



His Impossible Elf Mate

(Sweetwater Pack Book 4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: An elf with a secret.

Tearlach is on a mission to find the reason behind the beta sickness and how the plight relates to the elven fertility crisis. The last thing he expected to find is the man who feels like a part of his soul.

Or how determined he'd be to keep Axel. No matter what.

A shifter with an impossible dream.

Axel's recovery from the beta sickness is slow and only bearable because of the elf that breathes new life into his world. Just when everything finally feels perfect, he is rocked by revelations.

The choice between his secret dream or a love that makes him feel whole seems impossible.

When truths are uncovered along with what is at stake, they have to decide if their love is worth everything they may have to give up to be together.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here, or how long I'd spent in this... space. Void. There was nothing there in the blank white expanse that surrounded me apart from myself and my charcoal colored wolf.

For all of my twenty-seven years, my wolf had been with me. A constant presence in my mind. A comfort in harder times and my fiercest protector.

All that I got from him at that moment was confusion and worry. His bright silver-blue eyes darted around the space, watching, alert and wary. Yet there was nothing there that he could fight. Nothing to protect me from.

We wrapped around each other, sharing memories and wishes in a way we'd never done before. Giving each other comfort. My fingers in his fur. For an unknowable amount of time, I got to know my wolf better than I could have imagined. I'd never taken the time to know what my wolf wanted from his life, always assuming that I would be in charge of our fate.

The longer we spent there, the more control that we had over it. Soon we could broadcast our memories like movies, seeing three-dimensional images in the brightly lit area.

I discussed our recollections with my wolf, allowing him to share his version. Seeing the world from his point of view changed my perspective of events.

Together, we watched our upbringing alongside our twin, Chase, and our baby brother Blake. My heart ached for my twin. Where was he? Was he sick, too?

My last memory had been of fever sickness, a weakness in my limbs and bone crushing tiredness as I tried to console my brother, to reassure him I'd be fine. Being unable to wake, to pull myself from this void, was not fine.

Chase had been sick too, but not nearly as bad off as me. I prayed to The Luna that Chase was well and helping our Alpha, our brother, Blake, to run things in my absence.

If he was sick, why wasn't he here? All our lives, we'd shared everything. Our wolf alters were also twins and my wolf worried for them as much as for me.

In this place, we were powerless to do anything but remember or dream. Once we had recalled all of our most precious and tragic memories, recalling the birth of Blake and the death of our mother, we moved on to our innermost wishes.

For what felt like a long time, I fought against letting out the deepest of my desires. My secret wish that made my heart burn with bitter envy and the bleakest feelings of grief for what I couldn't have.

Eventually, I shared with my wolf what they had already known. I could keep nothing from my wolf. After all, he knew my innermost soul. He had been there since the beginning.

Together we grieved. He shared my pain and longing and sought to give solace in the bond that we had. My wolf mourned with as much feeling as me, since his wishes and mine matched. In most things, we agreed.

Another amount of time appeared to pass as we lay together, my head on his stomach, his head resting on my chest.

Slowly, the landscape changed, and we saw Sweetwater. Our pack was divided, with

most of the betas still sleeping. I saw flashes of myself in a bed in a home that I vaguely recalled was Dakota's, though I'd never been inside.

My gasp broke the silence when I saw Chase. He didn't look like himself. He was altered. Thinner. Stress marred his face with a frown. He stayed glued to my side even as people I didn't know moved around him.

There. I saw someone new. Somehow, something blocked their face from my view. Everyone that I didn't know already were blurs. Just shapes.

A voice broke the quiet. Ethereal in its beauty. Ageless but female.

"Choose. You must make a choice. I can offer you what you most desire, Axel, but it is the more difficult path to follow, for you must learn to trust your heart over your head."

"What do you mean? Who are you?"

"You already know who I am. If you listen to your inner self, you know what I offer. However, you must know this. There is a price for this gift. Love may be its cost."

"So I could have a life without true love, but I'd have what I most desire?"

"Yes."

"Then you already know what I choose."

"So be it."

Waking was like wading through molasses.

Sounds came first. The beloved sound of my brother telling a story for laughs. I remembered that day, and had shown it to my wolf. He had revealed that was when he had realized the true depth of my alpha brother's power.

Chase was deep in storytelling mode. "He was so upset. Little Blake chased us all around the house, yelling at me to give it back. I don't even know why Axel was running. Maybe he thought I was going to share it with him. I wasn't."

"You were." My voice croaked with disuse.

I felt the entire room still in reaction to my words. I attempted to open my eyes. To say something more. Everything felt disconnected. I wasn't quite there yet.

"Wha—" Chase again. "Did you hear that?"

"I did." Two voices spoke at once. One familiar to me. Dakota. The other was beautiful, melodic, with a strange accent. I wanted to hear it speak again. My consciousness surged upwards to wakefulness, that was just out of reach.

After a pause, Chase continued. "So, we stopped, out of breath, and Blake squared up to us. He demanded I give the cookies back, not noticing that there was only one. I refused because I wanted it."

"Brat," I muttered. We had been annoying as kids. Chase more than me, obviously.

There was only the briefest pause this time.

"We were at an impasse because I wasn't giving up the cookie on the principle that Blake wanted it and he was our dad's favorite. I didn't get that it wasn't a good thing until much later. Blake got really mad and his eyes started to glow. His voice got really low. It was pretty scary, actually."

My laugh burst from me. Goddess, had Blake been scary. It was funny now, but I'd almost peed myself with fright then. Even at four years younger than us, he had been so strong.

I felt Chase's hand in mine and twitched my fingers, trying to clasp him closer, to use him as an anchor as I swam to waking.

So close. The surface was only inches away. I heard the break in Chase's voice and tears stung my eyes.

"This voice just came out of him. Drop the cookie, it growled. And I did as compelled. Dropped it there and then. Right in the dirt. As soon as Blake saw it, he burst into tears and ran into the house. Mama saw him crying and found out what had happened. She was so mad at us. Dad, though, was proud when he found out. He actually asked Mama to make Blake a batch just for him."

Mama had lectured Blake not to abuse his power, especially over us since we weren't alphas. I missed her so damn much.

"He gave me some." Finally, I broke through, my eyelids fluttering open, my throat dry and scratchy. "Water?"

Instantly, Chase and Dakota rushed forward to help me, raising the hospital bed I lay in and resting a straw at my lips. I gratefully sipped the water, quenching the burn in my throat.

Then my eyes settled on him. The most perfect being I'd ever set eyes on. "Who?"

They stepped forward warily, and it was then that I noticed the pointed ears that answered what this being was. An elf. Here in Sweetwater.

Our eyes locked, and I sucked in a breath at the most startling turquoise eyes I'd ever seen. His eyes were deep pools I could drown in. Ageless and full of wisdom. "Much has happened while you slept. I'm... I'm a friend of the pack. Teárlach."

My heart skipped a beat as he said his name, my eyes never leaving his. It settled deep into my soul.

I repeated his name, matching his pronunciation as closely as possible. If he had been gorgeous before, he was otherworldly when he smiled.

"We need to tell everyone you're awake!" Chase got up from where he'd been perched on the side of my bed, pulled his phone out of his pocket and called our brother. "Blake! He's awake! You need to come."

I didn't try to listen to the other side of the conversation, as much as I wanted to hear Blake's voice and check that everything was okay. The male elf beside me captured all of my attention. It was him I looked to for answers.

His focus hadn't shifted from me despite the flurry of movement and excitement my waking was causing. Easily, he read my thoughts and answered my unasked question. "You've been asleep for a few weeks. Chase has been awake for two weeks now. He's one of the few betas awake."

A few weeks? A memory came to me of someone saying a month. I'd lost an entire month.

"Huh." What he was saying matched what I recalled from the void. The longer that I was awake, the less I remembered. It was like trying to hold water in my hands. The memories were slipping through my fingers the harder that I held to them. "The others?" I asked.

“I’ll go check.” Dakota left the room, and Chase stayed close to the window, complaining about poor service.

Still, Teárlach stayed next to me, watching my every expression with a look of rapt wonder. It felt like we were the only people in the world.

Was it possible to fall in love with someone the very instant that you met? All I knew was that I had to be next to him. By his side was where I belonged.

We shared a smile at Chase chatting to Blake, his excitement infusing the room. A wide yawn split my face. The last few minutes had drained all of my energy.

“Sleep, Axel. I see your exhaustion. Don’t fight it. I’ll be here when you wake.”

“You promise?” I whispered.

“I swear it.” His words, pitched low and only for me, followed me into my dreams.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

The queen looked at me with no expression on her beautiful face. I knew she would not order me to stay. She simply could not understand my wish to go.

Her simple but elegant crown glinted in the sunlight, catching my attention. Her family symbol, that of all who claimed Skanicudal as their lineage, stood front and center. She was proud of her position, of her line, but this matter required more than just the research she had ordered. More action had to be taken. It needed me.

“Mother,” I used the honorific as a plea to her maternal nature. In front of all these witnesses, she would not ignore me. I stood straight, clothed in my courtly best rather than my usual uniform for my position in the army. A circlet sat on my head, with the same snowy owl symbol as the queen’s on it as well as my tunic and on the jewelry I wore. This was a performance. A plea in front of my queen, the favorites of her court, and her assembled parliament.

They surrounded us, all of parliament stood watching the proceedings from their balcony, each with a banner in front of them symbolizing their house. It had always amused me that our goddess was represented by different owls and the assembly was called a parliament, the same name given to a host of owls.

Returning my focus to the matter at hand, not the judgmental stares of the elves in the throne room, I got to the heart of my argument. What I was asking for was so very important to me. Vital.

“It is time for me to leave. Our people need proof that I’m willing to do anything to resolve this crisis.”

“Why you? I worry for you so. As my only child...” It discomfited her to admit such a weakness.

I heard all she couldn’t express with so many ears listening. Though I had been on many journeys to the human world, those were as part of healing missions, for my education, to look for answers. This task was more... involved. We had never approached the shifters before. They were... a volatile species of supernatural. Even more unpredictable than humans, while also capable of more harm with their alter forms.

Yet, here we were, a mission from our goddess had set us on the path, and deep in my soul, I felt it was my place to go with a small party to offer our assistance.

“It has to be me. The goddess, she has called to me. Told me I must do this.” Though I had not seen her in my dream, I had heard her voice as clearly as I could hear my mother’s.

My words had more of our people paying attention. What they had initially thought a trifle, a disagreement between my mother and I, was so much more now I had invoked our goddess. There was a ripple of conversation, which our queen muted with a look.

There was a long silence between us. Truthfully, I spent very little time with my mother. I loved her, as I knew she loved me. A necessary distance had grown between us after I had come of age so many years ago and took up my place in the army. As our queen, she had so much to do, especially in this crisis. No children had been born in Abrocaelum for fifty years. Every day, it seemed she had yet another meeting with scientists or advisors in order to find an end to the situation, while I focused on preparing our troops for the inevitable war which would follow if a cure was not found.

How had our people missed the signs for so long?

Immortality had its downsides. We were so long lived we appeared immortal. Truthfully, we could be killed, and those who separated themselves from life, from vitality, other elves, other species, were doomed to fade with the passage of time. Most got to such a long age they returned to our goddess willingly. Either to be reborn, or stay in the afterlife.

Mother, our beloved queen, had many decades, even centuries, ahead of her. Yet, I still had to prepare to ascend the throne. Again, I longed for a female sibling. She would have taken the role over me. Our people preferred a female leader, finding them less prone to wars. As a general in the army, I had been conditioned to war and feared I would not be suitable as a leader.

If I could just fix this problem for our people, perhaps my mother could have another child, leaving me free to live the life I chose, rather than one decided for me. I would happily give up my life in the army to dedicate myself to the protection of the child.

“If you must go, I will give my blessing. Teárlach, please do not wander from your path and return home soon.” I heard the implied instruction, “Fix this and come home quickly.”

“May I ask one other favor of my queen?”

Mother nodded, a smile playing about her lips. We were in front of too many to drop the formality and talk as parent and child.

“I would like to go not as myself, but as a guard, or assistant to someone. For this to go well, I must not be Prince Teárlach, rather someone they can approach and befriend.”

She thought about this. The surrounding whispers grew in volume. “I will permit this.” The level of noise rose until she glared at the room and they fell silent. “Your cousin, ívarr will take the lead on this. He is, after all, our best scientist. I believe a small party should be sufficient to begin with.”

With her decree, I caught ívarr’s jolt of surprise. He may have been related to me, but he did not expect preferential treatment. Even after all our years of friendship, he would not have expected such an honor. He was certainly up to the task, since he had been at the heart of identifying the fertility issue. Without him, we may not have realized there was a problem for much longer.

