the matter, Alpha? Magic talk over your head?”

“Not in the slightest. I’m just wondering if this is the part where you all start cackling and turning people into toads.”

“You’d make an adorable toad,” Jaslyn deadpans. “Very commanding.”

“You’d miss me in five minutes.”

“Maybe ten.”

Before I can retort, Theo jogs up from the rear of our little caravan, his face unusually tense. “Gray, we’ve got movement up ahead.”

“Demons?” My wolf snaps to attention, every muscle in my body going taut.

“Not sure,” Theo answers, glancing toward the dense trees ahead. “Could be, but it doesn’t feel... wrong enough. Might just be humans. There’s a clearing about fifty yards ahead. We’ll know more when we get there.”

I glance at Jaslyn, whose posture is already shifting into something more alert. The witches are sharp, but this isn’t their world—it’s mine. “Stay close,” I tell her.

She doesn’t argue. Good.

As we approach the clearing, I feel what Theo was referencing. Voices drift through the trees, and my wolf’s instincts sharpen into a single point of focus. I motion for the group to slow, signaling for Theo to take the left flank while I take the right.

The witches fall silent as we creep closer.

When we reach the edge of the clearing, the source of the voices comes into view—and my blood turns to ice.

Malcolm .



He stands in the center of the clearing like he owns the damn place. Wiley is with him, and his son's smirk is as sharp and predatory as ever. But it's the scene around them that makes my wolf snarl with fury.

A group of girls—witches, judging by their scent—are huddled together, their faces pale and terrified. They're bound with magic-tampering ropes, and their wrists are raw and red. Two of Malcolm's lackeys—both burly, wolfish types—are standing guard.

"Son of a bitch," I growl. My wolf is practically foaming at the mouth, demanding blood for everything they did to Jaslyn.

Jaslyn steps up beside me, and she sucks in a breath as she takes in the scene. "Malcolm," she whispers.

"Yeah," I confirm. "Looks like he's out looking for more witches."

Her magic spikes into an electric pulse that makes the hair on my arms stand on end. "We're not letting him get away with this," she hisses.

"No, we're not," I agree.

Theo moves closer and asks, "What's the plan?"

I grit my teeth as my mind runs through the options. Malcolm's outnumbered, but he's cunning. Reckless action could get those girls killed—or worse.

"We take him by surprise," I say finally. "Split into two groups. Theo, you and the witches circle left, draw the guards' attention. I'll take Jaslyn and cut off their escape."

Theo nods, but Jaslyn's hand clamps onto my arm before he can move. "I'm not just backup," she declares.

"You're not," I reply. "You're my ace."

"Damn right I am."

Malcolm won't see us coming.

The plan works—mostly. Theo and the witches draw the guards' attention, scattering them toward the left, and I charge into the clearing with Jaslyn at my side. The element of surprise gives us the upper hand, and the sheer fury behind our approach sends Malcolm's men scrambling.

It's not until Malcolm spots Jaslyn, standing tall and defiant with her magic crackling like a live wire, that the real trouble begins.

"Well, well. Look at her," he says lasciviously, gesturing at Jaslyn like she's some prized horse up for auction. "Healthy. Strong. Radiant, even. That wasn't part of the deal, Gray. I sold her to you to be used, not to have her paraded around like some kind of queen."

"Careful," I growl. "I don't take kindly to people questioning my decisions."

Malcolm barks a laugh. "Decisions? Is that what you call this? You've wasted what I gave you. Do you even realize what you've done? Letting her loose, giving her ideas about freedom—"

"I didn't let her loose. I set her free," I snap as my wolf bristles beneath the surface. "I paid you for Jaslyn, Malcolm. What I do with her now is none of your concern."

“None of my concern?” His voice rises, tinged with disbelief. “She’s mine. She’ll always be mine. You might’ve paid, but I didn’t sell you the right to unbind her. To make her think she’s more than what she is. That’s not what I agreed to.”

“You sold yourself the illusion that you could keep me caged forever,” Jaslyn bites out.

His gaze snaps to her, and his face twists in rage. “Watch your mouth, girl. You think you’re untouchable now? That I won’t drag you back myself if I have to?”

“You can try,” she challenges as her magic coils around her like a living thing. “But you’ll regret it.”

Wiley steps up beside his father, and his smirk is just as irritating as ever. “Big words for someone who used to grovel at our feet. Don’t think we’ve forgotten what you really are. What you’ll always be.”

Jaslyn’s green eyes burn with fury. “And what will you always be, Wiley? A pathetic little boy who hides behind his father?”

Wiley’s smirk falters, and his face flushes as he throws his hands in the air. “Enough. I’ll have you back, Jaslyn, one way or another. You’ll see. And when I do, you’ll—”

“You’ll what?” she demands, stepping closer. The hum of her magic grows louder, and the ground beneath us trembles. Even my wolf flinches at the intensity of her power, but I stay rooted, watching her take control of the moment. “If you so much as look at me or another girl again, I’ll hunt you down myself,” she warns. “And this time, I won’t stop with just scaring you. I’ll burn your empire to the ground.”

Malcolm’s bravado falters as the weight of her words sinks in. The light surrounding her pulses, brighter and stronger, and for the first time, I see real fear in his eyes.

“You’ve made your point,” Malcolm finally states. “But don’t think this is over. I’ll be back.”

He turns to leave, motioning for Wiley and the rest of his men to follow as the girls take off into the woods. Wiley lingers for a moment, his gaze moving between Jaslyn and me before he spits at the ground and storms after his father.

When they’re gone, the clearing falls silent except for the sound of Jaslyn’s ragged breathing. Her magic flickers out, leaving the air heavy and still. She sways, and I catch her arm before she can stumble.

“Jaslyn—”

“I’m fine,” she snaps, but her voice is shaky, and her hands tremble at her sides.

“You’re not fine.” I steer her away from the group, keeping my voice low. “You’re about two seconds away from falling apart, and that’s okay. But not here.”

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn’t argue as I lead her toward a cluster of trees on the edge of the clearing. The others watch us go, but no one says a word.

When we’re out of earshot, she finally collapses against a tree with her face in her hands. Her breathing is shallow, and I can see the telltale signs of an anxiety attack creeping in—the quick, uneven breaths, the way her shoulders shake.

As I watch her unravel in front of my eyes, I make a silent promise to the both of us: I’ll protect her from anyone who tries to take her freedom away again.

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Gray drags me behind a cluster of trees like we're hiding from the law, and I don't fight it. His hand is firm on my arm, but not rough. Not pushy. Just solid. Like he knows exactly how close I am to crumbling, and he's determined to stop it before it happens where anyone can see.

"Sit," he orders after a moment of me leaning against a tree.

I glare at him. "I'm not a damn child."

"No, you're not," he agrees calmly, crouching in front of me. "But you're shaking like a leaf, and I need you to sit before you fall over."

I hate that he's right. I hate that my legs feel like jelly, that my chest is tight and my hands are trembling. But most of all, I hate that he's looking at me like that—steady and patient, like he'll stand between me and the whole damn world if it means keeping me upright.

So, I sit.

It's not graceful. My knees buckle halfway down, and I end up landing with an unceremonious thud against the base of a tree. Gray sits next to me, close but not crowding, with his arms resting on his knees like he's just here for the scenery.

The pressure in my chest ratchets up another notch, and my nails bite into my palms as I force my breathing to slow. "I don't need a babysitter."

"Good thing I'm not babysitting."

“Feels like it.”

His lips spasm, almost a smile. “Call it... strategic support.”

“Strategic support,” I repeat flatly.

“Yeah. You keep the world from falling apart, and I keep you from losing your mind while you do it. Teamwork.”

His voice is calm and steady, and it settles something jagged in me. I squeeze my eyes shut, focusing on the sound of it instead of the storm raging inside me. “You don’t have to do this,” I say. “I’m fine.”

“Stop lying to me.” There’s no bite to it, no frustration. Just quiet honesty. “You’re not fine, and that’s okay. You’ve been through hell, Jas. No one’s expecting you to just walk away from it unscathed.”

“I don’t want them to see,” I admit, the words cracking as they escape. “Not them. Not him.”

“Then don’t let them,” he replies. “You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met, Jaslyn. You don’t have to prove that to anyone. Least of all Malcolm.”

The mention of his name sends a fresh wave of heat and shame crawling up my throat. My breath hitches, and I press my fists harder into my thighs, trying to ground myself.

“Hey.” Gray’s voice is sharp, cutting through the spiral before it can take me under. His hand covers mine. “Don’t go there. Stay with me.”

“I’m trying,” I rasp.

“I know. I’m here.”

His words are an anchor, and I cling to them with everything I have. My chest is tight, my throat burning, and the world feels too close, too loud. I can feel it building—the panic, the helplessness, the fear. It’s a familiar enemy, one I’ve fought more times than I can count. But it still hits like a freight train every damn time.

“I hate this,” I whisper. “I hate feeling like this.”

“I know,” Gray says again. His thumb brushes over my knuckles in a slow, soothing rhythm, and the warmth of his touch pulls me back inch by inch. “But you’re not alone. You’re never alone.”

Something inside me splinters at that, at the quiet certainty in his voice. He doesn’t say it like a promise or a reassurance. He says it like a fact. Like it’s as unshakable as the ground beneath us.

I take a shaky breath, then another, trying to focus on the steady rhythm of his touch.

“You’re okay,” Gray says. “Breathe, Jas. Just breathe.”

I do. It’s not easy. Every inhale feels like dragging air through broken glass, but I do it, anyway. And slowly, the tightness in my chest starts to ease. The trembling in my hands subsides. The storm quiets, just a little.

Gray doesn’t say anything else, doesn’t push. He just stays there, and that’s enough. For now, it’s enough.

By the time I can finally breathe again without feeling like my chest is in a vice, Gray leans back, giving me enough space to reclaim a shred of dignity but not enough to make me feel exposed. His hand lingers on mine for a moment longer before he pulls

it away.

“You good?” he asks.

I nod, brushing a stray curl out of my face. “Better. Thanks to you.”

His lips curve into a soft, almost shy smile that makes my stomach flip. “What can I say? I’m a great strategic support.”

That earns a small laugh from me, weak but real, and he seems to take that as a win. He stands and offers me a hand, which I take, letting him pull me to my feet. For a moment, I’m not sure I can face the group after all of this, but Gray’s steady gaze anchors me.

“Ready to go back?” he asks.

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

When we return to the group, they’re clustered near a hastily constructed campfire. The witches are chatting in low voices while the wolves keep watch on the perimeter. Theo gives me a quick glance but says nothing, keeping his expression carefully neutral. It’s Jade who speaks first, and her eyes move between Gray and me like she’s piecing together a puzzle.

“Everything okay?” she asks, and there’s a note of genuine concern beneath the coolness.

“Fine,” I reply quickly, stepping past her to join the others. “What’s the plan?”

Jade exchanges a look with Isadora before answering. “We need direction. Tracking the portals blindly is only going to waste time, and we don’t have the luxury of



guessing.”

“I can scry for a vision,” Jade adds. “It’ll give us a glimpse of what’s ahead, maybe even lead us to the next portal.”

Isadora nods, already pulling a small pouch of herbs from her satchel. “I’ll reinforce her magic. It’ll make the vision clearer and help her focus.”

“That’s risky,” Gray interjects. “You’ll be vulnerable while you’re working. If anything comes at us—”

“We’ll handle it,” I cut in, meeting his gaze with a confidence I don’t entirely feel. “I’ll keep watch.”

Gray doesn’t look thrilled about the idea, but he nods after a moment. “Fine. But I’m watching over you while you’re watching over them.”

The corner of my mouth quirks up. “Protecting me from the big, bad witch hunters, Alpha?”