“Thank you, Mother. By your leave, I would recommend Hakeem join us for his experience of working with shifters. Teagan is also vital to this going well.” If she was going to allow me to have one friend on this mission, she would allow the other two. These elves I could trust to treat me like a regular elf, not royalty.

While I felt bad about the deception, I knew it was essential my royal lineage not be discovered before we could make a difference to the shifters.

“I give permission for this party. You will leave immediately. Please bring word of a cure as soon as possible. The fate of Abrocaelum depends on it.”

The door to my chamber, which I’d left ajar on purpose, opened further to permit Hakeem, Teagan, and ívarr entry. Like ívarr, I was also related to Teagan and Hakeem, though more distantly in Hakeem’s case. His family had a different name and symbol and were linked through marriage.

“Are you sure you want so few to join you?” Teagan asked as she picked up items and carefully packed them into my bag. She was such a dear friend of mine. We had practically grown up together, each taking separate paths once we had reached adulthood.

I removed some of the more formal items of clothing from the bag with a significant look to my friend. “I am just a guard, remember?”

She just shook her head at me before looking through my jewels. “Here, you must wear a symbol of your house. You would stand out without one, and this is the plainest I could find.” The amulet was spelled with protective charms and held only the image of the owl in silver with two glowing yellow eyes. The citrine gems held the magic perfectly.

Taking it with thanks, I placed it over my head before tucking it under the plain tunic I had changed into. This was far more practical and comfortable than the garb mother expected me to wear for my audience in front of her gathered parliament.

“We only have one pack the council believes will work with us. They are also the worst affected, with all of their betas sick,” I explained, giving them the information I had just received. We had very little time to prepare. No time to research the pack correctly.

“The Sweetwater pack is incredibly vulnerable at present. Going in with more of us would be an error and would likely end with them shutting us out for good.” I caught Hakeem nodding as I talked. “We’ve been arguing with the shifter council for weeks, ever since I was given that vision.”

“But us?” Hakeem’s skepticism was sharp, despite his agreement over the small party. The elf deceived many with his easy-going manner and wide smiles which were so contrary to his intimidating presence. He was tall, dark skinned, and muscular. Hakeem held many scars from his work with shifters, rescuing them from terrible conditions. While he looked self assured, inside, the elf was doubtful of his place on my team.

“Who else would I choose but you three? My closest friends and truly the perfect

elves for the task.” I talked while I helped Teagan finish packing my things. “Hakeem, who besides you understands shifter nature better? Teagan, who could charm the birds out of the skies while keeping us to task?” I squeezed her hand.

They both laughed, finally coming around to my way of thinking.

“And me?” ívarr questioned, the barest hint of a frown on his ageless face.

“You, my friend,” I said, laying a hand on his arm, “are vital to this. Without you and your science, we would have nothing to offer the shifters.”

Color rose on his cheeks. “Thank you, my prince—“ Regardless of our familial bond and long friendship, ívarr struggled not to be formal with me. A trait from a difficult upbringing and the scars they had left.

“Tearlach for now, please. You must learn to view me as a guard. I have had enough training to pass as one. Do you need more time to prepare?”

ívarr shook his head. “No, whatever we need we can request the shifter council provide for us. I believe they have already given medical assistance to the pack?”

I nodded. Everything should be in place for our meeting with the pack Alpha.

Within the hour we were outside of the castle, ready to portal to the Sweetwater pack.

My initial impression of the pack was of a large family. They all appeared to care deeply for each other. This sickness had rocked them to their foundation. The pack relied on their Alpha as their tether, their strength came from him, but his absence was felt with his mate’s pregnancy. The babies the omega carried were much too important to risk with such an unknown, so the Alpha’s precautions made sense.

None of them held any suspicion over our arrival, just a sense of relief to have the assistance they so badly needed. I was treated exactly as I hoped, with the pack deferring to ívarr as our leader.

There was much we could do to help the sick, and those who watched over them, I was sure of it.

During our brief meeting, there was a commotion.

A beta woke!

Our new friends were trusting and with good reason, we wanted to solve this for them. Without much prompting we were allowed into the sickroom. In it, there were two beds holding twin wolf shifters.

No matter how much I tried to keep my attention on Chase, the awake twin, my eyes constantly gravitated towards the still sleeping twin. I wanted to see the color of his eyes. Were they the same gray-blue as his twin's and Alpha brother's?

Though they were twins, the two shifters were not identical. I found myself comparing them, always looking favorably upon the sleeping one. Though Chase was handsome with his athletic build, easy-going smile, sharp jaw and brown hair. Axel continued to steal my gaze. He had darker hair, a thinner face, more interesting features. In truth, he was beautiful.

Axel.

Even his name did something to me.

Was this fate?

Was he to be mine?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

As he promised, the elf, Teárlach, was there when I woke again. There was no telling how long I'd been resting, but I felt marginally more alert than before. My body ached, my muscles stiff from lying still for what was apparently weeks.

There were more people in my room. More elves, too. "Axel, this is ívarr, he is taking the lead on the investigation into the sickness. You, of course, already know Aldrin and James. Hakeem and Teagan have been working in the main house..." Dakota was speaking, but I wasn't really paying attention.

Everything felt fuzzy at the edges. Not quite in focus. The only person who I could see properly was the elf. He was a bright star on a cloudy night.

Internally, I rolled my eyes at the sentimental thoughts. I was just awake after a month long coma and waxing lyrical about a pretty elf I'd just met. Ridiculous. My wolf chuffed an amused sound at me, but he was just as interested in the elf. He liked the way he smelled.

I was aware of the passage of time as I floated in and out of consciousness. Chase stayed by me, chatting away with the elves, the nurses, anyone who would listen. His excitement was draining the little energy I had.

Chase looked different. Acted differently, too. He was still the hyper brother I was used to, yet he was also more steady. More like Blake. This was the side of him we saw when he was in work mode. Outside of pack business, he was the fun twin.

Honestly, when I looked back at that time, the hours and even days after I woke, all I could recall was the hold sleep had on me. I was more tired than I'd ever felt in my

life, despite my month-long nap. At the same time, I felt restless, like I needed to go outside, be under the moon in my wolf form. My body just wasn't able to give me what I craved.

Blake visited for a while with Kade, before he got Kade settled back at home. He, like Chase, wasn't quite the same brother I remembered. The sickness haunted him. He was constantly worrying about the long-term effects of it alongside battling the guilt of being separated from the pack. All the challenges of running a pack at a distance had eaten at him as he tried to protect his very pregnant mate.

My time with the sickness hadn't robbed me of seeing Kade pregnant, at least. For that, I was grateful. I couldn't wait for my niblings to be born. They would be so treasured and likely very spoiled.

The days after I woke remained blurry with only the memory of Teárlach admitting he was staying close while ívarr left Dakota's house, sticking out to me. My relief at not losing the strange elf felt odd to me. We had just met, but he was already such an important, fundamental part of me. I didn't know what I would have done without him.

To an outsider, we wouldn't have had much to talk about, yet we spent days talking to each other about anything and everything. I told him about my work, my family, things I liked to do when I was off the clock, like playing music and reading fantasy books.

Teárlach told me he liked to play the flute, was fascinated to know we had read the same author, and told me many stories about his time in the army.

Under his care, I took the time and rest needed to get strong enough to get out of bed. Once I was stronger, there was talk of moving me back into my rooms in the main house. I didn't want to go back to the noise and chaos of the main house and

wondered if Blake would spare a home for me in the beta housing. Though it was unlikely there was space thanks to the elves and medical personnel.

“Would you...? I wonder...” Teárlach tried several times to ask me for something.

We were relaxing after my morning physical therapy appointment and a much needed nap. I was always so exhausted after the exercises Aldrin and ívarr had drawn up for me. There was only so much magical healing could do, and with so many betas in a similar position to me, we had to let nature and our shifter sides do their thing. Frustrating as shit, but understandable.

“What is it?”

“I wondered if perhaps you would like to take a walk with me. I know you have been outside in the yard, but I feel the forest would be more rejuvenating for you. It is for me.” He ended his speech with a blush, as if he was ashamed of the admission.

“A walk?” He seemed to deflate farther. I hated that expression on him. “I’d like that. It would be nice to get away from the others.” I grinned at him, unable to keep the smile off my face. I wanted to spend time alone with him. Here, there was always someone lingering nearby.

His answering smile was bright. “I am glad. I shall find you something warm to wear. It is colder out today and we do not want you catching a cold.”

Fall was fast approaching and the area had hit a spell of poor weather. Nothing too drastic, just a lot of rain and cooler temperatures. Dakota and Blake had asked about magical assistance for the orchards. We didn’t want to lose too many of the apples for our cider production.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. As much as I loved my family, extended and all, I

hated how they had treated me since I woke. Chase was constantly on edge, like I was about to fall back into a coma again if I slept too long, or showed any signs of illness. They would absolutely try to prevent me from taking a walk with my elf friend if they thought I wasn't taking proper precautions.

Telling Teárlach that, as a shifter, I ran hotter, was likely pointless. He had heard how my family fussed over me and would pander to them if that's what he needed to do. At heart, he was a peacemaker, despite his role in the army back home.

He left the room to return a few minutes later with a ghost of a smile playing around his lips, a zip up hoodie and shoes for me in his long-fingered hands.

I'd had daydreams about those hands, okay? They were one of the first things I noticed about a person. Unlike Blake, I wasn't particular about gender but nice hands and kind eyes were always a must even for a brief hookup, which was all I'd had in the last few years, especially since we lost our parents.

My brothers came before anything else. We were, or used to be, the only family we had outside of our cousin, Deke. Now we had Kade's parents acting like we were theirs, too. His grandparents had adopted me and Chase as their extra grandchildren. We had new siblings in Hayden when he arrived in a couple of months, and Angel.

It made me feel less... alone, like I was fighting for my brothers against the world. Now I had backup, I had people I could go to for advice. Though it was going to take a bit of getting used to.

"They agreed that some fresh air and light exercise would be beneficial. They thought a scarf and hat may be necessary, but I convinced them I would use my magic if I felt you were getting a chill." Teárlach said as he helped me zip up the hoodie. I might have felt like a child being dressed by a parent if it wasn't for the heated look in his eyes or the way he dragged his fingers up my body along with the zip.

Never had dressing felt erotic.

After quickly putting on my shoes, I was ready for a trip outside. I tried to restrain my enthusiasm for time alone with Teárlach. I didn't think I was any good at hiding my feelings, because his eyes danced with mirth every time they met mine.

Whatever this was between us, I knew he was feeling it too.

We escaped the house with minimal fretting, and soon I had to shed my hoodie, as the late summer air, as cool as it was, had me sweating.

Just the short walk into the woods that bordered Dakota's home had me slightly breathless. I tried to pant without letting the elf know I was struggling. Pretty sure I failed.

"Let's take our time," Teárlach suggested, slowing his pace. He held out an arm for me, which I took gratefully as we began to ascend the incline of a hill. It wasn't steep, but by The Luna, it felt like it. My muscles screamed in protest as we climbed.

"There's a viewpoint up there with picnic benches. I don't think many go there," I managed to get out around heaving breaths.

"So it is the perfect place for us to rest for a moment and enjoy one another's company?"

"Yes."

He led me around the bench and I gratefully took a seat next to him.

The air was filled with the sounds of my heavy breathing. "Sorry..."

“For what, Axel?” he asked looking genuinely perplexed. “You have been gravely ill. Your body will need time to recover the vitality you had before.” He was so matter of fact, it soothed me.

Teárlach fully expected me to recover, to be who I was before, or close to it. Unlike my family, who seemed to fear a relapse at any moment.

I was being unfair. Being cut off from the pack for a month must have been impossibly difficult for Blake and Kade. And having to watch me still trapped in a coma for two weeks after he woke from his must have been traumatic for Chase. I couldn’t have done it. I preferred having something to fight.

“Thank you,” I finally whispered.

“For what?”

“Your... friendship... whatever this is. I think you came at just the right moment.”

“I think I did, too.”

It was a long time before Teárlach suggested I might be getting cold and that we should return to Dakota’s house. He warmed me with some magic, even pushing in some healing to help with my exerted muscles. I pulled him into a grateful hug before taking his arm for the homeward journey.

His shocked but pleased face would stick with me for a while.

We didn’t talk about much. That was one of the easy things about spending time with Teárlach, we could just be quiet together. All we talked about was the differences between how each of the shifters were recovering from the sickness. I was doing better than little Angel, but not as well as Grady and Trey.

While I didn't understand a lot of the research being done on us, I was fascinated with it and how dedicated Teárlach was to helping his people.