“More like protecting the witch hunters from you,” he shoots back.

Jade rolls her eyes. “If you two are done flirting, we have work to do.”

“Don’t be jealous, Jade,” I say sweetly. “Just because your husband had to keep watch doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t enjoy ourselves.”

That earns a chuckle from Isadora, and Jade shoots me a mock glare before turning back to her supplies. As they set up for the scrying ritual, Gray and I move to the edge of the camp, taking up a position where we can see both the witches and the surrounding forest.

The quiet stretches between us, comfortable but charged. Gray leans against a tree with his arms crossed while I sit on a fallen log, keeping my eyes on the witches as they begin their work. The air comes alive with magic as Jade and Isadora chant softly, their voices blending into a rhythmic cadence that's both soothing and unnerving.

"Do you ever get used to it?" Gray asks after a while.

"To what?" I glance at him, noting the way the firelight dances across his features.

"The magic. The way it feels. Like the air's buzzing with electricity."

I tilt my head, considering. "You don't feel it the same way I do. For me, it's... personal. Like a part of me waking up and stretching its limbs."

"It's impressive. Watching you control it, use it. I can't imagine what it's like to have that kind of power."

"Exhausting," I admit with a wry smile. "It's not all fireworks and glowing hands, you know. Half the time, it feels like wrangling a wild animal. One wrong move, and it all goes to hell."

"Sounds like being an alpha," he notes. His tone is teasing, but there's an edge of truth in there.

"Guess we're not so different after all."

"Guess not."

We fall silent again, but this time, it's a companionable quiet. I catch him watching me out of the corner of my eye, and when I turn to meet his gaze, he doesn't look

away.

“What?” I ask, raising a brow.

“Just thinking,” he says, his voice lower now. “About everything you said to Malcolm.”

My stomach twists at the mention of his name, but Gray’s steady gaze keeps me grounded. “What about it?”

“You were incredible. The way you stood up to him, the way you put him in his place. I’ve never seen anyone make the object of their fear back down like that.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I glance away, feeling strangely self-conscious. “I didn’t have a choice. If I didn’t stand up to him, he would’ve taken me. Or worse, taken someone else.”

“Doesn’t make it any less impressive.” His voice is soft now, almost reverent. “You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

I swallow hard as his words settle deep in my chest. “Thanks. For being there. For having my back.”

“Always,” he replies without hesitation, and the sincerity in his voice makes something in me crack.

For a moment, I let myself just look at him—the sharp angles of his face, the strength in his posture, the way his blue eyes hold mine like they can see straight through me. He’s infuriating and impossible, but he’s also... everything. Solid and steady and unshakable in a way I never thought I’d need.

“You’re staring,” he comments with a smug grin.

“So are you,” I counter, leaning back on my hands. “What’s your excuse?”

“Admiring the view.”

The comment is so unexpected that I laugh, and the sound is startlingly loud in the quiet night. “Smooth, Alpha. Real smooth.”

“What can I say? You bring out the worst in me.”

“Flattering.”

“Only for you.”

There’s a beat of silence, and the air between us shifts, growing heavier. His gaze drops to my lips, and my heart stutters in my chest.

“Gray—”

“Jaslyn,” he interrupts, “I know we’ve got a lot ahead of us. And I know this isn’t exactly the time or place. But I need you to know... I’m here. For all of it. For you.”

My throat tightens, and for a moment, I don’t know how to respond. But then I reach out, resting my hand on his arm, and the tension in his shoulders eases.

“I know,” I say quietly. “And I’m here, too.”

The moment stretches, and for once, I let myself lean into it, let myself feel the weight of his presence and the quiet promise in his words. Whatever comes next, I know we’ll face it together.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

I wake up to two things: the distant chatter of the camp coming to life and Jaslyn curled against me, warm and soft and entirely too tempting. Her breath is steady, her body relaxed, and the last thing I should be thinking about right now is how damn good she feels.

But my body doesn't get the memo.

My arm is draped around her waist, and her hair tickles my jaw as I shift slightly, trying—and failing—not to make it worse. Morning wood is bad enough, but add in the fact that I can feel the curve of her hip pressed against me, I'm officially screwed.

You're an alpha. Get a grip. This is not the time .

Except Jaslyn stirs, and when her body brushes against mine, all rational thought goes out the window. My hand tightens reflexively on her waist, and she makes a soft sound, something halfway between a sigh and a hum, that hits me straight in the dick.

She's awake now, and her body shifts against mine again as she stretches lazily. I'm torn between praying she doesn't notice and hoping she does.

"Morning," she grumbles, her voice husky with sleep.

"Morning," I manage, though it comes out rougher than I intended.

She tilts her head back, and her green eyes catch mine. There's a hint of mischief there, like she knows exactly what kind of hell I'm in right now. Her lips curve into a small, sleepy smile.

“You okay, Alpha? You look tense.”

Her teasing tone pulls a low growl from me, and I tighten my arm around her just enough to press her back against me. “You know damn well why.”

Her smile widens, but she doesn’t pull away. If anything, she leans into me. Her body fits against mine like she was made for it. My wolf snarls in approval, and I’m suddenly very aware of how easy it would be to forget the world outside this tent entirely.

“I could move,” she offers, though there’s no sincerity in her tone.

“Don’t you dare.”

Her laughter is soft and low, and it sends a shiver down my spine. I’m already losing this battle, and she knows it. Before I can talk myself out of it, I adjust my position, turning her toward me. My hand cups her jaw, and her breath hitches as my thumb brushes over her cheek.

“Jaslyn.” Her name comes out as a warning and a plea all at once.

She doesn’t respond—not with words, anyway. Instead, she leans in and brushes her lips against mine in a kiss that’s soft at first, but it doesn’t stay that way.

The moment her hand slides up to tangle in my hair, the last of my restraint snaps. I pull her closer, deepening the kiss as my other hand finds her waist. Her body presses against mine, and the warmth of her skin under my touch is enough to drive me out of my mind.

She makes another sound—this one softer, needier—and it’s like pouring gasoline on a fire. My lips move to her jaw, her neck, trailing kisses that leave her breathless. Her

fingers curl in my hair, pulling me closer, and I let out a low growl as my teeth graze the sensitive spot just below her ear.

“Gray,” she whispers, her voice shaky but full of need. Her nails rake lightly against my scalp, and I swear I could lose myself in her completely.

My hand slips under the hem of her shirt, brushing over the curve of her hip, and her breath catches.

“Jaslyn, we—” I start, but she cuts me off with another kiss, her lips demanding and insistent. I can feel her smile against my mouth, and it’s maddening and perfect all at once.

“Keep quiet,” she urges against my lips. “Unless you want everyone out there to know what we’re doing.”

Her words send a rush of heat through me, and my hand slides higher, tracing the outline of her waist. She shivers under my touch, her body responding to me in a way that makes it damn near impossible to think straight.

I’m about two seconds away from forgetting where we are entirely when a loud shout cuts through the air outside the tent.

“Gray! Jaslyn! Get out here now!”

The moment shatters, and we both freeze. Our breathing is heavy and uneven as reality comes crashing back. Jaslyn pulls back just enough to meet my gaze. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are swollen from kissing.

“What the hell?” she complains, clearly just as annoyed as I am.

I take a deep breath, trying to rein in the frustration—and the lingering heat—before I answer. “Sounds like Theo.”

Her brow furrows, and she sits up, tugging her shirt back into place. “This better be good.”

Reluctantly, I follow her lead, adjusting myself as discreetly as possible before stepping out of the tent. Outside, I spot Theo near the campfire, waving us over.

“What’s so urgent?” I call out as we approach.

Theo doesn’t seem to notice the tension, or maybe he’s just too excited to care. “Jade got something. A vision.”

“What kind of vision?” Jaslyn questions.

“Mountain range,” Jade announces with triumph. “I saw a mountain range with three peaks and a narrow pass between them. It felt... close. Familiar.”

“Familiar how?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“Like I’ve been there before,” Jade replies. “Or near it, at least. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s within a day’s travel.”

Jaslyn glances at me. “Looks like we’ve got our next move.”

I nod as the tension from earlier melts into something sharper, more purposeful. “Let’s gear up. We’ve got a portal to find.”

The closer we get to the mountains, the more Jaslyn withdraws into herself. She’s walking just ahead of me with her shoulders stiff and her movements sharp, like her



body's ready to spring into action at any moment. She doesn't say much, and when she does, her tone is clipped. Focused.

"Are you going to tell me what's got you wound up, or do I have to guess?" I ask, stepping closer so we're walking side by side.

"I'm fine," she replies without looking at me.

"You're not fine," I counter, keeping my voice low so the others can't hear. "You're about as fine as a wolf caught in a trap."

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn't respond.

"Jaslyn," I press, "talk to me."

She stops abruptly, and I nearly bump into her. "What do you want me to say, Gray? That I'm nervous? That I can feel the magic in these mountains clawing at me like it's alive? That this whole thing feels wrong?"

"Yes," I say simply. "That's exactly what I want you to say if that's what you're thinking."

"We're close. Let's just get this over with."

The others don't seem to notice the shift in her mood. Jade and Isadora are quietly discussing the logistics of the sealing ritual, while Theo and the warriors scout ahead. But I can't shake the unease creeping through me, mirroring Jaslyn's.

By the time we reach the base of the mountains, the energy in the air is almost suffocating. The familiar scent of pine and earth is replaced by something putrid and acrid, like burning sulfur. My wolf snarls in protest, and I catch the faintest flicker of

movement out of the corner of my eye, though when I turn, there's nothing there.

"This is it," Jade announces, pointing to the mouth of a cave nestled between two jagged peaks. The entrance is wide and dark, and the shadows inside seem to writhe like living things.

"You feel that?" Jaslyn asks, glancing at the other witches.

"Yeah," Isadora replies grimly. "That's definitely demon energy."

"It's stronger here," Jade adds. "Like the cave is amplifying it."

"Any signs of animals?" Theo asks.

"None," I reply, scanning the area. The forest around us is eerily silent, and I don't like it one bit. "Nothing alive would want to be anywhere near this place."

"That makes five of us," Jaslyn mutters under her breath.

Jade and Isadora exchange a glance before nodding. "We'll seal it down," Jade announces. "If we trap the energy inside, it won't be able to spread or attract more demons."

"Do it," I tell them. "We'll keep watch."

The witches move to the entrance of the cave. Jaslyn lingers for a moment, her green eyes locked on the dark mouth of the cave before stepping forward to join them. They form a loose circle with their hands outstretched as they begin to chant in unison.

The air grows heavier with each word, and the magic swirls around them like an invisible storm. My wolf bristles at the sensation, but I force myself to focus,

scanning the tree line for any sign of movement. Theo and the warriors fan out with their weapons at the ready, but the forest remains unnervingly quiet.

Until it isn't.

A guttural roar erupts from the cave, so loud and sudden that it feels like the ground shakes beneath us. My heart lurches as a massive shape bursts from the darkness—a demon covered in black, chitinous armor. Its glowing yellow eyes fix on Jaslyn before it moves with terrifying speed, closing the distance in seconds.

“Jaslyn, move!” I shout, already lunging toward her.

She reacts just in time, throwing up a glittering barrier of magic that barely holds as the demon slams into it. The force sends her stumbling back, and her hands tremble as she struggles to maintain the shield.

“Gray!” she gasps, her voice edged with panic.

“I’ve got you!” I growl, shifting mid-stride and leaping at the demon with all the strength I can muster. My claws rake across its side, and it lets out a screech of rage, turning its attention to me.

Good. Let it focus on me.