The walk home was peaceful. Our pace was slower, as if we were both reluctant to return to the house where, no doubt, my family would be ready to treat me like a child. I knew they meant well, I just struggled with feeling so weak.

“Teárlach, I heard Dakota call you T, I was wondering....?”

“If you could do the same? Of course, Axel. It would please me.”

“Please you?”

He paused just shy of the door from the yard into the house. “A nickname, or shortening of a name, is a... rite of friendship, is it not? A sort of endearment that suggests a close friendship? I must admit, initially I was not sure of how my name was altered, but given how some pronounce my actual name...”

We both chuckled. His smile lingered even after his laugh faded. “It truly made me feel welcome here that Dakota would bestow a new moniker on me. I have come to like it.”

I grinned, pleased for him. “Yeah? That's cool. Now you'll have to find something for me.”

He thought for a moment as he reached for the door. “I hardly think A would suit. A what? I would be thinking. I need to speak to A. A who?”

A laugh burst from me, quickly joined with T's own as we crossed into the house.

My back stiffened at the disapproving expression from Kade, which turned conflicted

in a flash. I knew they didn't exactly approve of my friendship with the elf, the relationship that was building between us.

Neither of us were hiding our feelings very well. Not that I cared to. I wanted to see what this was growing between us. What my family thought be damned.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

The bear shifter, the father of the Alpha Mate, had invited the elves to accompany him and his darling daughter to the factory the pack ran. It was one of the most prominent businesses the pack owned. Of course, it was something that was endlessly fascinating to Hakeem, our resident expert in shifter behavior. In Abrocaelum, shifters were not as unified as this pack.

Hakeem was already vying for permission to stay and study the pack since they were one of the healthiest ones he'd ever seen. Even his beloved books and histories had never described one so closely bonded. Yes, there were still outliers in the pack, but the majority were there out of a deep love and loyalty for the Alpha Pair.

Our queen had already given us leave to stay as long as necessary to study the beta sickness and to look for any link tying it to our fertility issues. There had to be a reason our goddess wanted us to help the shifters. We had been sent to their worst affected pack, one who behaved so differently from anything previously known to us, for something important. I felt it to my very bones.

Walking beside Axel in his wolf form felt like a privilege. His wolf was a stunning creature. He was not shifting nearly as much as he should be, perhaps because we could not talk properly with him in his alter form. With a sly grin, I sent out a tendril of magic towards the young beta, the one who occupied all of my thoughts.

Axel? Can you hear me?

The wolf stumbled, causing the others with us to shoot shocked glances at him.

Teárlach?

Yes. I wondered if my magic could link us like your pack link does.

So you're just speaking to me, not everyone else.

No. Just you. I felt some strange possessive emotion pass over him. Why? Would you prefer I spoke to the others like this too?

I was teasing. There was no one else in our group that I would want to speak to like this. It was intimate, being able to hear his thoughts. I was sure he could shield anything he did not want me to hear.

Just me, he interrupted. I don't want anyone else to have this. I didn't know your magic could do this.

Elven magic is all about intent and I wanted to speak to you while you were shifted. Perhaps now you will assume your wolf form more around me?

Through our link, I felt his embarrassment at being caught out.

I'll shift more.

Good. I felt a smile stretch across my face and the wolf by my side caught the expression.

Passing closer to the charcoal wolf, I sifted my fingers through his dense fur. Axel was a thing of beauty, whatever form he took. It shamed me to admit I was jealous he had another form. The freedom he had to give in to his natural instincts, to be free, in wolf form, made me long for one of my own.

Axel gave a pleased rumble at the petting.

You really are beautiful. I hadn't intended for the sentiment to escape, but I couldn't deny the satisfaction I got when Axel's pleasure registered.

In my wolf form?

Both, obviously.

Our arrival at the factory cut our flirting short. The manager, a nymph named Shelby, led us into a room where the shifters could regain their human forms. Axel followed Dakota and Dakota's daughter, Angelica and I heard them shuffling around and shifting. Axel seemed to take a long time.

Dear one?

Axel jolted with surprise, finally back in his human form. I'm okay, T. I felt him slump into the seat provided for him and slowly begin dressing. His exhaustion from the shift weighed heavily over our link, which was likely more emotional than the usual pack links. Axel would have found it invasive, so I vowed to be careful not to let it slip just how much he was broadcasting.

As soon as I was able, I was by his side, providing comfort and support to the shifter who had already stolen my heart.

The revelation of my feelings stunned me to my core. I had already felt drawn to the man, yet I had not expected to have given my heart away so quickly, especially knowing our time was limited.

No, I would find a way to keep him.

Dakota was repairing a machine when Angelica spotted the bear tattoo the alpha bear had. It must have held great emotional significance for him to put in the effort,

considering tattoos were typically applied with magic on supernaturals.

“Tattoos aren’t that common with shifters because of the magical ink required to suppress our healing long enough to accept the design. This one was really important to me, though. I’d love to get another.” Dakota was patient with his young daughter as he explained the bear etched into his skin.

“You would?” Hakeem asked. “You should have Teárlach work on you. He did a remarkable piece for me that wraps around my leg from thigh to ankle. Teárlach, my friend, do you have any of your supplies?”

“No, but it wouldn’t be much of an issue to use the portal and head home for a bit and grab them.” Leaving Axel behind after the discovery of my feelings would be difficult. I wanted to push for more time with him. To finally go on a date.

“Could I come with you?” Axel asked.

That would not be wise. As much as I would like to show you around my home, it will have to be another time.

To the others, it would look like we were having a wordless conversation, so I didn’t want to say too much.

Axel slumped with defeat, and I feared exhaustion. The urge to soothe him was immediate.

“Next time. When you can enjoy it better. I fear you are tired.”

He gave in and allowed me to bear his weight to the car Dakota called for him and Angelica. The little girl was also feeling the strain of shifting and the excitement of the factory.

“Are you sure that’s all it was?” Axel questioned.

“Of course, dear one. When you are better, you can come see where I come from.”

Hopefully, he would forgive my lies.

The floors of the palace clacked with the sound of my rapid footsteps as I dashed for the safety of my rooms. All I wanted to do was get in, find my equipment, and then leave.

My thoughts were back in Sweetwater, with Axel, who had looked so forlorn at me leaving him behind. He was ill-equipped to deal with any hostility he may face in Abrocaelum. Especially at such an early stage in our relationship. No, I wanted him to be more secure in what we were to each other before he ran the gauntlet of the court’s expectations.

I flung my door open and drew up short to find my mother perched on the edge of my bed.

The picture looked so out of place I was sure my jaw was hanging open. I’d never seen my mother look so... un-queen-like. Sitting as she was, she looked so... human. Her ears were hidden under her sleek hair, the same platinum blonde as my own.

Gone was the usual finery. Her long dress was simple. All she wore of jewelry was a broad cuff with the snowy owl on her slender, pale arm. So unlike her, it took me a moment to recover.

“The magic told me you were in the palace. Luckily, I assumed correctly that this was not a son missing his mother, or a soldier reporting up the chain of command on the progress. Tell me, my son, what has brought you home in such a hurry?”

“Apologies, my queen. If you require an update on our progress, I can get you a report tomorrow. This is merely a brief visit home to gather something I need to help with the shifters.”

“How are the shifters?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“There is little change from the last report. All who had the sickness are recovering at various rates. A link has been found to age and rate of recovery. However, the sickness itself is still a mystery.”

She looked displeased by this, yet unsurprised. We all knew this would take time, and it was only a handful of weeks since the shifters had awoken.

“Your ruse?” she asked as she absentmindedly picked at the blanket on the bed. Her behavior was troubling. I didn’t doubt she truly wanted to know, she just seemed so far away.

“Mother, are you well? Is there something I need to know?”

Her eyes rose to meet mine. “All is well.”

Lie.

“Mother...” I pressed.

“Just the usual rumblings in court.” She waved a delicate hand. “They are dissatisfied that I allowed you to go on this mission.” I swear she huffed a sound. Clearly I’d been with the shifters for too long. “None of them appear to care if it is our goddesses’ will.” There was a lengthy pause. I waited her out, aware she would speak when she was ready.

“She came to me in a dream.” Her eyes had a far away quality. “I have not seen her since before you were born.”

“A vision? Truly? This is remarkable timing! Does it not prove we were right to be involved?”

My queen’s gaze turned bitter. “If they were not dismissed as the fantasies of an old queen. They believe I should call you home, ignore this portent. I cannot.” Her tone was filled with bitterness and regret.

“Each day I am with the pack, the more sure I am, it is the place I am supposed to be,” I assured her. “I vow to bring back something useful to our people. A way to bring us out of this crisis.”

“I would caution you to not over promise, my son.”

“Of course, Mother.” I needed to cut this talk short, or we would talk around the subject for hours. Getting back to Sweetwater and Axel was my priority. I was sure half of his unhappiness was a fear I would not return. “I have some things I need to take back to the pack.”

Crossing the room, ignoring my mother’s questioning look, I went to the walk in closet. Elves were much like the dragons. We liked to hoard the finery. I was no different. Each of the walls of the closet held rich fabrics, jeweled crowns, necklaces, and trinkets from all over Abrocaelum. Most were bespoke pieces, gifts with our snowy owl emblazoned, or owls crafted in precious metals.

The elves had long forgotten why the owl was the symbol of our goddess and her wisdom. All we knew was the goddess Athena was forged in her image. We had long since lost her true name. Over the eons, we had lost so much knowledge. Perhaps the past had the clue to the current crisis.

I stalked to the back where I kept the things I had saved from my many journeys around the human realm, including what I had come for.

I picked up the box, finding it covered in a layer of dust, since the servants did not venture this far into my space. It was something I had picked up from a witch and updated whenever I got the chance. Tattoos had moved on from the stick and poke method, even with magic involved.

“That thing?” Mother wrinkled her nose in disgust when she caught sight of the mahogany box in my arms. It was covered in runes, demon, elf, fae, and witch symbols in their differing runic languages as well as our family symbol.

“Yes, a shifter wants a family tattoo. His mate is pregnant and he would like to have them tattooed.”

“So the shifters are still having babies?” My mother’s face was lit with hope and curiosity. I supposed she wondered what made them different to us.

“They are, though not quite at the same rate as the Sweetwater pack are. The Alpha Mate, Kade, is pregnant with triplets!”

Mother raised a hand to her mouth in shock. “By the goddess, they are so blessed!” She took a moment to process the news, then stood tall and determined. “This is exactly what I need to explain your presence there. Go! Return to us with good news soon.”

I smiled, happy to have helped her, to have restored her faith. “I will.”

“Be blessed.”

“Where did you learn to do this?” Dakota asked as he lay on the bench in front of me.

We had gone to the clinic so the surprise wouldn't be ruined.

"In the army, much to my mother's horror."

"She doesn't approve of tattoos?"

Without saying too much, I explained my mother was important to our people, and while she did not look down on the soldiers, she was more refined in her tastes. She did not see the beauty that I did in covering skin with ink, especially when it had to be spelled to stay put.

Mother had finally come around to my own tattoo when I explained the significance of it, though I didn't reveal my own inked design to Dakota. It was something personal.

The design Dakota wanted was easy enough to sketch, so I could ensure it was right for him before I began. My tattoo gun ran on magic. The ink was spelled colored powders turned into liquid with more magic. All of it was designed to keep the ink on the skin and not let supernatural healing erase the design before it could be set with more magic.

Dakota sat well and answered many of my questions about pack life as I covered his back with his chosen design. The sentiment behind it was beautiful.

I envied him for his family. I wanted a partner of my own, children too.

Truthfully, my heart had already decided on Axel. He was all I wanted. We could make children happen if he wanted that, too.

As if Dakota had heard my thoughts, he asked me about the wolf. "What's happening with you and Axel? You appear very close."

“Axel is... I care for him very much and wish to explore our growing connection.”

“He’s... fragile now. Don’t play with his feelings, please. I respect you and don’t want that respect to be ruined.”

“You care for him,” I stated, sensing Dakota’s worry and growing agitation.

“When Kade mated Blake, those brothers all became family. They belong to us and we protect what is ours. Even from well-meaning elves. I know that Kade and Blake have expressed their concerns. We just want what’s best for Axel.”

“I understand. Truly, I do. Axel is precious to me. Causing harm to him would be to hurt myself.”

Mollified, Dakota settled. “Good. I like you, T, and want to keep it that way.”

The tattoo did not take long after our talk. I settled into the routine of the ink and the needle, quickly drawing the family scene on Dakota’s back.

He thanked me with a hug before returning home. He had asked me to go with him, but my host family needed time together without me along.