The warriors join the fray, striking at the demon from all sides in their wolf forms. It’s fast, unnaturally so, but we’ve trained for this. Theo’s teeth find their mark, slicing through one of its legs. The creature staggers, its movements slowing.

“Keep going!” I shout, ducking under a swipe of its massive claws. “Don’t let up!”

Jaslyn and the witches resume their chant, their voices rising in unison as the air

thickens with power. The demon roars again, but I slam into it with all my weight, driving it back.

You're not getting anywhere near them , I snarl, sinking my claws into its throat. The creature shrieks, and its yellow eyes dim as the warriors deliver the final blows, cutting it down with brutal efficiency.

The demon collapses with a sickening thud, and its body dissolves into ash and smoke. I don't wait to see it vanish completely—I'm already shifting back to human and spinning in circles, searching for Jaslyn.

She's still standing, her hands glowing with residual magic as the chant reaches its crescendo. The cave entrance shudders, and a blinding flash of light erupts from within. When it fades, the oppressive energy is gone, replaced by an almost unnatural stillness.

"It's done," Jade announces, her voice weary but triumphant. "The cave is sealed."

Relief washes over me, but it's short-lived. Jaslyn sways on her feet. Her face is pale, and I'm at her side in an instant, steadying her before she can fall.

"Jaslyn, are you hurt?" I demand.

She shakes her head, but her hands grip my arms with a force that tells me otherwise. "I'm fine. Just... give me a second."

"You almost died. If that thing had been a second faster—"

"But it wasn't," she interrupts. "I'm here, Gray. I'm okay."

The conviction in her voice doesn't erase the image burned into my mind of her

standing there, so close to danger.

The others regroup, but the scene blurs at the edges for me. All I can focus on is Jaslyn—the pale set of her face, the trembling in her hands as the adrenaline drains from her body. My arms stay locked around her, holding her upright, but it's my wolf that needs to be grounded. It's still snarling, pacing inside me, haunted by how close she came to being ripped from me.

“You scared the hell out of me,” I admit.

She tilts her head to look at me, and as her green eyes search mine, I know she sees it—the fear I can't hide.

“I'm okay,” she says again, softer this time. “Gray, you stopped it. You protected me.”

“That thing was seconds away from tearing into you,” I grind out. “Do you have any idea—” I stop as the words choke me. “If I'd been a step slower, Jas...”

“But you weren't. You were there. You always are.”

The trust in her voice is both a balm and a blade. She doesn't understand how close I came to losing her. Not just to the demon, but to the chaos of this whole mission. My hands tighten on her arms, and I press my forehead to hers, letting the warmth of her presence soothe the storm in my chest.

“I can't lose you,” I admit. “Not to demons. Not to anything.”

She goes still for a moment. Then, slowly, her arms come up to wrap around my neck, and she holds me as tightly as I'm holding her. “I'm not going anywhere.”

But the words don't stop the images flashing in my mind: the demon lunging, her shield faltering, the endless possibilities of what could've happened if I'd been a heartbeat too late. My wolf snarls at the memory, and I pull her closer as the fear manifests in an almost desperate need to feel her solid and alive in my arms.

"I mean it, Jas," I rasp. "Promise me you won't take risks like that again. I don't care what's at stake—your life is more important."

Her hands slide down to cup my face, forcing me to look at her. "I can't promise I'll always play it safe, but I can promise you this: I'll fight to survive."

The conviction in her eyes steadies something fragile in me. She means it. She's not just saying the words to soothe me, she's making a vow. My hands come up to cover hers, and I lean into her touch, letting the knot in my chest loosen just a little.

"The others are waiting," she points out.

I nod, but I don't let her go just yet. "Jaslyn..."

"Gray," she interrupts gently, her lips curving into a faint smile. "I'm here."

But the fear doesn't leave me, not entirely. It lingers, a quiet shadow in the back of my mind, a reminder of how close I came to losing her.

As we rejoin the group, my wolf's instincts narrow in on one thing: protect her at all costs.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The noise hits me first—cheering, clapping, the unmistakable buzz of celebration—and my stomach twists like I’ve walked into the wrong room at a party I wasn’t invited to.

We’ve barely stepped foot past the packhouse gates, and the crowd is already rushing toward us, all bright eyes and jubilant smiles. Someone shouts my name— my name—and the sound ricochets through me. For a second, I consider turning around and running back into the forest.

Instead, I grit my teeth and force a smile. A poor one, if the way Madison’s eyebrows knit together when she spots me is anything to go by.

“There she is! The woman of the hour!” Madison’s voice is clear and warm, and before I can escape, she’s throwing an arm around my shoulders like we’re old friends. “You’re a hero, Jaslyn,” she gushes.

“Hardly,” I mutter, but the words drown in the rising wave of chatter around us.

A small child darts forward, holding something in her tiny hands. A flower. I crouch to her level, ignoring the way my knees protest after days of hiking and fighting.

“For me?” I ask, and the girl nods shyly, her big brown eyes wide as saucers. I take the flower, trying not to crush the delicate stem with my trembling fingers. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

Her mother beams from the sidelines, and the child scurries back to her, leaving me crouched there like an idiot with a daisy in my hand. Someone else pushes

forward—a man this time. As soon as I’m upright again, he grips my shoulder like he’s known me forever.

“You saved us,” he says. “All of us. Thank you.”

I nod, swallowing hard. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? You’re welcome for not dying?

Before I can come up with an answer, someone else is stepping forward. Then another. And another. The crowd presses closer, their voices blending into a cacophony of gratitude and admiration that makes my chest feel tight.

I glance over my shoulder, searching for Gray. He’s there, of course, towering over the crowd with his calm, steady presence. He catches my eye and gives me a small, reassuring nod. It helps, but not enough.

“I need to—” I start, but the words get lost in the noise. Someone thrusts a mug of something into my hand, and I blink down at the frothy liquid like it’s a foreign object. I don’t even drink beer. Not that anyone here seems to know, or care.

The celebration swells around me, pulling me under like a tide. Music starts up somewhere, and the crowd gives way to dancers and laughter. The energy is infectious, electric, and it should feel good. It should feel like victory.

But all I can think about is that demon and the portal. A sickening what if that lingers like a shadow in the back of my mind.

What if we missed something? What if it wasn’t enough? What if next time—?

“Hey.” Gray’s close enough that I can feel the warmth of him at my back. “You doing okay?”



“Peachy,” I respond. I take a sip of whatever’s in the mug. It’s bitter and vaguely fruity, but it does the job of distracting me for half a second.

Gray doesn’t look convinced. “You’re about two seconds away from bolting.”

“I’m fine,” I insist, but even I can hear the strain in my voice. “Really. Just not used to this.”

“Being celebrated?”

“Being stared at,” I admit. My eyes dart to a cluster of shifters near the edge of the crowd, and their gazes linger on me like I’m some kind of miracle. “I didn’t do anything special. I just survived.”

“You did a hell of a lot more than that,” Gray states. His hand brushes against mine. The contact is brief, but it’s enough to remind me that I’m not alone. “Let them celebrate you, Jas. You’ve earned it.”

I want to believe him. I want to stand here and bask in the warmth of their gratitude, to let myself feel like the hero they see. But the truth is, I don’t. I feel exposed, like a nerve that hasn’t quite healed. The weight of their expectations is too much, too soon.

“I just need a minute,” I grumble, handing him the mug before the crowd can shove another drink at me.

“Jaslyn—”

“I’m fine,” I repeat, cutting him off before he can argue. My voice softens as I add, “I just need some air. I’ll be back.”

He studies me for a long moment, then he nods. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t.”

I slip through the crowd as quickly and quietly as I can, keeping my head down and my steps aimed at the door. People part for me, and their smiles fade into puzzled glances as I pass. I know I’m being rude, but I can’t bring myself to care. Not right now.

By the time I reach the edge of the celebration, my chest feels like it’s about to cave in. I suck in a breath, then another, letting the sounds of the crowd fade into the background as I put more distance between us.

I don’t stop until the music and laughter are little more than whispers on the wind. When I do, I let out a shaky exhale and press my back against the rough bark of a tree. It’s over. We’re safe. I should feel relief, or pride, or something other than this knot of tension coiled in my stomach like a snake. But all I can think about is how close we came to losing everything—and how much closer we might come next time.

If there is a next time.

The thought makes my stomach churn, and I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the spiral to stop. I just need a minute. Just one damn minute to pull myself together before I have to face them all again.

I don’t hear Gray approach until he’s right in front of me. When I look up, he’s leaning casually against the tree beside me with his arms crossed like he has all the time in the world.

I groan, tipping my head back against the bark. “Are you going to drag me back?”

“Do I look like I’m in a hurry to go back to that?” He gestures loosely in the direction of the packhouse, where the sounds of laughter and music are still going strong.

I study him for a second, trying to read the expression in his eyes. It's not pity, thank God, but there's something softer there. Understanding. That makes it worse, in a way.

"I just needed to get away for a minute," I mutter, dragging my hand through my hair. "It's too much."

"I get it." He shifts to face me, and his arms drop to his sides. "It's a lot of people, a lot of attention. Not exactly your scene."

"That's an understatement," I say with a weak laugh. "They're acting like I saved the world or something. Like I'm some kind of hero."

"You kind of did save the world," Gray points out. "Or at least our corner of it."

I glare at him, though there's no real heat behind it. "I didn't do anything special. I just did what anyone would have done."

"That's where you're wrong." He straightens and steps closer until he's standing directly in front of me. His blue eyes pin me in place. "Most people wouldn't have been able to do what you did. Most people wouldn't have had the strength, or the courage."

"Courage?" I scoff. "I was terrified the whole time."

"Doesn't mean you weren't brave," he counters. "Being brave doesn't mean not being scared. It means doing what needs to be done, even when you are."

I drop my gaze, focusing on the ground beneath my boots. "I don't want to be brave. I don't want to be special or strong or any of it. I just want to be normal."

There's a beat of silence, and then Gray's hand is under my chin, tipping my face up to meet his. "You're not normal, Jaslyn. You're extraordinary. And you should be proud of that."

The words hit me like a punch to the chest, knocking the air right out of me. I blink up at him, searching his face for any hint of insincerity, but there's none. He means it. Every word.

"I don't feel extraordinary, either," I say.

"That's because you don't see what I see. You don't see the way you light up a room when you walk in. The way you inspire people without even trying. The way you make everyone around you stronger just by being you."

My throat tightens, and I look away, my cheeks burning. "You're just saying that because you're—"

"Because I'm what?" he interrupts, stepping closer. "Because I'm falling for you?"

My heart skips a beat, and I freeze, the world narrowing down to the space between us. He doesn't move, doesn't say another word, just watches me with an intensity that makes it impossible to look away.

"I..." The words stick in my throat, tangled and useless. The demons are gone, the mission is over—for now—but what comes next? Everything feels uncertain, fragile. I don't want to hand my heart over on a whim, not when I'm still trying to piece together what's left of my life.

But then Gray's steady gaze holds mine, and something in his expression—a quiet strength, a certainty I can't muster on my own—pulls me in.

Instead of finishing the sentence, I close the distance between us, leaning up on my toes to press my lips to his.

It's not a soft kiss. It's all heat and need and the kind of desperation that comes from holding back too long. Gray responds instantly, his hands gripping my waist as he pulls me closer, deepening the kiss until the rest of the world fades away.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathless and more than a little dizzy. Gray rests his forehead against mine, his breathing just as uneven as mine.

We stay like that for a moment, wrapped up in each other, until the distant sound of laughter and music pulls me back to reality. I step back, smoothing my hands over my hair and trying to ignore the way my heart is still racing.

"Guess we should get back," I suggest, though the thought fills me with dread.

Gray nods, but his hand brushes against mine as we start walking, a silent reassurance that I'm not alone.