Also, my heart was pulling me towards the mansion, where Axel was likely eating dinner with the pack. He liked to do that a few times a week to give Dakota and Jasper time as a family. The betas, Grady and Trey, also made themselves scarce on those nights. This pack was so family oriented.

While I walked, I dreamed about what it would be like to be one of them. To not be a prince, to be a shifter and not an elf, so I belonged by Axel’s side. We could shift together, explore the forest, protect our home. We could be mated, for life, without others worrying.

There, under the rising moon, I wished for a life with Axel. I just prayed it was what he wanted, too.

The dining room was full when I entered. I caught sight of Axel immediately. He was sitting surrounded by his kin, his pack, yet looked so alone and withdrawn.

Like he sensed me too, his head snapped up, his eyes met mine. A smile stretched across his face.

Yes, the feeling was mutual. My heart sang with rightness and I couldn't contain my answering smile.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

The memory of that day would be branded into my soul. Our first kiss. The thing that started it all.

I was packing my things, the stuff Chase had brought me from home to encourage me to wake up, and the couple of outfits he had thought to bring me since I'd woken, when Teárlach finally broached the subject.

Not Abrocaelum and the rejection there, but something much more pressing. Eventually, I'd ask him about it. There was a bigger elephant in the room that needed to be dealt with.

"With you going home..." He was quiet for so long, I didn't think he could get the words out. I didn't rush him, just like he never rushed me through any of the physical therapy exercises to rebuild my muscles, or when I struggled to get the words out, my exhaustion playing havoc with my focus. "When will I see you again?"

He had drifted closer to me, seemingly unable to stay away. I knew he was feeling this pull the same as I was. I reached out and snagged his hand. We had been careful not to touch skin to skin before, some sort of unspoken agreement not to cross a line. His skin was soft to the touch, warm and just so right. This felt more intimate than any kiss I'd ever had.

"There's nothing to say you can't come with me."

"But I have a room here." T frowned. The expression looked so odd on his perfect face. I could look at him all day and not get bored.

“You don’t have to sleep in it, if you don’t want to. Or not alone, at least.” I wondered if he would get my meaning. There was still a language barrier between us where he would misunderstand or not pick up on my more subtle flirting. I found it cute.

Finally, he seemed to understand. “I fear you cannot manage the stairs just yet. They are quite steep.”

A smile flitted across my face. Never had I had to work so hard with someone I wanted to sleep with, and I did want to sleep with T just as soon as my body caught up with my brain. “You could carry me. I assume elves are as strong as shifters,” I teased.

“Stronger.”

As if to demonstrate, T lifted me into his arms princess style. “Shall I carry you like this?”

Now he was getting it. I loved this banter we were falling into. It felt so natural to be playful with Teárlach.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as if it was the most normal thing in the world for me to do. His hair felt like silk against my fingers. I wanted to rest my face against his neck and breathe in his honey and jasmine scent. “I quite like it here.”

My words seemed to break the spell we were under.

Teárlach set me on my feet carefully, checked I had my balance, then stepped away from me, putting distance between us. “I fear it is not appropriate for me to feel as I do for you. We have only known each other for a handful of weeks. You are still recovering.”

This felt so incredibly wrong. Him denying our connection physically hurt, like the stinging of a slap.

“Do you believe in fate?”

He looked at me, an unreadable expression on his beautiful face. “I do. You know I do. What we have between us—“

“Feels like fate.” I reached for him, tangling a strand of his silver-blond hair in my fingers. Tugging on it lightly made him move a step closer. “I know we can’t be fated mates like alphas and omegas are, but... what I’m feeling can’t be ignored.”

Never in my life had I hated being a beta more. All I wanted was for T to be my fated, which was ridiculous because even if I had a different designation, they weren’t fated to other species. We weren’t compatible. It was impossible to have an elf for a mate.

A shifter and an elf couldn’t be a fated match.

“It does,” he agreed. There was another pause. He sighed. “Even if it is not.” Something complicated flitted across his face. His fist clenched and relaxed. “A connection like ours deserves to be explored, does it not?”

“It does,” I echoed.

Another step closer. The air between us became charged.

Teárlach closed the gap between us and leaned down to press his lips to mine in the sweetest first kiss that had ever existed. His lips were warm and smooth against my probably chapped ones. He used just the right amount of pressure for the right length of time. He pulled away, leaving me wanting more.

“We should do this properly,” he said stiffly, a faint blush covering his cheeks.

“Properly?” I asked. My fingers itched to touch my lips just to feel the echo of his kiss.

“We should court.”

“Court?”

I thought for a moment. “Date.” I felt the smile overtake my face. “Take things slowly,” he said warningly as he took me in.

“You are someone to be treasured, Axel.”

A month-long coma apparently meant I was no longer capable of looking after myself, my pack, or my siblings.

As the oldest child, I had prided myself on my ability to keep my siblings in line, alive in Chase’s case, and thriving. Yet, I was nowhere near getting the all clear from Aldrin, James, and the elf, ívarr. I had been home in my rooms for a week, awake for a couple of weeks before that and still everyone seemed to hover over me as if I was about to keel over at any moment! It was damn frustrating.

“I need to get out of here,” I muttered to myself from the safety of my rooms.

Someone knocked on my door.

Without thinking, I groaned. I heard the person chuckle in response and instantly recognized the sound and stood quickly. A dizzy spell nearly landed me back on my ass, so I eased back into my seat and called for Teárlach to enter.

“Are you well?” he asked, taking me in. I had no idea what he saw in me, but he frowned. “Perhaps this can wait for another day.”

“Please,” I begged, “don’t treat me like an invalid.”

Teárlach studied me for a moment, his head slightly cocked. “Alright,” he said slowly, as if going against his instincts. “Then perhaps you would like to get some fresh air with me? We could call it our first date, if you would like.”

“I’d like that a lot.”

When I stood, slower this time and without dizziness, Teárlach held out his arm for me. He did it in such a way it was... charming, not patronizing. It was one of our regular things. He’d done it a lot when I still lived with Dakota.

Each and every time he did it and I accepted, his eyes lit up with delight. When I took the offered arm and rested some of my weight on him, his smile shone so brightly and my heart gave a pang. He was so precious. I enjoyed giving him that small joy. Being closer to him was an added perk.

Together, we sauntered down the stairs towards the kitchens. “Why?” I asked before T cut me off.

“I thought we could have a picnic before it gets too cold to spend much time outside.”

The kitchens were their usual hive of activity, with Winter conducting in the center. He caught us entering and pointed to a basket set to the side. Without a word, he turned back to his tasks, and we were dismissed.

Outside, the air was just on the right side of chilly. The type of fresh air that made you feel rejuvenated and cooled you after some activity. Not that there was a chance

of that. I just got the vibe that T was going to keep things strictly PG until he deemed me ready for more R rated shenanigans.

What would it take for him to believe I was ready to feel his touch, to kiss him again?

Frustratingly, we hadn't kissed since that one epic kiss the day I'd left Dakota's house. Though we had spent plenty of time together, we just hadn't gone beyond simple hand-holding.

I wanted to scream at how blue my balls were.

Teárlach led us through the yard to the path that would take us into the forest. There was a well-trodden trail we followed until it came to a clearing.

The leaves had begun to turn, their colors a riot of reds, oranges, and golds. Most were still on their branches and the grass was mercifully dry as T spread the blanket and unpacked the basket.

"Come. Sit. You must be tired."

I was, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know. Still, I think he caught it as he frowned. To wipe the expression away, I joined him on the blanket.

To change the subject, I asked the question that had been burning in my brain. "Why wouldn't you let me come to Abrocaelum with you?"

He considered his words as he made a plate for me. The sandwiches were cut into perfect triangles, the fruit all looked juicy, but it could have been ashes he was offering me for all it appealed.

Abrocaelum had loomed between us since the visit to the factory and the tattoo T had

put on Dakota. I'd seen the work and offered myself up, but T had declined, wanting to wait until I was stronger before getting inked.

Rejection had stung, and I'd felt it keenly. T had returned from his homeland quieter than I'd ever seen him. Something had happened he had refused to speak about.

"Truthfully? Some of the elves are not... particularly happy that our goddess asked us to assist you. There are..."

"Ones that see us as lesser?" I knew there were still fae that saw shifters as pets. I'd hoped the elves were better.

"Unfortunately, yes. Though they are few and far between," he rushed to add, "however, I knew you were tired and feared it would make you more susceptible to becoming upset if you overheard something."

"Okay," I heard the doubt.

"I am not, and never will be, ashamed of being with you, Axel. You... I... there are no words to express how each second with you brings me unimaginable joy, even when we are doing something so mundane as walking through the woods."

"And having a picnic?"

T grinned and took a bite of a juicy strawberry. "The fruit tastes so much sweeter because you are near."

Another bite had the juices clinging to his plump lower lip. I leaned forward and brushed my thumb over it, collecting the sweetness. I licked my thumb. "Hmm, you're right."

Heat filled his gaze.

I tried not to smirk, though I was pretty sure I failed.

The air between us fizzled with electricity as T stared at my mouth.

My elf leaned into me and took my mouth in a heated kiss. Gone was the sweet way he'd kissed me before. This was a claiming.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him on top of me as I returned his kiss, darting my tongue into his mouth, tasting the remnants of the strawberry.

He was careful not to put all his weight on me as we made out for a while; the minutes stretching until it felt like time had stopped. Still, it felt too soon when he broke away.

A sound of protest left my lips, making Teárlach smile. "Oh, don't worry Axel, I'm not done with you just yet."

With a smirk that really worked for him, T kissed a path down my body, pushing my clothes up and out of the way to get at my heated skin. He nuzzled at my groin before meeting my eyes.

"May I?"

All I could do was nod. I couldn't form a word with how much I wanted his touch, his mouth, anything, on my straining cock.

My wardrobe comprised of sweatpants because of the weight I'd lost, so he had easy access to my dick. It slapped against my stomach, red and rock hard, as Teárlach released me from them. Then he leaned down to lick along the length.

I let out a groan that was loud in the quiet of the clearing. My fingers reached into his long hair and gripped him as he sucked me down.

A possessive side of me reared up at how practiced he was at sucking cock. He took me into his throat and swallowed around me at the same time as he did something to my balls with his magic that had sparks shooting down my spine as my orgasm drew near.

“Close,” I warned as my fingers tangled further into his silky locks.

Teárlach doubled down on his sucking and massaging, lighting me up with pleasure. The very air around us seemed to spark with magic of the palest pink.

“Tee...” I groaned as I came down his throat. He swallowed it all with a blush and a smile. He truly was the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen, and here, in this moment, he belonged to me.

Gently, T tucked me back into my sweats and righted my clothes before lying next to me, his head on my chest.

“I could...”

“No, thank you. This is all I want,” he said as he snuggled closer.

I smoothed his hair and kissed his head. “Okay. If you’re sure.” I laughed, too fucked out to argue. My eyes closed of their own accord.

“What is it?” I felt him studying my face.

“Now I have to plan a better date than this.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

After our first magnificent date, I was unsure if there was anything Axel could do to better the experience. Apparently, I was wrong.

My date had been simple in its premise, yet it garnered results far beyond what I could have hoped for. Axel's date was far more traditional as modern dating practices went.

The problem with trying to plan dates was we were limited to things we could do on the pack lands. No one wanted a vulnerable beta like Axel to be off pack lands without guards, and dates were difficult to have with an entourage.

Luckily, Axel knew the pack lands well and knew their secrets.

"First, we are going to go bowling," Axel said enthusiastically.

"Bowling?"

"Here, watch this." Axel showed me a video on his phone of a ball being rolled to knock down things.

"Those are the pins. There's ten of them. The aim is to knock as many down as you can in one go. You get points for each one, then the person with the most at the end, wins. Simple, right?"

This was the most animated I had seen Axel since he had awoken. The joy that lit his face was infectious. I wanted to experience this game for myself if even the thought of playing it made Axel so happy.

“But the pack cannot have somewhere to play this bowling here, can it?”

If I had thought Axel was shining brightly before, he was incandescent then. “You’ve clearly not explored the community center!” He reached a hand out for mine. “Come on!”

I followed him through the pack lands from the main house where we had eaten dinner with the Alpha, Alpha Mate, and the rest of the pack.

“Because I’m a beta, this area is open to me. This is where all the unmated omegas live. We call it the omega compound. Since I don’t get the same urges as alphas do when they catch the scent of an omega in heat, I’m not a danger to them. Neither are you, but I got permission for us to be here just in case any were wary.”

Axel was so thoughtful. He had such a beautiful soul.

“What else is there? You mentioned a community center?”

“Well, it’s sad. A lot of the omegas have had run-ins with alphas in their past. They are understandably cautious. Here they get the help they need to overcome that trauma, as well as assistance with raising any pups, or just making it through the day.” A troubled look passed over his face. “There’s a school because some don’t trust humans much either and would prefer to educate their kids at home. Honestly, it’s safer for the pups not to leave the compound until they are older and can control their shifts better.”

“The school is where Jasper teaches?”

“That’s right. Well, it isn’t just a school, a daycare, a hub for them to eat as a community. There’s also a pool, a mini bowling alley, where we are going, a little theater so the kids can watch movies, which we can do after we play. They also have

sports facilities. It was one of the things my uncle did right after my dad died. Couldn't manage the factory correctly, but he did right by the omegas."

Axel was usually reticent about his family outside of his brothers, so I took that nugget of information to discuss it with Dakota and Jasper at a later date. I wanted to know everything about Axel, just not at the expense of his happiness. His expression had soured at the brief mention of his uncle and father, so I knew there were issues there.

"I feel honored to be allowed into their sanctuary."

He beamed at me. "It should be set up for us and we should get it to ourselves." His smile turned sheepish. "Just be prepared for the kids to be nosy."

I tried to reassure him with a squeeze of his hand. Axel's need for touch was charming. "I will. Children are a joy. I don't mind if they watch us."

Following Axel, I entered the compound within a compound. It wasn't an area I had much of a reason to visit before. Usually the omegas with beta children came to the clinic for treatment. I was sure as a mated male, the alpha doctor, Aldrin, had permission to enter this area frequently. However, it would be better for most to be seen at the clinic where the correct facilities were held.

The building was rather nondescript. Functional. Utilitarian at first glance, until, that was, you moved closer and could look inside. The interior was so colorful; it was an assault for the eyes. Every wall was a different color than the last, all of them covered in murals or art clearly drawn by children. It was so endearing. Every surface of an otherwise plain building showcased the love the shifters had for their young.

We passed many rooms, and though Axel explained the purpose of each, all I could focus on was his fine form. He was dressed in denim, showcasing his lean form.

Tight black jeans wrapped around his long legs. He wore a black long-sleeved denim shirt over a band tee he had explained the name of, but I had forgotten.

Next to him, my forest green linen tunic and matching leggings were boring.

“Axel, would you assist me with buying more human-like clothing? I fear I stand out in a bad way, not just with the hair and ears, but the way I dress. Blending in more would be useful, would it not?”

His smile was wry. “It would. We don’t even have to leave the compound to update your wardrobe a little. If you come to my office tomorrow, me and Dalton, my assistant, can do some online shopping with you.”

“Thank you. I have gems and gold to pay,” I said softly, aware that these things could be costly and it was rumored the pack was not wealthy. They were just coming out of a time of hardship. Blake’s leadership had done much, not just for the morale of the pack, but for its finances.

“That won’t be a problem.” Axel smiled easily. “The council is covering your expenses here. That includes a stipend for clothing. I think it is a payment for the services you are all providing by trying to find out what caused the beta sickness.”

“Ah, well, it would be... nice to fit in better. Perhaps I should cut my hair?”

“What?” Axel rounded on me. “Absolutely not!” he cried angrily. His objection was amusing as much as it flattered my vanity. I would have hated to cut my hair. He taunted a tendril and gave it a playful yank. “I love your hair. It’s so silky.”

Goddess, I wanted to pull him close to me, to claim his mouth with another kiss. Since our last date, he was all I could think of, his taste, his touch, the feel of his skin under my fingers.

“Thank you.” I could feel a blush heating my cheeks.

He paused next to a door. “We’re here.”

The room we entered had slick wooden floors set up in lanes like the video Axel showed me. There were racks of brightly colored balls and stark white pins standing at the end waiting to be knocked down. Above each section was an electronic scoreboard.

“Come on, you’ve got to wear special shoes.”

With efficient movements that suggested he had done this many times before, Axel got me into the ridiculous shoes for the bowling alley and demonstrated how to hold then roll the ball down the lane. It was clear he was attempting to take it easy on me. He just forgot I was a being who had been alive for many hundreds of human years.

“You’re a natural!” he exclaimed after I managed another strike.

“We’re evenly matched.”

“Hmm, I’ve been taking it easy on you,” he admitted, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck as he surveyed the scoreboard. I couldn’t resist my smile. “It’s time the kid gloves come off!” I didn’t understand the saying. Human idioms were difficult to pick up, but I understood the implication.

“Shall we make a wager?” I suggested.

“A bet?”

“Yes. Should I win, I would like you in my bed for the night.”

Axel's throat bobbed as he swallowed heavily. "And if I win..."

"What would you like, dear one?"

"I... I'm not sure yet."

That did not appear to be the entire truth. Though I wanted to push, I decided to let Axel tell me when he was ready. He was suddenly skittish. Had I been too forward?

"Axel?" His eyes met mine. "Even if I win, I will not hold you to the terms of a bet if you aren't ready."

He took a deep breath and laughed as he exhaled it. "I was just wondering if I could fake losing without it being too obvious."

A chuckle broke free. This man was too adorable for words.

"We could just call it quits now. Is that how the saying goes?"

"It is, and we could, but I have a movie planned for after. Call it edging."

"Edging?"

Slowly, we gravitated towards each other. His breath washed over my face. We were so close. I wanted to lean in and capture a kiss.

"Axel!" a child's cry broke the spell. We jumped apart.

My companion laughed. "Hey little dude. We have the bowling alley for a little longer, then you can play, okay?" Axel whispered to me. "He's one of the kids who lives here. His mom is Cadence."

I had not met that omega. Leaning down, I addressed the small child. Ages were difficult, particularly with shifters. Their babies grew quickly until they could walk in human form, then slowed to a more human-like rate.

“Would you like to watch us play?”

The child just stared at me open mouthed until he caught Axel laughing. “You’re an elf!”

It was my turn to laugh. “I am. We came here to help shifters. I won’t harm you. Are you a wolf shifter like Axel?”

“No, I’m a raccoon!”

“Oh, well, that is delightful. I’d like to see your alter one day.”

“I can shift now!” He began to peel himself out of his clothes.

“Riff, no!” Axel darted forward to stop the boy. “We are on a date. This is adult time. Teárlach would love to see your raccoon, but another time, okay?” Axel was adorable with the boy. Firm, but fair. I believed he would make a great parent.

“But...” Riff looked upset and needed soothing. Axel righted the boy’s clothes and smoothed his ruffled hair.

“No, Axel is quite right.” I squatted down to get on eye level with the sweet child. I hated to see him sad when he had been so excited. “We need someone to make sure there is no cheating on our game.”

Axel looked at me with fondness. Perhaps showing my parental side would demonstrate my ability to be a suitable partner for the wolf. What I wanted from Axel

was no short-term fling. He was all I could think about.

“I’ll do it!” Riff immediately cheered, earning a smile from Axel.

“Okay, Riff. It’s important if you find the elf cheating, you say it out loud, okay?”

“And if you cheat, Axel,” Riff said in a very adult voice.

My laugh was loud, startling us all. “Yes, Riff,” I chuckled. “You tell me if Axel cheats.”

Was I imagining the heat behind Axel’s gaze as we played out the last few turns?

He brushed by me to collect his last ball. “Once I get a strike, I win.”

“And if you win?” I whispered, aware of the child watching us avidly.

“Then I’m taking you to my bed.”

Axel was smug as he hit the final strike to win the game.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Awareness buzzed between us as we made our goodbyes to the children, and Axel canceled the movie we were to watch. Even as anxious as we were to get somewhere with privacy, Axel's well-bred manners would not allow him to have someone waiting to begin the film for us.

There were more than a few knowing glances among the omegas in their part of the compound as Axel made an excuse about being tired after the game.

They knew it was a lie.

We would not be resting once Axel took me to his suite. I, for one, could not wait. It felt as if we had been dancing around our electric chemistry since the very day we had met.

Since our first date, the picnic, there had been a handful of kisses, yet never time for more. All it did was ramp up the sexual tension between us.

Though I was skilled in the carnal arts—time in the military will do that—I required a connection to a person, regardless of gender, before I could take things further. Sexual attraction only came from knowing them first, finding things in common, having feelings for them.

I had a lot of feelings for Axel. Likely more than I was willing to admit, considering my time with the pack would be short and our future... there were too many unknowns. Not taking this chance with Axel would leave me with my life's biggest regret. That I knew with certainty.

Shifters moved out of our way as we rushed to the main house, Axel's hand firmly in mine.

Aware he might be expending too much energy, I pushed magic into him, giving him a boost. His color brightened, and he tossed a grateful smile my way.

Energy renewed, he took advantage of that by twisting our positions as soon as we were behind the door of his suite. I did not have time to see the room I was in before my back met the wall and Axel's mouth covered mine.

From our first kiss, I became addicted to his taste. The feel of his body against mine had a surge of arousal flowing through me. This first full experience with Axel would not be a drawn-out affair. My body ached for him.

"Bedroom," Axel demanded as he broke the kiss. "We need to be naked for this."

I paused our journey to his bed. "What do you want?"

Axel hesitated, and I nearly ended it all. I would not be with an unwilling or reluctant participant. He would be fully and enthusiastically consenting or it would not happen.

"What do you like?" Was there a glimmer of fear in his eyes?

I raised a hand to brush the hair from his forehead and then caressed his cheek. "I have to admit, my position in the army has had me playing the part of the more dominant partner. If this is an issue for you—"

"No!" he interrupted. "I like both, but with you, I'd be happy to bottom." A trace of a smile clung to his full lips. They were slightly kiss swollen, and I hoped I'd soon see them wrapped around my cock.

“Well, in that case, I’d like you to strip and get on the bed.”

“How about I get on my knees for you instead?”

The heat had returned to Axel’s expression. It wiped away any hint of worry I had about going further.

Stepping away, I pulled my tunic over my head, my amulet snagged in the cloth.

“This is beautiful,” Axel said as he untangled it to hang correctly around my neck.

“Do you want to keep it on?”

In answer, I removed it, dropping it to land on my tunic.

Axel gazed at my bare chest. His breathing picked up, and I caught sight of his arousal. He was straining the fabric of his jeans.

He dropped to his knees, pulled my leggings down, and took in the sight of me, hard and leaking at just a look from him.

“What’s this?” He stroked a finger over the tattoo on the skin of the crease of my groin.

“Later. I need you to touch me.”

“I am touching you.” Axel laughed quietly. His breath over my cock was torture.

“Suck me,” I ordered, my voice coming out gravelly.

With one hand around my length, Axel licked from root to tip. I let my moans fall free. He spent some time exploring the head and slit with his tongue before working

more of me into his mouth.

His eyes caught mine as his nose met my neat curls at my groin. The heat and humor in them had me cursing. He looked so amazing on his knees, those pretty lips sucking on my cock, I feared I might orgasm on the spot.

“Get on the bed.”

Axel came off my cock, wiped his mouth with a grin, then stood. He peeled himself out of his clothes slowly, allowing me to enjoy each new expanse of skin he revealed. I was going to enjoy exploring every inch of lean muscle.

He took my hand and walked backwards to the bed, stopping at the foot to kiss me. Our bodies brushed together, making each of us groan at the friction.

I broke away this time, to push him back. He fell onto the mattress with a laugh, then shuffled back to lie with his head on the pillows. He reached for a bottle on the nightstand and set it at his hip.

“Lube,” he explained. “Unfortunately, I can’t make slick.”

“Ah.” Only omegas made slick. This I knew, however, the information had dropped from my head the second Axel had dropped his underwear. He was too gloriously naked and all mine for rational thought.

Climbing onto the bed, I hovered over him. After a delicious kiss where our tongues explored each other, I took my time learning all his sensitive spots until Axel was crying out in desperation.

“Get me ready!” he cried out. “And... fuck... I can’t... you need to do something to silence all these fuckers in my head.”

My lips quirked against his thigh. “The pack link?” I guessed.

“Yes. And my fucking twin can hear us in the hallway.” He was too precious. His cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

“Alright.” I made a motion with my hand, which wrapped us in a bubble. No one would be able to hear a thing and the pack link, his twin link, and family one all went silent.

“Fuck, yes.” He tossed the bottle at me. “Here! I need you to open me up before I blow.”

Sensing he really was on the edge, I took the bottle and slicked up my fingers. With a careful motion, I pressed my forefinger inside him, pursued by my middle finger soon after. I tried to focus on my task, but the heat and tight muscles inside Axel hypnotized me. All I wanted to do was cover my cock in this lube liquid and press inside him.

“Hurry up!” he panted. “I don’t need much prep.”

“I do not wish to harm you.”

“You won’t. I promise.”