When we return to the packhouse, the celebration is still in full swing. The crowd erupts into cheers when they see us, and for the first time, I don't feel the urge to run. Gray's words linger in my mind, steadying me, reminding me that maybe I can do this.

I'm swept into the crowd, surrounded by smiling faces and warm congratulations, but it doesn't feel suffocating this time. It feels... almost good.

At some point, Gray appears at my side with a glass of something cold in his hand. "Dance with me," he says, holding out his other hand.

"I don't dance," I reply automatically.

He raises a brow, and his lips curve into a teasing smile. “You’ll spar with demons, but you won’t dance with me?”

“That’s different,” I counter, but I can’t fight the smile tugging at my own lips. “Fine. One dance.”

Gray leads me to the makeshift dance floor. The music is slower now, softer, and I let him guide me, our movements easy and unhurried.

“You’re not terrible at this,” he comments after a moment.

“Careful, Alpha,” I reply, smirking. “You almost sound impressed.”

“Maybe I am.” His gaze holds onto mine, and the teasing glint fades, replaced by something deeper. “Jaslyn...”

“Gray,” I cut in, my voice softer now. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make me fall for you more than I already have.”

His smile widens, and he spins me gently, pulling me closer as the song shifts. The moment stretches between us, heavy with the kind of tension that makes my skin tingle. I can feel the heat of his body, the strength in his arms, and it’s intoxicating in a way that has nothing to do with the music.

“We should go,” I say suddenly, the words slipping out before I can think them through.

“Go where?” he asks, though the gleam in his eyes suggests he already knows.

I glance toward the forest; the pull of it is undeniable. “For a run.”

His grin is all teeth. “Lead the way.”

We slip away from the crowd as quietly as we can, our steps quick and eager. The forest beckons, and for the first time in days, I feel like I can breathe. Like I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

I'm running just behind her, close enough to watch the powerful lines of her wolf move through the forest with effortless grace, and it's driving me insane. Her scent is everywhere, wrapping around me like a vice, teasing me with every stride she takes. She glances back once, and there's no mistaking the challenge in those green eyes.

She wants me to chase her.

My wolf doesn't need to be told twice.

Jaslyn's speed is impressive, lean and quick, but I'm an alpha, and the predator in me doesn't care about making this easy for her. My paws hit the ground with a solid rhythm as I push harder, cutting through the trees and closing the distance between us. She dodges left, then right, darting between thick trunks and low-hanging branches. I can feel her amusement in the way her tail flicks when I get too close.

She thinks she can outpace me. Adorable.

I surge forward, and her ears twitch back as she realizes I'm gaining. Her pace quickens, her strides stretching longer, and I swear she's laughing, at least as much as a wolf can.

The forest around us feels like an extension of our bodies, the way we move through it without hesitation, without second-guessing. It's instinct, raw and primal, and it's not just the run that's fueling the tension in my chest. It's her. The way she moves, the confidence in every step, the way she lets herself go entirely to this moment.

I nearly lose myself watching her, but she veers sharply to the left. I react instantly,



cutting through the undergrowth to intercept her. My wolf is relentless, fueled by the promise of catching her, and when I finally close the gap enough to graze her flank with my shoulder, she snaps her head around and growls.

That playful, low growl shouldn't be sexy, but it is. It's everything I can do not to shift back right then and there, and—

She bolts again, breaking my train of thought. This time, I don't let her get far. I push hard, closing the distance in a few powerful strides, and lunge just enough to nip at her tail. It's a deliberate move, one that earns me a sharp bark in protest and a flick of her tail against my nose.

It's not a fight—it's foreplay. And my wolf is all in.

We break into a clearing. She skids to a stop, turning to face me with her head held high and her chest heaving. I slow and start circling her as I move closer. She doesn't back down, doesn't shy away. If anything, she leans into it.

When I step forward again, she shifts first. The change ripples through her like liquid fire. Her naked human form replaces her wolf in a matter of seconds, and she stands there in all her bare, unapologetic glory, looking at me like she dares me not to follow.

“Are you going to stay like that?” she asks. “Or are you going to join me?”

I shift without hesitation, letting the transformation take hold. When I stand before her, I can feel the heat of her gaze like a physical touch. My skin buzzes under her scrutiny, every nerve alive and alert as we take each other in.

“Caught you,” I tease.

“You didn’t catch me,” she counters. “I stopped.”

“Why?” I step closer, and the space between us shrinks until there’s barely enough room to breathe.

She tilts her head. “To see if you’d actually make a move, Alpha.”

Challenge accepted.

I close the final distance, and my hands find her waist as her breath hitches. Her skin is warm under my touch, and when I lower my head to capture her mouth with mine, the world falls away. The kiss is molten, a clash of heat and hunger, and her hands find their way into my hair, pulling me closer, deeper.

I kiss her until the tension inside me is a burning ache, until my lungs scream for air, until the only thing keeping me upright is her.

My hands trail lower, tracing the curve of her hips, and she arches into me with a soft sound that makes me dizzy. I want to hear her say my name. I want her moaning and gasping and whispering my name as I make her come.

My tongue sweeps across hers. The taste of her is addictive. I need more, and she gives it freely, kissing me with the same intensity. Her hand slides over my bare chest, and her fingers trace the lines of my muscles, exploring every inch of exposed skin.

I let her explore, relishing the way her touch lights up my body. I want her to see, to touch, to claim me the same way I plan to claim her. When her fingers brush the edge of my hip, I bite back a groan, and my own hand tightens on her ass.

She pulls away from the kiss just enough to gasp for air, and I trail kisses along her

jaw and neck, tasting the salt on her skin. She sighs, tilting her head back, and I nip at the delicate skin of her throat, eliciting another moan.

The sounds she makes drive me wild, and my free hand comes up to cup her breast, stroking and teasing her nipple until she arches into me. When I replace my fingers with my mouth, her hand clenches in my hair, and she cries out.

Her nails dig into my shoulders, and her hips press against mine, grinding against me. My cock is rock-hard, and her heat is searing. I know she can feel me, can sense the effect she has on me, but the urge to touch her, to taste her, is stronger.

I want to worship her.

My mouth moves lower, tracing a path of kisses down her stomach and lowering myself onto my knees in front of her. When I reach the spot where her thigh meets her hip, she whimpers, her legs trembling as I continue lower, my lips brushing the soft, sensitive skin.

Her hand slides down, guiding my head between her legs. When her fingers tighten in my hair, I give in, licking and sucking until she can barely stand. Her breaths are ragged, and the sound of her pleasure fills the clearing, driving me mad.

I want her. Need her.

My tongue darts over her clit, and her body shudders. Her thighs squeeze my head, and her moans turn into cries. She gasps, her body bucking, and I can tell she needs more. Just as she's about to shatter, I slip my arms around her waist and lift her.

She yelps in surprise, and her legs wrap around me automatically, anchoring herself. I carry her a few feet and press her against a tree, bracing her back with one hand and holding her up with the other.

Her arms encircle my neck as her fingers thread through my hair. Her eyes find mine, hazy with pleasure. My cock presses against her entrance, and the contact is so good, I can't hold back the groan that escapes me. She's so wet, and the heat of her is like a brand, sending sparks of need through every part of me.

When I ease into her, the feeling is overwhelming. She's tight and hot and perfect, and the way her body tenses and relaxes around me drives me insane. I thrust deeper, and her back arches. Her hips roll forward, taking me in, and the sensation is enough to send a rush of desire through me.

I bury myself deep, and the cry that leaves her is the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

I pull back, the friction sending a wave of heat through me. The need to possess her, to claim her, is almost unbearable, and I know I'm not going to last long. Not with her wrapped around me like this, her body trembling with need.

The next time I drive into her, her body jerks, and her walls clench around me. I set a steady rhythm, thrusting hard and deep. The sight of her like this, lost in pleasure, is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I can't tear my eyes away, can't stop looking at the way her body moves against mine. She's flushed, her lips parted and her eyes half-closed. Every part of me screams to claim her, to mark her, to make her mine.

I'm not gentle, but she doesn't seem to care. She meets my thrusts, urging me deeper, her voice breaking around my name. The sound is enough to send me over the edge, and I can't hold back anymore.

My release rips through me, and I bury myself in her with a low growl. My fingers dig into her hips, holding her still as her walls pulse around me, milking me for everything I have. Her body shudders. Her nails rake down my back, and her legs tighten around my waist, pulling me closer, deeper.

It's bliss and torture, and I never want it to end.

I can't catch my breath. Can't think. Can't do anything but feel.

When the pleasure subsides, I lean against her, pressing her back to the tree and resting my forehead against hers. She's still shaking, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. We both need a moment.

When my heart finally slows and the haze fades, I open my eyes to find her looking at me, her expression equal parts stunned and sated.

"That was..." She trails off, her lips curving into a satisfied grin.

I smile, trailing kisses down her neck and jaw, savoring the taste of her. "Amazing?"

She lets out a breathless laugh. "That's one word for it."

"I have others, if you'd like a list."

Her smile widens, and the sight warms me, chasing away the chill of the air on my sweat-slicked skin. "I'm sure you do."

I steal another kiss, slow and lingering, before easing her back down onto her feet.

When we return to the pack house and make our way to our room, Jaslyn barely glances at me before flopping onto the bed with an exhausted sigh. She sprawls across the covers, completely at ease. For a moment, I let myself just look at her. She's perfect like this—relaxed, alive, and safe.

I sink into the chair across from her, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. She hums softly, a tune I don't recognize, and stretches like a cat before rolling onto

her side to face me.

“You okay, Alpha?” she teases.

I force a small smile. “Always.”

She smirks, but it’s a sleepy one, and within minutes, her breathing evens out. She doesn’t even bother getting under the blankets.

I should lie down, too. God knows I’m exhausted. But the moment I see her like this, something holds me back. Something sharp and painful that I’ve been avoiding all night.

I promised her freedom.

When I first saw her—filthy, bruised, and beaten down—I swore I’d give her a chance at something better. I paid for her life in blood money, and it was never supposed to be more than that. Get her free, make her safe, deal with the demons, and let her go.

And yet, here we are.

She’s become the center of everything. The one thing my wolf and I agree on without question. She belongs here. She belongs with me.

But that’s just it, isn’t it? She belongs to herself.

And I’m not sure I’m strong enough to let her have that.

She shifts in her sleep with her face half-buried in the crook of her arm, and something in my chest clenches painfully. The demon threat is over. The pack is safe.

She doesn't have to stay here anymore. And if I were half the man I claim to be, I'd tell her that. I'd let her go without question, without hesitation, and I'd make sure she knew she was free to choose whatever life she wants.

But what if she doesn't choose me?

The thought guts me more than I care to admit. I've built my life around strength, around the belief that I can protect what's mine. But Jaslyn isn't something to be protected, she's someone to be trusted. She's a force of nature, unique and wild and everything I never knew I needed. And holding onto her feels less like safety and more like selfishness.

My promise hangs heavy in the back of my mind. I swore to set her free when this was over. And even though every instinct in me is howling to keep her close, I know I have to follow through. She deserves the world. Deserves to make her own choices, to figure out who she is without anyone holding her back.

Even if it breaks me to give her that.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The restaurant Gray picks isn't what I expected. When he said he had "somewhere special" in mind, I thought he meant a private, romantic spot in the woods or maybe one of the quieter pack-gathering areas. But this place? This place is packed.

The tables are filled with shifters. The smell of sizzling meat and fresh bread fills the air, and there's music playing from a corner where a few pack members are plucking away on guitars. It's charming, but far from intimate.

A group of kids races past, their laughter ringing out as they duck under tables, and I raise a brow at him.