Despite his demands, I worked another finger into him before I deemed him ready. I got on my knees, pushed his thighs back so he was open to me, and coated my length in the fluid. It was strange and cold. I would need to introduce Axel to elven slick.

As I inched inside his hot body, I grunted at the feeling of him squeezing me. I smoothed my hands over his flank, waiting as he relaxed around my cock.

The pace I set once he was ready was slow. Our bodies moved together, undulating and creating a circuit of pleasure. I kissed him deeply, wrapping one arm under his ass, the other at the back of his neck, keeping him at the perfect angle as I swallowed all the beautiful sounds he made for me.

My name was a benediction on his lips as I picked up the pace. My cock was angled perfectly to brush over his prostate, bringing whimpers out of Axel.

He clung to me as he cried out and came over his stomach, his spend slick between our bodies.

I kept pumping into his body and bit back my shout as I came inside him.

We lay there, unmoving for a few minutes, as we caught our breath. Then, unwillingly, I withdrew from his body.

Axel reached for me as I left the bed in search of the bathroom. I wanted to be the one to clean him up.

“Over there,” he pointed in the direction of a closed door.

I returned to his side with a damp cloth in one hand and a warm, dry one in the other. After wiping him down and drying the pale skin, I checked I was not too rough. His sexual history was unknown to me, so I did not know how long it had been since he had allowed a man to fuck him. We could not transmit diseases so it had not been necessary to discuss it. Thankfully, he seemed perfectly fine.

“Throw them over there and come here,” Axel said as he got himself comfortable under the sheets. He threw off the blanket we had made love on with a grimace. “Wet spot,” he explained.

Laughing, I did as I was bid and joined him in bed.

He came into my arms with a happy sigh. “Now, can you explain the tattoo?”

“Alright,” I agreed as I stroked his hair. All I wanted to do was keep touching him. I feared he was about to fall asleep. “Feel free to ask me in the morning. You can sleep if you are tired.”

“I want to know. I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep if I don’t know. Everything about you fascinates me. I want to know all there is to know about you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” I took a moment to gather my thoughts. Although I wanted Axel to know I was a prince, telling him after we had just had sex for the first time was not a good idea.

“You know that I have served in the military.”

“Yeah. Is that where it’s from?”

“It is. As is customary, we all wear our family’s symbol on us. Usually in the form of the amulet I took off earlier. It is a way to identify us by house. Every house, or family, has a different owl, as they are the mark of our goddess. My family uses the snowy owl as its symbol. Hakeem, though we are distantly related, uses an eagle owl.”

“You’re related to Hakeem?” Axel asked in surprise.

“Truthfully, I am related to ívarr and Teagan, too.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Yes. So these emblems identify fallen soldiers. Unfortunately, the enemy knows this, so they often remove any trace of the house, making it harder to identify whoever has died. A long time ago, an elf discovered tattoos in the human world and took it back to us. We began to tattoo the house emblem on every soldier who enlisted, usually in a place that was easily hidden, so if they fall in battle, we can identify them later and give them a proper funeral.

“That’s...”

“I have complicated feelings towards it, too. It should not be necessary, but I am proud of my house and family, so I do not mind having the tattoo, just that it was deemed important.”

“Yeah, that’s a lot.” Axel was silent for a long time. “T?”

“Yes?”

“Please stay the night.”

“Dear one, I will stay all of your nights if you let me.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

About six weeks after I'd woken, my body was beginning to feel like mine again. Instead of feeling like a stranger occupying my old skin suit, life felt good, but changes were just around the corner.

Blake took me out of sleep with a shout down our family link.

Kade is shifted! Help! I think the babies are coming!

Woah, hold on. He could be shifted in preparation. Is he doing anything else? I got out of bed, looking longingly at T with his beautiful platinum hair splayed along my pillow. He belonged in my bed.

He's literally spent all night making a nest.

All night? And you're just telling us now? Chase butted into the conversation.

He wouldn't let me before! Said it was fine. His wolf just wanted to build the nest for the babies. He can't shift back! I can feel him freaking out and I'm trying to hide my own freak out.

Blake did seem like he was on the brink of a freak out.

Casually, I wondered how many times I could use the term freak out before it ceased to make sense. Okay, maybe I was losing it, too. There wasn't time for that.

Shit! Chase was succinct for a change.

Call Dakota and Jasper. You should call Aldrin, too. It was time for me to take over this shit show. Blake was not in his right mind. Never was when it came to Kade. He loved his omega more than he loved anything. If asked to stop breathing to keep Kade alive, he would.

Yes! Do that, Chase urged. We'll be there soon. Do you need anything?

There. That was the Chase I knew and loved.

Just you both and maybe some more blankets for the nest. Kade isn't happy.

The link closed off as Blake made the call to Kade's parents.

I quickly got dressed and searched my rooms for suitable blankets to place in the nest. Kade would want our scents on them, as they would soothe his wolf with the smell of family and pack.

Teárlach finally roused as I approached the bed. "Where are you going? Get back in bed." His pout was so cute! His turquoise eyes were dark as he scanned me head to toe. If I got back in there, I wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

"Can't." The Luna help me, I really, really wanted to. "Kade's nesting. Can't shift back." If it had been for any other reason, I would be under T again right then.

He moved to sit up. "No, you stay in bed. Blake has asked for me and Chase..."

Thankfully, T seemed to get my meaning. "This is for family. And we are not." Sadness tinged the words.

The yet hung in the air between us as ludicrous as it was to even think of us two together forever. It was what my heart wanted, what I was sure Teárlach wanted too.

Instead of saying anything else and risking hurting him more, I leaned down to kiss him. He cupped my neck and kissed me back hungrily.

“Would you send me one of those messages on your phone?”

T was trying to kill me with cuteness. “Yes, I’ll text you,” I said in a patient tone. He was always losing the damn phone. “Keep your phone close, okay? I’ll keep you as updated as I can, though if you are close to any shifters, the pack link will have news too,” I said as I stroked his hair.

“I will.”

Leaving him looking so gorgeous in my bed was hard, but necessary. If my nibblings were coming, I wanted to see them be born!

Chase caught up to me in the hallway just outside of the Alpha Pair’s suite. As I was Second and shared the job with Chase, who had his extra ability to detect lies, we were important to the pack, so we also had suites in the house, or rather, mansion. Really, as Second, I should be pushing for the Alpha Pair to move out of this house. It was too crowded with many of the single alphas living here, too.

All of us living in the main house was a security nightmare. I’d learn how true that thought was later.

That was another day’s problem. First, I had nibblings to meet.

“Can you believe we are going to be uncles?” Chase chattered excitedly. “I can’t wait to meet the pups.”

“Be nice to have someone on your wavelength, huh?”

Chase shoved me into the wall. “Dick.”

“Uh-huh, less of the language! There’s gonna be impressionable pups soon. You gotta put a lid on the cursing,” I chided mockingly.

All I earned was another shoulder check into the wall as Chase entered into the suite, without knocking, of course.

Blake met us outside of their bedroom in their sitting room. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he said, pulling us both into tight hugs. “I hate seeing him in pain.”

“So it’s really happening today?” I asked.

“Aldrin seems to think so.” Blake ushered us into the bedroom where the alpha doctor was setting up. He and his mate, James, were Dakota’s parents and now ran the medical facilities for the pack. Aldrin had struck up a firm friendship with the elf, ívarr, which I found surprising. He was the only elf I just couldn’t get a handle on. I was pretty sure he hated me for some reason.

Kade was pacing the length of his nest. My heart went out to him, as he seemed uncomfortable. Blake was reacting to each circuit he made with clear agitation. He kept flinching and wincing low, as if trying to hide it from us.

I handed over my blankets, which Kade took in his mouth gratefully. Thank you, he muttered before adding them to his nest. It appeared to be exactly what he needed as he settled briefly before another contraction hit.

It was a relief when Dakota and Jasper appeared. Jasper went straight to his omega son and spoke in low tones for only Kade to hear as he stroked Kade’s snout.

I couldn’t help but voice my fear for the babies. It felt too soon for them to be here.

We'd been told that multiple births were usually early, but what if they were too small? I wasn't sure we were equipped to handle three premature babies.

Thankfully, Aldrin knew his shit and assured us, well, mainly me, that the babies would be fine. Shifters were resilient. My niblings would be fine with the care we could give them.

Pushing my panic aside was hard. I felt so useless just standing watching Kade labor. I was grateful when Aldrin gave us directions to help Blake manage Kade's pain.

As betas, this was as close as we would get to experiencing this, so it was a privilege to help the niblings enter the world, even in this small way.

Chase held a wordless conversation with me, not even using our twin bond for fear of it leaking through to the pack link or our family link as Blake focused on his mate.

My twin knew what this meant to me, just as I knew the secrets of his heart. He didn't have to tell me he didn't want a mate. I took his share of that wish, wanting it twice as badly as anyone else.

He held my hand in silent support as he soothed our baby brother as best we could.

Greyson was born first. He felt like an alpha and would likely be a handful when he was older, yet he remained calm as his sibling was born.

The omega pup, Felix, made his way into the world shortly behind his brother. This one was an old soul I felt an immediate connection to. Maybe I shouldn't have picked a favorite, I just couldn't help it. He was just so cute with his patches of red and those wise eyes. He had Kade's golden eyes.

After a little delay, the final pup was born. Her arrival was like a punch to the gut. All

the air left my lungs when I caught her alpha scent.

Kade and Blake had done the impossible by creating an alpha daughter. Elliotte was a miracle and a danger in one super cute bundle of fur.

All the protective instincts I had wanted to jump into high gear. Nothing could happen to the babies, especially Elliotte. They were all vulnerable at this stage.

While the babies were cleaned, checked, and weighed, the others made plans to discuss Elliotte's existence with ívarr.

I didn't care for history or that alpha girls used to happen. My attention was on the moment at hand. There were guard shifts to arrange. Enforcers to check and triple check for suitability. Not just any guard could protect such precious bundles.

The elves arrived in a rush, far too excited to see the babies to worry about their usual show of decorum. My eyes met T's and caught the humor and joy dancing there. He, like the others, was truly delighted about the babies.

Blake handed me Felix so I could get a snuggle. I wanted each of the babies to get my scent so they would recognize me as family. They were all so precious as I held each pup to my neck in turn. It was a struggle to return them to their parents, or worse, hand them to Chase to hold.

"Okay, the babies are cute and all," Chase said as he handed Greyson back to Kade, "but Axel is the baby whisperer. Call me back when they can crawl or talk, 'kay? Until then, I'm going to head to Axel's office to work out a new security schedule."

His look for me told me all I needed to know. He wanted me there to go over the plans. We had to take the pressure off our brothers. Kade was our family now, and those babies were ours.

I was distracted from Chase leaving by a hushed conversation. Hakeem was playing peacemaker, a role he tended to take naturally. ívarr was gesturing wildly at Teárlach and speaking rapidly in Elvish. Teagan looked tense before offering her opinion, again in Elvish. While I understood a few words here and there, they were talking much too fast for me to keep up.

Eventually, they broke apart, none of them looking particularly happy. T stood with a mulish set to his jaw, a complete contrast to the man who gave me sweet smiles and pretty blushes on our dates and walks.

ívarr was the first to speak. This time in English, finally. “We have decided that Hakeem and I will return to Abrocaelum to search our archives. Teagan will assume the lead on the research. It is too important to lose time with it. Teárlach will remain with her to work as her assistant.”

Blake thanked them for their help and ívarr took his leave, the air between him and T decidedly frosty. I put it to the back of my mind to ask T about it another time, then focused on what needed to be done instead of my mixed feelings.

I had just witnessed the start of something new. A family being formed. The one thing I so desperately wanted for myself, yet would never have.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Axel, could you come to my office, please? Blake used the pack link to summon me.

Dalton looked up from behind his desk. “Everything okay? Blake sounded pretty serious there.”

Dammit, he’d broadcast it, so I looked like a naughty kid being summoned to the principle’s office. Everyone within range would know Blake wanted to speak to me.

Sure, I replied, this time just to him. I tried to broadcast my annoyance at him, but emotions were generally a mate link thing.

“Probably wanting a security update,” I said aloud to Dalton, rubbing my forehead. The stress of the last couple of days after the elves had returned wanted to give me a headache, even if shifters didn’t really get them.

We now had a shiny new portal and a dozen new elves to place, thanks to the provisions the council had put in after the announcement of Elliotte’s birth. There was also the new healer, Hiroshi, and the betas who had arrived with him to properly vet. No one thought they posed a security risk, Logan, the leader of the Northarbor Pride, had vouched for them. It was more the risk of trouble they brought with them.