He smirks, holding the door open for me. "What, you don't like it?"

"I didn't say that," I reply, stepping inside. "I just thought... I don't know. Something quieter."

"Quieter would've felt too expected," he teases, leading me toward a table near the back. "This place feels more like us."

I don't argue. He's right, in a way. It's relaxed, unpretentious, and a little chaotic. Kind of like my life lately.

The waitress, a cheerful she-wolf with a wild mane of curls, greets Gray by name. Of course she does. The alpha walks in, and everyone knows who he is.

"Alpha Gray," she says, smiling warmly. Her eyes flick to me, and something curious passes over her face before she schools her expression. "And you must be Jaslyn. I've



heard about you.”

“All good things, I hope.”

“Only the best,” she replies with a wink before handing us menus and disappearing to grab drinks.

“Famous, are we?” I tease, settling into my chair and flipping open the menu.

“You’re the witch who helped save the pack,” Gray points out, leaning back like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “People tend to talk about things like that.”

“I’m not sure I like being a topic of discussion,” I grumble as I skim the options. “What’s good here?”

“The burgers,” he answers without missing a beat.

“Don’t all shifters say that about every restaurant?”

“Maybe. But here, it’s actually true.”

The banter is easy, and for a while, I let myself enjoy it. We order food, and as we wait, the conversation shifts to lighter topics—my admittedly terrible aim with throwing knives, his surprising skill at baking. We talk about old times in Red Arrow, back when we were kids. Life was easier for him then, that’s for sure. He never had any problem fitting in. It’s fun. Comfortable. Almost normal.

But the longer we talk, the more I notice something off about him. He’s smiling, laughing, but there’s a tightness around his eyes, a weight in his voice that I can’t quite place.

“You’re quiet tonight,” I say after a lull in the conversation.

“I’m always quiet,” he replies easily, taking a sip of his drink.

“No, you’re broody. There’s a difference.”

He smirks, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Maybe I’m just enjoying the company.”

“Gray.”

He meets my gaze, and for a second, I see it—something flickering behind those blue eyes. But before I can press him, the waitress arrives with our food, and the moment slips away.

The burgers are as good as he promised, and I let the conversation drift back to safer topics. But the knot in my chest tightens with every passing minute. There’s something he’s not telling me. Something big.

It’s not until we’re halfway through the meal that he finally sets his fork down and leans forward.

“Jaslyn, there’s something I need to say.”

Here it is. The moment every part of me has been bracing for.

“Okay,” I say slowly, setting my burger down and wiping my hands on a napkin.

“What’s going on?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he studies me like he’s trying to memorize my face, like he’s weighing every word before he speaks.

“You’re free,” he says finally, his voice quiet but steady. “You can leave, Jaslyn. Go wherever you want. Do whatever you want. You’re not tied to the pack anymore.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. For a moment, I can’t breathe. Can’t think.

“What?”

“I promised you freedom,” he says, his jaw tight. “The demon threat is gone. The pack is safe. You don’t owe me—or anyone—anything.”

I stare at him, trying to process what he’s saying. The laughter, the easy conversation, the playful teasing—it all feels like a cruel setup now. Like he brought me here just to drop this on me.

“You’re... letting me go?” I manage, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to keep it steady.

His hands clench into fists on the table, but his voice remains calm. “It’s what you deserve. You’ve been through enough, Jas. You’ve earned the chance to live your life on your terms.”

“You already gave me permission to leave before everything was settled with the demons, remember?” Anger flares, sharp and hot. “What if I don’t want to leave? What if I’m happy here?”

He looks away. “You think you’re happy now, but—”

“But what?” I snap. “You think I don’t know my own mind? That I don’t know what I want? I chose to stay before, didn’t I?”

“It’s not about what you want. It’s about what’s best for you.”

“And you think what’s best for me is leaving the one place I’ve felt safe in years? Leaving you?”

The silence between us is deafening.

I push back from the table, and my chair scrapes loudly against the floor. “You don’t get to decide what’s best for me, Gray. Not after everything we’ve been through. Not after—” My voice cracks, and I swallow hard. “You don’t get to do this.”

“Jaslyn—”

“No.” I cut him off, grabbing my bag and slinging it over my shoulder. “If you want me gone, fine. But don’t pretend you’re doing it for me.”

I don’t give him a chance to respond. My hands are trembling, and my chest is tight, but I hold my head high as I walk out of the restaurant. The night air hits me like a slap. I breathe it in, trying to calm the storm raging inside me.

But I can’t.

I don’t stop walking until I’m well outside the pack’s territory, the forest closing in around me. My legs ache, my heart feels like it’s been ripped from my chest, and still, I keep going.

Because if Gray wants to let me go, I’ll make it easy for him.

I’m blinded by anger and tears. My chest feels like it’s caving in, and the memory of Gray’s words crushes me with every step. He let me go. He wants me to leave.

And the worst part? I thought... I thought we had something. I thought he felt it, too.

“Damn him,” I mutter, swiping angrily at my face. My voice cracks, and I hate the weakness in it. “Stupid, self-righteous alpha.”

A twig snaps to my left, and I freeze. My wolf stirs uneasily, but when a familiar scent carries on the breeze, I nearly collapse with relief.

“Jaslyn?” Isadora’s voice carries through the trees.

“Over here,” I call back, my voice raw from holding back tears.

A moment later, she appears, and her eyes narrow as she takes me in. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Walking.”

“Walking,” she echoes, raising a skeptical brow. “Through the forest. Alone. Crying.”

“I’m not crying.”

She steps closer, folding her arms and tilting her head like she’s daring me to lie again. “You look like a wreck, Jaslyn. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I snap, but my voice wavers. “Just... leave it alone, okay?”

“No.” Her tone is firm, and she plants herself directly in my path. “You don’t get to brush me off. Spill. Now.”

I glare at her as my throat tightens, but the fight drains out of me as quickly as it came. With a shaky breath, I drop onto a fallen log and bury my face in my hands.

“It’s Gray,” I mumble through my fingers.

“What about him?” Isadora asks. She sits beside me with her hand resting lightly on my shoulder.

“He told me I’m free,” I choke out. “That I can leave, that he’ll annul the marriage. Like... like I’m nothing to him.”

Isadora is silent for a moment. When she speaks, her voice is thoughtful. “He actually said you’re nothing to him?”

“Well... not exactly,” I admit reluctantly.

“What did he say, then?”

“That it’s what’s best for me. That I deserve to live my life how I want.” I laugh bitterly, wiping at my face. “But he didn’t even ask what I want. He just decided for me.”

Isadora hums, and her fingers drum lightly against her knee. “Let me ask you something, Jaslyn. Have you ever seen Gray look at anyone the way he looks at you?”

“What?” I blink at her, caught off-guard.

“We’ve both known him for a long time, haven’t we? I don’t know about you, but I’ve seen that man go toe-to-toe with demons and alphas twice his size without flinching. But when it comes to you? He’s different. Every time you’re near, it’s like you’re the only thing he sees.”

My heart stutters, but I shake my head. “That doesn’t mean anything. He let me go,

Isadora.”

“Because he’s trying to protect you. Not because he doesn’t care. He thinks letting you go is the right thing to do. That it’s what you need.”

I want to argue, but her words settle deep in my chest, cracking open something I’ve been too angry to face. Gray isn’t pushing me away because he doesn’t want me. He’s doing it because he thinks it’s what’s best for me.

“He’s an idiot,” I mutter.

Isadora chuckles. “Well, yeah. He’s a man.”

A wry smile tugs at my lips, but it fades quickly as the weight of realization sinks in. Gray thinks he’s doing the right thing, but he’s wrong. He doesn’t get to decide for me. If he’s too stubborn to fight for us, then I’ll do it myself.

“I have to go back,” I say suddenly, standing and brushing off my pants.

Isadora raises a brow. “You sure about that?”

“Absolutely,” I reply. “He’s not getting rid of me that easily.”

She grins, rising to her feet. “Now that’s the Jaslyn I know.”

Before I can take another step, a low, croaky growl rips through the air. Every hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Isadora freezes beside me, and her hand snaps to the small dagger at her hip.

“Tell me that was your stomach,” I whisper.

“Not even close,” she replies as he scans the shadows around us.

The growl comes again, louder this time, and the undergrowth ahead of us moves. My magic comes alive in an instant, crackling at my fingertips. Isadora tightens her grip on her dagger.

A hulking shape emerges from the darkness with sickly, glowing yellow eyes. My breath catches as recognition slams into me.

“Demon,” Isadora hisses.

It charges, and there’s no time to think—only react.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

The first thing I notice when I step into the packhouse is the silence. Not a single shifter is up and about. It isn't right. It isn't normal. And my wolf knows it.

"Jaslyn?" My voice echoes through the empty space. No response.

I make my way through the house, and the knot in my stomach tightens with every room I check. Her things are still here, but she isn't. My wolf paces beneath my skin, restless and uneasy. This isn't like her. If she wanted space, she could've stayed here and made me suffer through the tension.

But she's gone.

I'm halfway out the door to track her down when the alarm bell shatters the quiet night, its sharp clang reverberating through the pack lands. My blood goes cold, and my wolf snarls, clawing for control.

Not again .

I sprint toward the sound, every nightmare scenario driving me forward. The first thing I see when I reach the edge of the training grounds is chaos—a group of shifters, most of them young, struggling to take down a demon. The creature thrashes wildly as its sickly, blackened skin gleams in the firelight as it swipes at its attackers.

"Move!" I shout.

They scatter just in time for me to shift and lunge at the demon's side, claws slicing through its armor-like hide. It roars, spinning to face me, but I don't give it the

chance to retaliate. My teeth find its throat, and with a vicious shake, I tear through the vulnerable spot beneath its jaw.

The demon collapses in a heap of foul-smelling ichor. I spit the taste of it from my mouth as the others gather around me.

“Where are the others?” I demand, shifting back just enough to speak.

“By the east perimeter,” one of the younger wolves stammers. “Two more demons. Theo’s leading the charge.”

I’m already running before he finishes, my wolf surging forward as I shift again. The east perimeter isn’t far, but every second feels like an eternity. Two more demons. That makes three tonight. Three too many after we thought we’d sealed the last portal.

When I arrive, the scene is a blur of snarling wolves and the stench of demon blood. Theo’s massive wolf form is clamped onto a demon’s arm while another shifter goes for its legs. The second demon is still standing, but it’s badly injured. Its movements are sluggish as a group of warriors forces it back toward the tree line.

I don’t hesitate. I charge the closer demon, crashing into its side with enough force to send it flying. It lets out a roar, clawing at me, but I keep moving, tearing into its hide with my teeth and claws until it stops thrashing. I whirl toward the second demon just as Theo delivers the killing blow, his jaws snapping its neck with a sickening crunch.

For a moment, there’s only the sound of heavy breathing and the distant echo of the alarm bell. The warriors exchange uneasy glances, and my wolf bristles with the need to do something—anything—but the words catch in my throat when Theo shifts back.

“There’s another one,” he says, his voice grim. “Southwest. Near the old trails.”

My stomach drops. Jaslyn.

I'm sprinting toward the southwest edge of the territory without a second thought. My mind races with possibilities, none of them good. If she's there, if she's hurt...

I force the thought away and push harder.

The scent of a demon hits me before I reach the clearing, and I hear the sounds of a fight—magic crackling, snarls, and the rasping roars of a demon.

When I break through the trees, the sight stops me cold. Jaslyn stands at the center of the chaos, her hands glowing as she blasts the demon back with a force that sends it skidding. Isadora is beside her, chanting under her breath.

The demon recovers quickly, lunging for Jaslyn with claws outstretched, but I'm faster. I crash into its side, and the force of the impact sends us both tumbling to the ground. My claws tear into its chest. It screeches, its foul breath washing over me as it thrashes wildly.

"Jaslyn, now!" I roar, pinning the demon just long enough for her to unleash another burst of magic. It slams into the creature's head, and it lets out one final, ear-piercing shriek before collapsing in a heap and dissolving.

I shift back, breathing hard as I turn to face her. She's pale, sweat glistening on her skin, but her green eyes burn with determination. Isadora is already moving toward me, and her expression as grim as I've ever seen it.

"There's more," she states. "The energy is stronger here. It's pulling them in."

I glance at Jaslyn, and she nods, already knowing what I'm about to say. "We have to go to the source."

“No,” I growl, stepping closer to her. “You’re exhausted. Both of you are. Let me handle this—”

“It’s not up for debate,” Jaslyn cuts in. “You need us, Gray. This isn’t just a shifter fight. It’s magic, and we’re the only ones who can deal with it.”

She’s right. I hate that she’s right, but there’s no time to argue. The demon’s corpse is already dissolving into blackened ash, and the energy in the air is growing stronger by the second.

“Fine,” I grit out. “But you stay close to me. Both of you.”

Jaslyn smirks, and her magic sparks as she lifts her hands. “You’re not the boss of me, Alpha.”

“Like hell I’m not,” I snap back, but there’s no heat in my voice. Just fear. Fear of losing her. Fear of what’s waiting for us at the source of this nightmare.

The energy pulls us forward like a beacon, growing stronger with every step. I can feel it thrumming through the earth beneath my feet, a vibration that sets my wolf on edge. Jaslyn walks beside me while Isadora and the rest of the group fan out behind us. Every nerve in my body is on high alert, anticipating another attack, but so far, the woods are silent.

The closer we get, the more familiar the terrain becomes. My stomach twists with a strange sense of foreboding, and when the trees open up to reveal the glint of moonlight on water, the realization hits me like a punch to the chest.

The lake.

Jaslyn freezes beside me, her green eyes wide as she stares at the expanse of dark,

rippling water. “No way,” she whispers.

I glance at the water, and my wolf snarls uneasily as I take in its unnatural stillness. The energy is strongest here, pulsing in waves that ripple across the surface. My gaze shifts to Jaslyn, and I can see the memory of her last visit to this place playing out behind her eyes. This is where I took her that night when she needed to get rid of her excess magic before it got the better of her. We came here to escape, to find peace, and now it’s become the center of everything we’re fighting against.

“Do you feel it?” Isadora asks. Her dark eyes narrow as she steps closer to the water’s edge with her hands outstretched. “The portal, it’s here. Somewhere beneath the surface.”

Jaslyn nods, her magic sparking to life as she follows Isadora’s lead. “It’s not just here. It’s strong. Stronger than any of the others.”

“That’s why the demons are coming through so fast,” Theo comments. “It’s a direct link.”

“To where?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Hell,” Isadora says bluntly. Her tone is calm, but the gravity of her words hangs heavy in the air. “Or whatever dimension the demons call home. This portal isn’t just a crack—it’s a doorway.”

I curse under my breath, running a hand through my hair as I try to think. The lake stretches out before us, deceptively calm, but the energy emanating from it is anything but. My instincts scream at me to destroy the portal, to close it down before another demon can come through, but the logistics are a nightmare. It’s underwater. None of us are equipped for this. Not me, not Theo, and certainly not the rest of the shifters.

“We’ll have to dive,” Isadora says suddenly, her tone matter-of-fact. She turns to Jaslyn. “The portal’s underwater. We’ll need to get close to seal it.”

“Absolutely not,” I snap before she can finish. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s the only option,” she counters. “You know shifters aren’t built for this. You’re strong and fast, but water isn’t your element. It slows you down. The water feeds off our magic. If anything, that’ll work in our favor.”

“She’s right,” Jaslyn adds, though her voice is quieter. She glances at me, her green eyes pleading. “We can do this, Gray. Isadora and I, we’re the best chance we have.”

“No,” I growl, stepping closer to her. “It’s suicide. If something happens down there, if you can’t—”

“We can,” Jaslyn interrupts. “You have to trust us.”

Trust. The word feels like a knife to the gut. I do trust her—more than I trust anyone—but the thought of her diving into that lake, surrounded by god knows what kind of energy and danger, makes my blood run cold.

“We’ll stay together,” Isadora interjects. “And we’ll be careful. But this has to be done, Gray. If we don’t close that portal, the demons won’t stop.”

“She’s right,” Theo adds reluctantly. “We don’t have a choice.”

I turn away, staring out at the lake as my thoughts race. Every instinct in me is screaming to keep Jaslyn out of this, to find another way, but I know there isn’t one. They’re right. The portal has to be closed, and the witches are our best shot at doing it.

Jaslyn steps closer, her hand brushing mine. “Gray, I need you to let me do this.”

I look at her, taking in the determination in her eyes, the way her shoulders are squared like she’s already made up her mind. She’s always been stubborn. Relentless in her need to prove herself, to fight for what she believes in. It’s one of the things I love most about her, but right now, it’s also the thing that terrifies me the most.

“You’re sure about this?” I ask.

“I am.” Her hand squeezes mine, just briefly, but it’s enough to steady the chaos in my chest. “We can do this.”

I nod, though the motion feels heavy. “Stay close to each other. No risks. If anything feels off—”

“We’ll pull back,” Isadora finishes for me. “We know what we’re doing, Gray.”

I force myself to take a step back as I watch the two of them prepare. Theo moves to stand beside me.

“You think they can do it?” he asks quietly.

“They have to,” I reply, though the words feel like ash in my mouth.

As the witches move toward the water, I fight the urge to stop them, to pull Jaslyn back and tell her she doesn’t have to do this. But I know better. This is who she is—strong, fearless, and ready to face whatever comes next.

And I can only pray that it’s enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

If I drown in this lake, at least I'll know one thing: Gray was wrong. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

The water is freezing, the cold slicing through me like a blade. Isadora is ahead of me, and her movements are graceful as she swims downward with her potion shimmering faintly in the depths. My lungs burn already, not from lack of air but from anticipation. From the tight grip of fear I refuse to acknowledge.

The portal comes into view—a swirling mass of black and crimson that looks alive. It pulses erratically like a predator waiting to strike, and the force of its energy pulls at me, clawing at my magic and my sanity.

I push back, steadying myself as Isadora gestures for me to follow. The potion she released swirls toward the vortex, lighting the way and stabilizing the water around us just enough for us to move without being completely thrown off course.

My pulse pounds as we descend. The portal's pull grows stronger, and the vibrations roll over my skin and make my magic tense. Every instinct screams at me to surface, to breathe, to run, but I force the fear down. This is why I came here.

Isadora reaches into her satchel, pulling out another potion. This one glows gold, and its contents swirl like liquid sunlight. She uncorks it and motions for me to hold steady. I nod, gripping my magic tightly as she moves her mouth in a chant. Her words are muffled and distorted by the water but no less powerful.

The golden potion spreads outward, merging with the vortex. The reaction is immediate—the portal ripples and shrinks, its chaotic energy sputtering like a flame



deprived of oxygen. I add my own magic to the mix, channeling every ounce of focus I have into holding the vortex still as Isadora works.

“Hold it!” Isadora’s muffled shout carries through the water. I grit my teeth, pushing harder. My hands tingle with the effort, and my magic sparkles and sparks.

The portal resists, thrashing like a wild animal caught in a trap. I feel its pull deep in my core, its chaotic energy trying to drag me under. But I don’t let go. I can’t.

Isadora releases another potion as the portal begins to collapse inward. The red and black swirls fade, their edges fraying and disintegrating. The pull grows fiercer, and my chest aches as my magic strains to keep it contained.

One more push. One more surge of magic, and—

The portal implodes.

The force of it sends a shockwave through the water, knocking me back and leaving a strange stillness in its wake. My magic falters, flickering out as I float there, staring at the empty space where the vortex once was.

We did it.

Relief washes over me, followed quickly by exhaustion. My lungs scream for air, but I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips. I glance at Isadora, ready to celebrate, but her eyes widen, and she points frantically at my leg.

That’s when I feel it.

Something cold and slimy wraps around my ankle, yanking me downward. I twist, panic flaring as I see the vines, dark, writhing things that move like they’re alive. I

kick hard, but they only tighten, dragging me closer to the lake bed.

The water distorts my scream as I claw at the vines. I hear Isadora shouting, see her swimming toward me, but another vine lashes out, forcing her back.

My chest burns, and my vision blurs as dark spots creep in at the edges and my lungs beg for air.

I'm not ready for this. I don't want this.

Gray's face flashes in my mind, his piercing blue eyes filled with the quiet intensity that always steadies me. I should've told him. I should've said the words that have been sitting on the tip of my tongue for weeks now before I came into this wretched lake.

I love him.

The thought tears through me, followed by the notion that I'll never get to tell him. Never get to see the way his eyes soften when he looks at me, or feel the warmth of his touch, or hear the quiet way he says my name like it's a prayer.

The darkness closes in.

And then—

A sudden burst of movement.

The vines loosen, and something crashes into me, pulling me upward with a force that leaves me spinning. Strong arms wrap around me, dragging me toward the surface, and I feel a rush of air as we break through the water.

I gasp, choking on the cold night air, and it burns in the best way possible. My chest heaves as I cling to the person holding me.

Gray.

He pulls me to the shore, dragging me inch by inch, and we collapse onto the muddy bank in a tangle of limbs. I'm shaking, coughing, struggling to process what just happened, but he doesn't let go.

"Don't—" His voice is raw, his breath ragged as he presses his forehead against mine. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

I can't speak. My body trembles too hard, and my mind is still caught in the moment I thought I'd never escape.

"You could've died," he continues, his voice breaking. "You almost—"

"I'm okay," I manage, though my voice is barely audible. "I'm here."

But his arms only tighten around me, and for a long moment, we just sit there, wet and shivering and clinging to each other like the world might end if we let go.

Finally, I pull back just enough to look at him. His blue eyes are filled with an emotion so raw, it makes my heart ache.

"You didn't have to stay here," he says quietly. "You could've just left, Jaslyn. You didn't have to do any of this."

Anger flares, cutting through the lingering fear. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You could've stayed away. You could've left, lived your life, been free. You didn't

owe us this.”

“Us?” I snap, sitting up straighter. “Or you?”

His silence is answer enough.

I laugh bitterly, swiping at my face. “Do you think I came back for them, Gray? For your pack? Do you honestly believe that?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” he admits, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Well, let me make it simple for you,” I say, my voice trembling. “I didn’t come back for the pack. I didn’t come back for duty or obligation or any of the crap you keep telling yourself. They treated me like trash most of my life. Why the hell would I risk my life for them ?”

He stares at me, his breath hitching as I lean closer.

“I stayed here for you. Because I love you, Gray. Because even when you pushed me away, even when you thought letting me go was the right thing to do, I couldn’t walk away. Not from you. Not from us.”

His lips part, but I don’t let him speak. Not yet.

“I don’t care what you think you owe me,” I continue. “You mean everything to me, Gray. You’re the one who makes me feel like I can be more than what I’ve been told I’m worth. And if you think I’m walking away from that, you’re insane.”

His blue eyes widen, unguarded and vulnerable in a way that makes my heart flutter.

“You said I didn’t have to stay here,” I whisper. “But I chose to. Don’t take that

choice away from me.” I reach out, brushing my fingers against his cheek. “Because I’m not scared of this. I’m not scared of us.”

The silence stretches between us, heavy with everything I’ve said and everything he hasn’t. My heart pounds as I wait for him to respond, to say something, anything.