Call me paranoid, but I didn’t think the situation with his betrothed was finished. Hiroshi was sweet, yet the two betas and an omega thing was a bit weird, even for the Sweetwater pack.

All of it was more work than I needed. The last couple of days had been stressful, I’d barely had any time to have another date with Teárlach, though he was also being

kept busy with the new contingent of elves. I'd always thought ívarr was the leader there, but it was T all the elves looked to for information and guidance. Every time I checked on him, he was directing more elves.

Between the portal and the temporary housing some witches helped us construct, there was somewhere for us all to sleep, so that was one concern handled. T spent most of his nights with me, but I wanted something more permanent. Unfortunately, that meant building.

I picked up the plans I'd had drawn up and said bye to Dalton before making my way to Blake's office. If he was in a mood, it wasn't worth keeping him waiting. His temper would just reach its height and he'd blow up at me. Catching him before boiling point usually meant I could talk him down.

"Hey, Axel. It's just him," Dakota greeted me fairly cheerfully. He seemed buried in a pile of paperwork. More work from the factory that made our alcoholic cider and formed much of our income. The elves were helpful in they were good with agriculture, encouraging a better harvest of apples. They took security shifts, too, so they were helping with the burden of affording all of the new buildings and feeding everyone.

"Where's Kade and the babies?" Roan's desk next to the door to Kade's office was empty.

"In his office. Roan and Jasper are in there watching them so Kade can get some sleep," Dakota said distractedly. "Jasper is supposed to keep off his feet."

Baby Hayden would be with us in a couple of weeks.

Solid plan. In that office, they had a solid defense with two alphas nearby in case anything did get through. Roan had a lot of training. I knew my cousin Deke, the

Head Enforcer, had put him through his paces when he took on the assistant job for Kade, so I felt confident he could protect the omegas and the babies.

I'd get my baby cuddles after, if Blake didn't rip me a new one. I'd probably need them.

Blake had to have heard me outside, so I entered without knocking.

"Set the ward, would you?"

Fuck. This wasn't going to be good if he wanted silence from interfering ears.

There was a table by the door with some wards just waiting to be used. It was useful to have close ties with the local coven in Northarbor. I activated it and waited for the now familiar pop to let me know it was working.

"Kade can still hear everything, but he should be sleeping." Blake spoke as if Kade was awake and listening in. "I never close the bond to him."

"Not even in the bathroom?"

Blake cracked a smile, the icy facade fading away. "Maybe just then."

"What's this about?" I asked, taking a seat opposite him.

The office had so many bad memories attached to it; I was sure I'd never truly feel comfortable in there. Blake had put his own stamp on it, but the pain our father had inflicted in there still lingered in the air.

"Everyone has told me to butt out." Blake rubbed his face with his hands, then steeped them on the desk. He was unusually anxious.

“Oh-kay.” I sat back in the chair and crossed my arms defensively.

“We all want you happy. I,” he stressed the word, “want you to have anything you’ve ever wanted. You deserve the world.”

“But?”

“Is Teárlach really the best choice?”

I nearly launched myself out of the chair. Years of training made me sit still in my seat and give no other indication of my anger other than a raised eyebrow. Inside, I was a raging storm. I kept the family link locked down so Blake wouldn’t know just how badly the question had affected me.

“Don’t make that face. I like T,” Blake said, reading me as clearly as if I’d shouted at him. “All the elves, really. I just... do we know how long they will stick around?”

“No. We don’t.” I kept my words clipped.

“Axel...” Blake blew out a breath. “I love you. I just don’t want you to get your heart broken when T leaves and you can’t follow.”

“How do you know I can’t?”

Blake stopped dead. He stared me right in the eyes. “There are three reasons just in the other room for why you’d never leave.” His face did something complicated, then landed on sadness. “You love those babies like they’re your own.”

Hiding my wince was hard. “I do. They’re yours though.”

“Are you telling me if you had the choice to go live in Abrocaelum with T, you’d go?”

You'd leave us behind, settle for only seeing the babies on holidays?" His worry was obvious. "Are you sure you'd be welcome there? The elves here are excited about working with shifters, but I know there are factions in Abrocaelum that don't want to integrate with us."

We sat in silence for a while as I thought about what I had to say. Words didn't come easily. I was the brother that stood watch, stood in the shadows for so long, I blended in. Blake had to understand how I was feeling.

"Teárlach told me about his people before. I thought if I ever went to spend time with him there, that I could change their minds. It doesn't matter if I can't. Being with him would be worth anything they said or did. The babies have all of you. They have Chase. There's a damn portal here. I could visit every damn day if I wanted."

I paused to let him process. "The thing is, I'm already at the point where being without him feels like I'd be missing half of myself. So missing the babies growing up would be a small price to pay. They aren't mine. Sometimes they remind me of what I can't have for myself."

"Axel—"

"It's fine, Blake. Once T helps fix their fertility, maybe he will have to go back. Maybe I'd go with him."

My admission stunned him. He sat there for a while, his eyes going distant as he communicated with Kade, who clearly had a lot to say.

"Kade says to be careful. He's not sure Teárlach is telling you everything. There's things that don't add up there." We locked eyes. A lot of unsaid things passed between us. Again, I was grateful The Luna hadn't made me an alpha. The pressure Blake had always endured would have destroyed me. Something I reminded myself

of often.

“We love you and want your happiness, and if that’s him, we’ll do what we can to ensure it.”

“Thank you.” I knew they loved me and this talk had come out of their need to protect me for once. Completely unnecessary, though. Teárlach held all of my heart in his hands already. It was up to him what happened next.

Even if he was hiding something, I was sure it wasn’t a secret mate and a bunch of kids. There wasn’t anything we couldn’t overcome together. I was certain about a future with Teárlach.

“So, how are those plans coming along?” Blake changed the subject. I wanted to hug him for it.

Reminded of them, I went back to the table where I’d dropped them and removed the ward for extra measure.

“All’s good, Dakota,” I said with a grin on my face.

“Thanks, Axel!” he called in return. I could hear him laugh through the door.

“The plans are great!” I set them on the desk and unrolled them. “We need to get you out of this place. It’s a security nightmare with how many people are free to pass through it daily.”

Blake winced. “You’re not wrong. I think part of our sleeplessness is anxiety for the babies’ safety.”

Tired, worried, silver-blue eyes, the same shade as mine, held my gaze. “I can’t put

my finger on it, I just don't trust some of the alphas. We need to get out of here before something happens."

"Well, luckily, your big brother is amazing!" Blake laughed, the fear receding from his eyes. "And I've got you covered." I pointed at the plans. "Here's your house, over here. There's mine."

"Oh, we're building you a house, are we?"

"Damn right. I've got it set up for six in a semicircle with defensive points." I pointed to the places on the map.

Blake grinned. "Okay, outline it all for me."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

“Your Highness,” ívarr’s voice carried the short distance between us. I looked around, wary of listening ears. Shifters had such sensitive hearing, elves were hardly any better. I believed some shifters could hear whispered conversations in a crowded room. Thankfully, we were far enough away from anyone else that no one should have heard his mistake.

“ívarr,” I greeted warily as he reached my side. “I am just Teárlach here. No need for titles and honorifics.”

There was a touch of chiding in my tone. I shouldn’t have to remind my fellow elf and friend of the rules. It had been bad enough with the recent arrivals. All had been sworn to secrecy over my royal status for fear of damaging our rapport with the shifters. For some it was harder than with others to drop the ingrained respect for my status.

“That is exactly what I wanted to speak with you about.” His eyes flashed dangerously with anger.

I took a step back from him, mildly alarmed to see such a passionate response from the usually stoic elf. ívarr often received praise for his calm exterior. He was the elf my people turned to in a crisis. He was my faithful friend and cousin. I’d never seen him so furious, especially when it was aimed at me.

“Come, take a walk with me in the forest. I fear you have much to say which others should not overhear.”

Luckily, we were alone, so no one could see ívarr so agitated. I had just left the

mansion and was returning to Dakota's home, where I was still living. I hoped soon that I would have a place to share with Axel. We were on the list for housing, however, the list was long and resources were in short supply until the new homes were finished. Axel refused to use his position to get a home more quickly. Something I respected about him. Until then, we would just have to spend nights apart when work got in the way and visit each other's apartments when we could.

It was charming to date Axel. My heart couldn't resist him and I had fallen head over heels for the young shifter. Earning his love in return had been my greatest triumph. I knew his love was hard won.

Ívarr followed me dutifully into the copse of trees that surrounded the main grounds of the Sweetwater pack. He had caught me alone because Axel had just returned to his office to catch up on paperwork after touring the building site, though we both knew Dalton would have it in order. It was important for Axel to return to the routines of his usual life. I was still to find my place here, but with time, it would come.

My companion was silent as we crossed the woods and walked farther, heading towards the beach of the Sweetwater lake. Tension flowed between us, leaving me feeling off kilter.

Though he showed no outward signs of emotion obvious to those who did not know him well, I could almost feel a glare being aimed at my back. It prickled over my shoulders and I had to fight the urge to hunch. Mother would be furious at us both for the unbecoming way we were acting.

My feet slowed as I reached the sandy shore of the lake. It stretched out in front of me, a place of beauty and serenity that I longed to take Axel to. I would, after this chat, to overwrite this moment with that one. Give this place a beautiful memory to go with the surroundings.

“What is it, old friend?” I finally asked after his silence became too heavy to bear.

“Your relationship with the shifter must come to an end, and soon, before one, or both of you, is hurt,” ívarr stated bluntly.

The resulting shock from his words had me rocking back as if he had physically assaulted me. Neither of us spoke for a long period. My mind raced as I tried to understand what he was telling me.

End things with Axel? Impossible. I’d sooner tear out my own heart.

My friend waited a moment longer before trailing closer to the water. “What do you truly expect to happen between you and the shifter?”

“Axel. His name is Axel.” There was a pain in my chest over my heart. My guts roiled from the coldness I felt from someone I had always respected. I rubbed absentmindedly at the ache. “ívarr, where is this coming from? I fail to understand this.”

He rounded on me. “You are in love with him. He is in love with you!” he spat. “This path will only end in heartache or even war.” ívarr took a step back, aware he was too close to me. Closer than court rules dictated, even for someone related to me. I was the crown prince after all.

His temper was still high. Shown only by the way his magic flashed purple in his eyes.

As he was a male unaccustomed to violence, it startled me to see his fists clenching and unclenching. I almost missed his words.

“War?” I echoed.

“What do you think the young Alpha will do when you break his brother’s heart?” His expression told me he had spent much of his time thinking about this and I was a fool not to have considered the implications of a heartbroken and betrayed shifter, especially one who was both Second-in-command and brother to the pack Alpha.

“Why would I do that? As you say, I love Axel.”

“Tell me, my prince, what do you think will happen when the queen calls you home? When she finally asks you to take the throne?”

I still failed to understand. “That is many years away unless we find a reason for our infertility. Perhaps if we do, she will have another child—“

ívarr scoffed, then startled. “Forgive me, that was rude. Your mother is far too old to have another child. The strain it would put on her body would likely kill her.” His eyes glittered with sympathy as he looked at me. “You are her only heir and must ascend to the throne.”

Shaking my head, I dismissed his words. “That is many years from now. I have read the laws. There is nothing prohibiting a consort of another species, just as there is not one against same sex marriage.”

He sputtered, his face a mask of shock. “You’d make him your consort?”

Offended on Axel’s behalf, I huffed, “Of course.” He would look magnificent beside me. “We could do as other same sex pairings do and hire a surrogate for an heir.”

His face took on a pitying expression. “My prince, as much as it would please me to see you so happy with someone you truly love, our people would not accept a shifter as a consort to their king.”

“Why—“

“Do not pretend you are ignorant of the ways of some of our people. They stand with the fae and believe shifters are below us. They would return to the days of having shifters as slaves. A shifter as consort would open you up to repeated challenges to your rule and could plunge our world into war with the fae.”

“But Hakeem—“

“He might rescue a few here and there, but it is seen as taking pets from bad owners and setting them free.”

Dismay filled me. The picture ívarr painted made things seem so hopeless.

“Why not you then? We are cousins, your mother was my mother’s half-sister. Does that not mean you are in line for the throne?”

He spluttered, shocking me. Then he laughed. “We do not share enough blood for that. I am not royal enough to resist any challenges to the throne. The parliament would become a republic, get rid of all the royals, before they would let me reign.”

His words made sense. Too much sense.

No, I would not rule without Axel if I had to do so at all. I would not allow it.

“No,” I said firmly, surprising both of us. I hadn’t intended to voice my thought aloud. “If I am to become king, it will be with the consort of my choosing by my side. Axel is not some lone shifter. He comes from a brave and large pack. They are gifted with magic, children, and allies.”