But all I can do now is hope he understands.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Jaslyn's just watching me, practically daring me to say something, anything. She's shivering, dripping wet, and absolutely furious—and all I can think about is how gorgeous she looks. How alive. How much I want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go.

But what do I say to someone who just told me they love me? To someone who stormed back into danger not for herself, not for duty, but for me?

I run a hand through my wet hair, buying a few seconds as my wolf snarls at me to stop being a coward. My throat feels tight, and the words don't come easily.

"I—" My voice falters, and I clear my throat, trying again. "Jaslyn, you don't have to—"

"Don't," she snaps, cutting me off. "Don't you dare tell me what I don't have to do. Not after everything."

Nearby, I can hear Theo and Isadora moving, their low voices just audible over the water lapping at the shore. They're giving us space, though I know Theo is still on high alert. Good. He can deal with any surprise attacks while I try to fix the mess I've made of this conversation.

"You're freezing," I say, reaching for her, but she steps back, shaking her head.

"Stop deflecting, Gray. I want an answer."

For a moment, I want to fight her. To argue, to push her away so she doesn't see how

much I need her. But I'm tired. Tired of lying to her. Tired of lying to myself.

"I'm not good at this," I admit finally. "I don't know how to say what I'm feeling. Hell, I don't even know how to make sense of it half the time."

"Then stop overthinking and just say it."

The words are simple, but the challenge in her eyes hits me like a lightning strike. There's no point in hiding anymore. Not from her.

"I love you." The confession falls from my lips before I can stop it, and the weight of it makes my chest ache. "I love you, Jaslyn. I've been trying not to, but it doesn't matter. You're under my skin. You're in every damn thought I have. And I know I've been a fool to push you away, but—"

"But what?" she presses. "What are you so afraid of?"

"Everything. I'm afraid of losing you. Of not being enough for you. Of ruining the only good thing I've ever had."

"Gray, do you honestly think I don't know what I'm getting into? You've been an ass, sure, but I've seen you. The real you. The one who would throw himself in front of a demon without a second thought. The one who would dive into a lake to save me, even when he's terrified of letting someone get too close."

I don't respond right away. How can I? She's right. I've spent so much time keeping people at arm's length, trying to protect them from me. Or maybe it was the other way around.

"Gray, I stayed here because I see you," she continues. "The you who feels like he has to carry everything on his shoulders, like he has to be perfect because the pack

depends on him. But you don't have to be perfect. You just have to be real."

I close my eyes for a moment. She doesn't know the half of it. She doesn't know how long I've carried the weight of my parents' deaths, the guilt that gnaws at me every time I look at the pack. The belief that if I falter, they'll fall apart.

"When my mother died," I say quietly, "it wasn't in a fight. It wasn't some noble, heroic sacrifice. It was an ambush. She was caught alone by hunters while she was out gathering supplies for the pack. I was twelve. She didn't even make it back to say goodbye."

Jaslyn sucks in a breath, but she doesn't interrupt.

"And my father—" My voice breaks, and I shake my head, struggling to find the words. "My father was the strongest man I knew, but after my mother... something in him broke. He tried to keep going, for me, for the pack, but the weight of it was too much. He made mistakes. And one of those mistakes got him killed." I swallow hard. "I was nineteen when I took over as alpha. I wasn't ready, but I didn't have a choice. Everyone was looking to me to fix things, to hold the pack together. And I tried. God, I tried. But I always felt like I was one wrong move away from losing everything."

"Gray," she whispers, "you can't blame yourself for that."

"Can't I?" I let out a bitter laugh. "If I'd been stronger, smarter, maybe my father wouldn't have felt like he had to shoulder everything alone. Maybe he'd still be here."

"You were a kid. You did the best you could."

"It wasn't enough. And it's why I've been so scared with you. Because if I let you in, if I love you the way I want to, and I lose you..." My voice breaks again, and I shake



my head. “I don’t know if I’d survive that.”

Her hand slides up to cup my cheek, forcing me to meet her gaze. “You’ve already lost so much, Gray. Don’t lose this, too. Don’t lose us.”

I close my eyes, leaning into her touch, and for a moment, everything else fades away. The fear, the guilt, the weight of the past—it all takes a backseat to the woman standing in front of me, the woman who stayed for me despite everything.

“You’ve always had it easier,” she says softly, and I open my eyes, startled by her words. “The pack accepted you from the start. You were the future alpha, the golden boy. Me? I was the outcast. The one they whispered about behind my back, the one they only tolerated because I didn’t have a choice.”

“Jaslyn—”

“I don’t say that to make you feel guilty,” she interrupts. “I say it because I need you to understand something. You made me feel like I mattered, Gray. Like I wasn’t just a burden or a problem to be solved. You gave me a place to belong, even when I didn’t think I deserved one. I’ve spent my whole life fighting to prove I’m worth something. And with you, I don’t have to fight anymore. With you, I can just be me.”

Her words shatter something inside me, and the walls I’ve spent years building come crashing down. I reach for her, pulling her against me. She comes willingly, her arms wrapping around my neck.

“I love you,” she whispers. “And I’m not going anywhere, Gray. Not unless you tell me to.”

The finality in her words leaves me breathless. For the first time in years, the weight on my chest feels lighter, and I realize that maybe I don’t have to carry it alone

anymore.

We barely make it back to the packhouse before the call comes in—a sharp knock on the door and Theo’s voice muffled on the other side.

“Alpha Gray, you and Jaslyn are needed in the main hall. Emergency meeting.”

Jaslyn glances at me, knitting her brows together. She’s still dripping from the lake with her hair plastered to her face. Her green eyes are wary. I know she’s waiting for me to say something, maybe to groan about another crisis or order her to sit this one out, but I can’t summon the energy to care about pack politics right now. Not when the memory of her almost drowning is still burned into my mind.

“I’ll be right there,” I say, my tone clipped.

Theo knows better than to argue. His footsteps fade down the hall, and Jaslyn crosses her arms, leaning back against the wall. “Are you really going to make me sit through one of these meetings right now?”

“I wish we didn’t have to,” I acknowledge.

Once we’re dried off and changed, she follows me to the main hall without another word. The room is already full when we arrive—alphas from neighboring packs, their betas, and the witches who’ve been assisting with the demon threat. The air hums with tension as voices overlap, some loud and accusatory, others quieter but no less intense. Everyone’s arguing, but no one’s solving anything.

Damien, alpha of Starfire Hollow, stands at the center of the room with his arms flailing in the air as he speaks. “We need to know how many of those things came through before the portal was closed. If even one slipped past us into the wider territory—”

“We’d know,” Alec, the East Hills alpha, interrupts. He leans against the back of his chair, scowling. “The energy they bring is impossible to miss. If there were more, our witches would’ve felt it.”

Jade, standing beside him with her hands clasped, shakes her head. “It’s not that simple. Closing the portal cut off their access, but it didn’t erase the magic already here. That lingering energy could mask any weaker demons that might’ve gotten through. We have to be vigilant.”

Isadora nods in agreement, her expression grim. “The pull from that portal was enormous. I wouldn’t rule out the possibility that something slipped past while we were focused on the big ones.”

The room buzzes with uneasy murmurs. Theo, standing to my left, leans in to whisper, “You’re going to let them talk us in circles all night?”

I glance at him, considering, but I’m too restless to focus. My eyes shift to Jaslyn, who’s standing beside me with her arms crossed. Her expression is calm, almost bored, but I can feel the tension radiating from her—the same tension I’ve carried since pulling her from the lake. She’s exhausted, but she’s here. She wouldn’t let herself be anywhere else.

Damien’s voice rises above the chatter, drawing my attention. “The question isn’t just whether more demons got through. It’s how to make sure they don’t come back.”

“Sealing the portal was the best we could do,” Jade responds. “But those rifts are like cracks in a dam. If the magic that created them is strong enough, it could reopen. Or create another somewhere else.”

“And what do we do then?” Damien demands. “We can’t keep reacting to this after the fact. We need a way to prevent it.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Isadora replies, her tone measured but firm. “The kind of magic needed to stabilize an area this size—”

“Would take more power than we have access to,” Jade finishes. “Even with every witch in the region working together, we wouldn’t be able to maintain it indefinitely.”

“So what’s the plan, then?” Alec asks, his gaze sweeping over the room. “Do we just wait for the next portal to open and hope we’re ready?”

The question hangs heavy in the air. No one wants to say it, but the answer is obvious: we don’t know. We can prepare. We can train. But the truth is, no one here can guarantee it won’t happen again.

Jaslyn speaks up, her voice cutting through the noise. “We don’t have to guarantee it won’t happen. We have to make sure we’re ready if it does.”

All eyes turn to her, and she steps forward, her shoulders squared despite the weariness in her movements. “We closed the portal tonight. That’s a win. But this isn’t over, and pretending we can control every possibility is a waste of time. We need to focus on what we can control—training, resources, communication between the packs. If another portal opens, we’ll face it. Together.”

Alec tilts his head, studying her. “Practical. I like it.”

Damien doesn’t look as convinced. “That’s easy to say now, while we’re all in one place. What happens when everyone goes back to their territories? Coordination isn’t exactly a strong suit between the packs.”

“We’ll make it one,” I interject, my voice sharper than I intend. “This isn’t a single-pack issue. We’ve all seen what happens when we’re not prepared for something like this. If we don’t stay unified, we’re as good as inviting another disaster.”

Damien's eyes narrow, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he shifts his gaze to Theo. "What about your warriors? How quickly could they mobilize if another portal opened nearby?"

Theo straightens, his expression all business. "Quickly enough. We've already started refining our response times after the first attack. And with the witches' help, we've learned how to contain demon energy more efficiently."

The discussion continues, moving from strategies to logistics, and the restlessness in my chest only grows. They're saying all the right things, making all the right plans, but it's not enough. Not tonight.

"Gray," Theo says quietly, leaning in again, "you good?"

"No," I mutter, stepping back. I've heard enough. It's not that I don't care—I care too much—but every instinct in me is pulling me toward something else. Someone else.

I catch Jaslyn's eye, and she arches a brow. "You're usually the one lecturing people about responsibility," she murmurs.

"Not tonight." My voice is low, but there's no mistaking the edge in it. "I'm done."

I turn to the room, clearing my throat loud enough to draw their attention. "You've got this handled," I say to Theo, ignoring the startled looks from the others. "Jaslyn and I are leaving."

Before anyone can argue, I grab Jaslyn's hand and lead her out of the room. She follows without protest, though I can feel her gaze burning into the side of my face.

Once we're outside, she finally speaks. "Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

I stop, turning to face her. The moonlight catches in her eyes, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. “I just needed to get you out of there.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I say, stepping closer, “I want to get you alone.”

Her lips part in surprise, and I take another step, closing the distance between us.

“Gray—”

“I want to show you how much I love you,” I interrupt. “And I can’t do that in a room full of people. Not with a thousand other things hanging over our heads. Just us.”

At that, she smiles. A soft, genuine smile that sends warmth flooding through my chest.

“Then what are we waiting for?” she whispers.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:58 pm*

Six months of demon-free peace should feel like a victory. A win. But here I am, sitting in yet another meeting, and the restless energy in the room is almost enough to set my teeth on edge.

The discussion has already dragged on for over an hour. Despite Gray's repeated attempts to keep things on track, the conversation keeps circling the same arguments. Should we stay, or should we go? Should we risk bringing more witches into the fold, or uproot the packs in the area and start over somewhere else?

I lean back in my chair, tuning out Damien's booming voice as he goes on about the risks of staying put. Again. For someone who's been an alpha as long as he has, you'd think he'd have more creative solutions.

"What do you think, Jaslyn?" Alec's voice cuts through my thoughts, dragging me back to the present. "You've been quiet."

I tilt my head, letting his question hang for a second while the room falls silent. All eyes are on me now, and I can practically feel Gray's gaze burning into the side of my face. I keep my expression neutral, refusing to let them see how much the attention bothers me.

"I think that we're all dancing around the real issue," I finally say.

"And what's that?" Damien asks, clearly unimpressed.

"That no matter where we go or how many witches we bring in, we're always going to be a target as long as supernatural energy is involved. Shifters. Witches. We're like

a damn buffet to anything drawn to that kind of power.”

“Then we should leave,” Damien snaps. “Find somewhere remote, cut ourselves off—”

“And what?” I interrupt. “Spend the rest of our lives running? Waiting for the next threat to find us? Because it will. Maybe not demons, but something else. It always does.”

The room falls quiet again, and tension is thick enough to choke on. Gray shifts in his chair beside me. I can tell he’s biting back whatever he wants to say. Good. Let me finish.

“There’s another option,” I continue, sitting up straighter. “One that doesn’t involve running or isolation. But it’s not going to be easy.”

Alec raises a brow, his interest clearly piqued. “I’m listening.”

I take a deep breath, glancing at Gray before turning back to the room. “Malcolm.”

The name lands like a bomb. Damien’s lips curl in disgust, Jade’s eyes narrow, and even Theo stiffens beside Gray. No one likes talking about him, let alone entertaining anything that might involve him. But this isn’t about liking it.

“Malcolm is running a slave system,” I say, forcing the words out. “We all know it. And we all know he’s been hoarding witches for years—training them, using them. Who knows how many are under his control or how strong they are?”

“What are you suggesting?” Jade asks cautiously.

“I’m suggesting we take him down,” I reply bluntly. “Topple his entire operation, free the witches he’s enslaved, and bring them here.”



Damien scoffs. “That’s a suicide mission. Malcolm’s forces are huge. His influence—”

“Is built on fear and lies,” I snap. “We’ve dealt with worse. Hell, we’ve dealt with demons. Are you telling me Malcolm scares you more than that?”

Damien’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t argue.

“Think about it,” I press. “If we can free those witches, give them a choice—help them rebuild their lives—we’re not just strengthening our defenses. We’re making it clear that no one gets to exploit people like that without consequences.”

“And what happens if those witches don’t want to join us?” Theo asks.

“Then we let them go,” I say simply. “This isn’t about forcing anyone to do anything. It’s about giving them a chance and a choice. Two things Malcolm never gave them.”

The room falls silent again, and I let my gaze sweep over the gathered leaders. Damien looks unconvinced, but Alec seems thoughtful. Jade and Isadora exchange a glance. Their silent communication is something I’ve grown used to over the past few months. Finally, it’s Gray who breaks the silence.

“She’s right,” he states. “Running won’t solve anything. And bringing in more witches without addressing Malcolm’s influence is like patching a dam with duct tape. It won’t hold.”

Damien snorts. “And you think marching into Malcolm’s territory will?”

“I think it’s better than sitting here arguing about the same damn things every few weeks,” Gray retorts. “We’ve been playing defense for too long. It’s time we took the fight to him.”

The room buzzes with uneasy whispers. Alec leans back in his chair with a faint smirk tugging at his lips. “Bold move, Gray. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Gray’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he turns to me, his blue eyes meeting mine with a quiet intensity that sends a shiver down my spine.

“You’re serious about this,” he says, not a question but a statement.

“Dead serious,” I reply. “Malcolm’s been a problem for years. We all know it. But no one’s been willing to do anything about it because we’re too busy worrying about our own problems. It’s time that changed.”

“And you think our packs can lead that charge?” Damien asks, his tone skeptical.

“I think our packs are already leading it,” I shoot back. “We’ve faced demons, sealed a portal, and come out stronger for it. If anyone can take down Malcolm, it’s us.”

Damien doesn’t respond, but the tension in his shoulders eases slightly. Alec, on the other hand, looks downright amused.

“Well,” he says, standing and stretching his arms overhead. “This should be interesting.”

Jade shoots him a glare, but he ignores it, turning his attention back to me. “If you’re serious about this, Jaslyn, you’ll have my support. But I hope you’ve got a plan, because this isn’t going to be pretty.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to be,” I reply, standing as well. “But I’ve spent my whole life dealing with ugly things. What’s one more?”

The meeting wraps up shortly after that, and I let out a slow breath as the alphas and witches begin filing out of the room. Alec claps me on the shoulder as he passes,

muttering something about how much fun this is going to be, while Damien offers a curt nod before disappearing through the door.

Gray lingers beside me as he watches the others leave. When we're finally alone, he turns to me with a faint smile.

"Bold move," he says, echoing Alec's words.

"You're not mad?" I ask, raising a brow.

"Mad?" He chuckles, shaking his head. "No. Proud, maybe. Impressed, definitely. But not mad."

"Good. Because I'm not backing down from this, Gray. Not for you, not for anyone."

"I wouldn't expect you to," he replies. "And I'll be right there with you, every step of the way."

His words send a thrill through me. I can see the determination in his eyes, the same drive that fuels my own, and I know without a doubt that we can do this. Together.

He reaches out, resting a hand on my hip and pulling me closer. "Hungry?"

"You mean emotionally drained and plotting Malcolm's downfall didn't count as dinner?"

He smirks. "Not quite. Come on."

I follow him out of the hall, my curiosity piqued as he leads me toward the forest. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

We walk in companionable silence. The moon is high overhead, casting just enough light to guide our way. The trees part as we reach a small field, and I stop short at the sight in front of me.

A blanket is spread out on the soft grass, surrounded by glowing lanterns that send a warm, golden light over the scene. A wicker basket sits in the center of the blanket, and beside it, a bottle of wine and two glasses gleam invitingly. The entire setup is simple, but it's perfect. Intimate and romantic in a way that makes my chest ache.

"Gray," I whisper, turning to him.

He shrugs and rubs the back of his neck. "I figured we could both use a break. Just us."

A smile tugs at my lips, and I shake my head. "You've been holding out on me. I didn't know you were capable of this level of charm."

"Stick around," he says, his voice dropping to a low, teasing rumble. "I might surprise you."

I settle onto the blanket as he pours the wine and hands me a glass before sitting beside me. The basket is packed with an assortment of fruits, cheeses, and crackers, along with what looks suspiciously like a batch of cookies he baked himself. I raise a brow at the sight, and he chuckles.

"Don't look so skeptical," he jokes, nudging the basket toward me. "You've eaten my cookies before."

"Once," I remind him, reaching for one. "And I'll admit, they were good. But if these are subpar, I reserve the right to mock you."

"Deal."

We spend the next hour talking and laughing. For once, there's no urgency, no looming threat. Just the two of us and the quiet of the night. Every now and then, I catch him looking at me—really looking at me—and it sends a pleasant shiver down my spine.

At one point, I lean back on my elbows and let out a contented sigh. “You know, this is dangerous territory, Gray.”

He turns to me, his brow furrowing. “How so?”

“You're setting the bar ridiculously high. How are you going to top this next time?”

His lips curve into a slow, wicked smile. “Who says I have to top it?”

“Are you implying this is a one-time thing?”

“I'm implying that you should appreciate the effort I put into this before demanding an encore.”

“Effort appreciated,” I reply, my voice softening as his face inches closer to mine. “But I might still demand an encore.”

His laughter is warm, low, and entirely too tempting. “You're impossible.”

“You like it,” I shoot back.

“I do,” he admits. “More than you know.”

My heart stutters in my chest as he leans in. His mouth brushes against mine, sending sparks shooting across my skin. When his tongue darts out, coaxing my lips apart, I melt against him, letting him deepen the kiss.

My pulse races, and the scent of pine and smoke surrounds me. I shift closer, pressing my body against his, and he groans. The sound is enough to make my stomach clench, and suddenly, I can feel the desire coursing through me.

I break away, breathless. My cheeks are flushed, and my eyes are glassy as I meet his gaze. He stares back at me, his expression a mix of adoration and need, and I trail my fingers down his shirt, savoring the feel of his muscles underneath the fabric. When I push against him, urging him to lie back, he lets out a low chuckle.

He follows my lead, lying back on the blanket with his hands behind his head. His blue eyes sparkle in the lantern light as I climb on top of him, straddling his waist.

He reaches up, tangling a hand in my hair, and pulls me down to kiss him. I lean into it, losing myself in the heat of his mouth and the feel of his body beneath mine. He breaks the kiss, nipping at my lower lip, and I whimper.

As he drags his mouth across my jaw, down the column of my throat, I tilt my head back, giving him access to every inch of bare skin. His hands slip up the hem of my dress, teasing and tormenting as his fingers ghost over my thighs.

I grind my hips against him, feeling his hard length press against my core. I let out a soft moan, and he growls. The sound is so primal, so animal, that it makes my knees weak.

It takes everything in me to pull away, but the look in his eye when I sink down between his legs makes the effort worthwhile.

I unbutton his jeans, taking my time and enjoying each new inch of exposed skin. As his pants slide down, his erection springs free. I wrap a hand around the thick base, stroking slowly.

He hisses in a breath, his abs tightening. I lean down, swirling my tongue around the

head of his cock. His hips buck involuntarily, and I grin.

I love seeing him lose control.

I take him in my mouth, teasing him with my tongue and lips until he moans. His fingers tangle in my hair, and his breathing grows ragged as I move faster, taking him deeper. My tongue swirls around the base, and his grip tightens.

He tastes like salt and smoke, and his scent is so intoxicating that it makes my head spin. I suck harder, picking up the pace, and his moans become low, desperate groans.

When he pulls at my arms, urging me up, I release him with a soft pop. He reaches down, dragging my dress over my head before tossing it aside. The night air is cool against my heated skin, but Gray is hot and firm as I sink back onto his lap.

His eyes burn into mine as he trails a finger across the edge of my bra. The simple touch is enough to send shivers rippling across my skin. He cups my breast, squeezing lightly, and my nipples harden beneath the lace.

With his free hand, he reaches around and unclasps the garment, freeing me. His gaze is intense as he takes in the sight of my naked chest. His thumb brushes across one nipple, making me gasp.

He grins, the expression somewhere between wicked and tender, and then his mouth is on mine again. He kisses me fiercely, hungrily, and I can feel his restraint slipping. His hand travels lower, down my stomach and across the curve of my hip. His fingers dance along the edge of my panties, and the anticipation is almost too much.

When he finally slides them down, I lift my hips, letting him remove the final barrier between us. When I hover my entrance over his cock, he groans.

He slides his hands down to grip my waist, steadying me. I can feel the tip of him pressed against me, hot and hard and ready. When he tilts his hips up, filling me in one long stroke, I cry out.

The feeling is indescribable.

His length stretches me, filling me completely. My toes curl as I bounce on him, riding him faster and faster as he cups my breasts and teases my nipples. His teeth graze my collarbone, and his stubble scratches against the sensitive skin of my neck.

He grips my waist, lifting and lowering me in time with his thrusts. The friction is exquisite. It only takes a few moments before my whole body starts to tense. My orgasm builds, hot and fast, and I grind down on him, chasing it.

He leans forward, sucking a nipple into his mouth, and the combination of sensations is enough to send me spiraling over the edge. I throw my head back, crying out his name.

He thrusts into me once, twice, and then his whole body shudders. His grip on my waist tightens as his cock pulses inside me. I lean forward, collapsing onto his chest as the aftershocks of pleasure wash over us.

He wraps his arms around me, holding me close. Our hearts beat in tandem, and the moonlight bathes us in its cool glow. For a moment, everything is perfect.

I could stay here forever.

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THE END