“Teárlach—“

“No. With Axel by my side, we will usher in a new era for Abrocaelum. Together we will aid the shifters and our goddess will bless the union.”

A feeling of certainty settled over me. A knowing I had only felt but a few times before. The goddess was with me.

“We were sent here for a reason, old friend. The goddess wanted us to aid the shifters. Why not so I could meet my soul-bonded? In my hundreds of years, I have met none that are his equal in his ability to reach my heart. Letting Axel go would be to live the rest of my life without love. There is no other for me.”

“It has only been a few weeks, Your Highness.” ívarr looked at me with shock painted over his features.

“My soul is half bonded to him already, ívarr. I can feel him from here.”

ívarr looked dismayed, then resigned. “This cannot be undone.”

“I do not want it to be,” I answered simply, putting all the honesty I could into my voice. “Axel is my heart.”

My friend left me alone by the lake to think things through. If it was indeed true that Axel would struggle with our people accepting his legitimacy as my consort, then I had much to do before I could take the throne.

I considered my next steps while I took a circuitous route back to my room in Dakota’s home.

First, I would have to confess my secret to my love. I had contemplated it before, yet a sense held me back, telling me it wasn’t the time.

I knew not telling him the truth was a mistake. Still, I had to keep the secret for a while longer. Our relationship had to be on firmer ground before I told him to not lose him completely. There was work for me to do as well. I had to ensure the pack was seen as important allies in our hunt for answers.

Our goddess would not have sent us to the shifters without a reason. They were important, and if they did indeed assist us in returning our fertility, then my people would have no choice but to venerate them. How could they be pets when they solved a problem our people and even the fae could not?

We had not told the shifters the fae were also in a crisis, and we had reached out with a plea to share information. Our former allies had grown distant over the several millennia since Abrocaelum had come into being. For many centuries, we had been at war. Now we were in a protracted period of peace. Yet it was a fragile truce.

The fae had not wanted to admit vulnerability by giving us their own research into their fertility rates. We had appealed many times, only to be rebuffed.

It would rock their society to its core to have their pets be the solution to our mutual problems.

“T? Are you here?” Axel’s voice floated up the stairs to the small apartment I lived in over Dakota’s garage. He sounded concerned.

“Here.”

“Everything okay?”

Like me, he was also rubbing over his chest absentmindedly. It was a sign that our bond flowed not only one way. It should have been impossible, but I found with Axel, so many things had become possible. Like falling in love, something I had

never truly done. I had lost my heart to the young shifter. I had been waiting for him.

Catching him around his waist, I drew him to me and pressed my lips to his. “Better now you are here,” I said as we broke apart and I pulled Axel further into the room.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked so sweetly.

“No, just elf business. Nothing to worry about.”

His frown told me he was not convinced.

Attempting to distract him, I kissed him again, deepening it, opening his mouth with my tongue as my need for him grew.

All I wanted at that moment was to wash away the bitter memories of my discussion with ívarr and just drown in Axel. His scent, his taste, the feel of him under me.

With him tucked into my arms, I walked us to the bed. Axel smirked against my mouth. “Insatiable.”

“For you, yes.”

At the end of the bed, I stripped him of the t-shirt and jeans he wore as his regular uniform for pack duties. Getting him into a shirt and tie was a battle, which made me wonder how he would be in royal robes.

Desperation for his skin next to mine washed over me. I pushed him back onto the bed, shucked my clothes and crawled up his body to that sinful smirking mouth. There wasn't time for preparation. All I needed was the feeling of his cock against mine. I rutted against him as he clutched at my back, digging his fingers in almost painfully.

I swallowed down Axel's moans as I kissed him and worked us both towards our release.

Our kisses slowed until we were just panting against each other's mouths. He was my universe, and in his eyes, I saw my love reflected back at me.

Pleasure sparked between us. Each touch, every thrust of my cock against his, took us higher.

Together, in a mess of sweaty limbs, we came, our spend pooling between us.

Axel cupped my cheek. "Hey, I know something's wrong. When you're ready, I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere."

No. He wasn't, because I refused to let him go. I would let my kingdom crumble to dust before I gave up the man in my arms.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Wrenched from sleep with a cry, I landed on the floor in a crouch, my eyes scanning for danger.

“Axel?” T looked down at me, his hair flowing into his face. He tucked it behind his ears with an impatient sound.

I put my finger to my lips as I listened. The sounds in the mansion were off. Something was playing with the acoustics. Everything was muffled somehow.

Processing this took seconds, then I took to the pack link. It, too, was distorted until the source of the panic that had woken me became clear.

Kade.

“We’ve been attacked!”

Teárlach scrambled to get out of bed. We both threw on pajama pants, T grabbing daggers held on a belt he hastily slung around his hips before rushing for the door.

“Go get the elves!” I yelled as I peeled off in the opposite direction. I paused, catching his eye. “There’s a guy, likely dead, in Blake’s suite.” He nodded in agreement before he started running away from me.

Watching him go, I tried to filter all the alarmed reports I was getting through the link. All I could really get was Kade. His absolute horror at what he had done. The life he’d taken, the damage he’d inflicted, were awe-inspiring from an omega. Kade had protected his child and his ex.

Roan's hurt bad!Kade cried out through the link.

Blake got to his mate just as I did. He peeled Kade off Roan, then checked them both over as Aldrin and James arrived with Dakota and Jasper to take Roan to the clinic.

While he was down for the count, I didn't want to underestimate the attacker. I went to him, checked he was alive, then kept my foot on him while the chaos went on around me.

Jasper's face paled so badly on seeing the crumpled form of Roan, the boy he'd known since childhood, that he fainted. Chase caught the fox shifter and called out to Dakota to take him into the house. Dakota took Jasper from Chase with a muttered thanks. Chase and Deke ushered Kade after him.

"Let me get Kade and Elliotte safe and we'll see to him." Blake had bypassed anger. He was beyond livid. The betrayal he felt was etched all over his face. He turned to follow his mate, sure we had the situation in hand.

He looked torn at leaving Roan. Despite what Roan was to Kade, he was their family, our family now. Roan had no one else but us. We had to make sure he was okay.

Elves appeared, each looking distraught. They helped with a spell to stretch Roan to the clinic while Aldrin did some basic healing on him.

There was just so much noise, so much pain in the air. Magic was everywhere, clouding my sense of smell.

Someone held out a potion to Aldrin. "Magic nulling. It should break the effects of whatever they've given him," they said. Roan's wolf was locked away, preventing Roan from healing on his own. I'd heard he'd gone through that before. It must have been terrifying. Still, he managed to get Elliotte back and keep her safe.

Roan was a hero. No one could doubt his loyalty to his Alpha and the pack now.

The healer uncorked the potion and worked it down Roan's throat. "I need another one. To boost healing," he ordered. "Axel, I'll get him up," he directed a glare at the shifter under my foot, "and talking as soon as I'm satisfied Roan is out of danger. I need to check on Kade."

"I think Kade's fine. Just in shock." My observation seemed to soothe Aldrin's worry.

Aldrin nodded, then used another potion on Roan. The young alpha lay suspended between Aldrin and James as they worked to stop the bleeding.

I watched in horror as Roan began seizing. Both the healers tried to hold him still while enforcers and elves scrambled to find another magic nulling potion.

"He's not breathing!" James cried, tears rolled down his cheeks.

The elves set him down. It was Hakeem that raced forwards and began CPR, all the while calling to Roan's wolf to protect him, to make him breathe.

Someone forcefully administered another potion to Roan before we all heard him take a breath.

Hakeem rocked back on his heels, relieved, while Aldrin clapped him on the shoulder gratefully.

Beneath my foot, the piece of shit stirred. Fury flared hot inside me. My wolf snarled. This... stain on our pack had hurt our family. Maybe I kicked him in the head. Who knows? He went still again.

After some more healing, they took Roan to the clinic suspended between an elven guard. Aldrin directed some enforcers to help me with the trash and he went to check on Kade and Elliotte.

I followed the sounds of my brother barking orders and found Jasper crying hysterically in Dakota's arms. The bear looked terrified. He won't calm down. I told him Roan will be fine.

Feeling helpless, I looked at Blake for guidance. He was shut off, clinging to his mate and child. Someone had brought the other two down. Blake kept one eye on their shared crib. They were still under the effects of the potion and were still asleep. For that, I was grateful. They didn't need to see us all so stressed and scared.

Blake, though, was struggling. I needed to step up for my baby brother and direct things while he did what he could for his mate and children.

"Perhaps you should call your witch friend. She may be able to alter Jasper's memory." Teárlach's voice was a soothing balm after all I had just seen. He wrapped an arm around me, giving me silent comfort.

"But the injury," Dakota whispered. Jasper didn't react, just shook with fear.

"Make the call," Kade spoke for the first time. His face was bleached of color, his golden eyes dim. He held his phone out to me.

"Okay." I took the device and called Poppy. Without letting her speak, I told her what had happened.

"I know what to do," she assured me. "There's a block I can put on the memory. I'll be there soon. Don't want him going into early labor!"

Fuck! I hadn't even thought about it.

"Dakota, you need to use your alpha power to calm Jasper before he ends up in labor," I told the alpha. He met my gaze and nodded, immediately acting to soothe Jasper.

Aldrin went to his son-in-law. "You're right, Axel. I should have—"

"Nope. We aren't playing the blame game. There is one of you and too many for you to heal."

"We have Hiroshi," he reminded me. "I'll get him to look at the prisoner. I need to work on Jasper until Poppy gets here."

The witch was goddess sent. She arrived with her wife, Zinna, so quickly I was sure she broke several traffic laws.

Once I was assured Jasper was safe, Kade was resting, and the babies were protected, Deke and I took Aldrin and James to the clinic so they could see how Roan was doing.

We gave the healers time with their patient to assess things before entering the room.

Roan was a mess. Truly, he was lucky to be alive. The Luna had to have been looking after him to survive such an attack. He was confused, wondering aloud how such a thing had happened. My mind was such a mess, I couldn't get my head around it.

"The attackers likely had at least one other accomplice." Deke explained as we entered the room. "They set sleep spells around the compound. You and Elliotte were in a silence bubble and they cut your connection between your wolf and the pack. It was powerful and expensive magic. They made it so you couldn't call for help and

didn't have your wolf to fight with."

I shared a look with my cousin, the healer and assistant. "The elves are sending for help."

Blake explained the elves wanted more of a presence in the pack over our family bond. They were sending more fighters.

"I can't believe someone tried this. We are so grateful to you, Roan."

With Deke, I stepped forward to lay my hands on Roan's legs, the only unharmed part of him, to give him and his wolf comfort. My wolf surged towards his, thanking him for what he had done.

Then they arrived. Hiroshi, the new healer, and his two betas. I had seen Tate around as he was in training with Deke to be an enforcer. He was a raven shifter, so useful for his ability to fly. We only had three avian shifters in the pack, making Tate's alter precious, unlike in his birth pack, where they looked down on ravens.

Mate. Roan immediately claimed Hiroshi as his.

It was both beautiful and heartbreaking to watch, even as distracted as I was, I still felt the pain of something I would never have.

I watched them flirt, terribly, but it was adorable.

Hiroshi finally got to healing Roan. No wonder he was famous. The power he held was amazing! Aldrin's shock let me know it wasn't a usual healing. Their mate connection had strengthened it.

The Luna really was watching over Roan.

We made to leave, to let the omega spend some time with his fated mate. Just as we were leaving, Hiroshi climbed onto the bed and into Roan's waiting arms. They were going to be fine.

I've healed that alpha in the basement enough, so his mind isn't foggy with pain. Not sure you'll get much out of him, to be honest. He just kept repeating, 'she must die', which is super creepy, FYI. Hiroshi sounded ill.

Deke gave an approving nod to Tate while I thanked Hiroshi for his hard work. Please do what you can for Roan. He nearly died for my niece...

He'll be well looked after. I could almost hear the mental wink. Hiro was a spitfire.

We didn't have cells, as such. Just a singular room in the cellar, not too far from the gym. It was reinforced to hold even the strongest shifter. The windowless room held a toilet, sink, and small cot. We used spells on the walls to muffle sound and cut off pack links.

Blake met us at the bottom of the cells around the corner from the holding room. He had set his face in a grim line.

"Let's get this done," he said with little emotion.

The shifter was standing, a smug look on his face. "I ain't gonna talk."

He held onto that resolve until we had removed his fingernails and fang teeth when Blake forced a partial shift on him. The shifter repeated his mantra about Elliotte until we began carving him up. Then he broke long enough to say there would be more, and they had the backing of powerful people.

Aware we would get no more, I grabbed the knife I'd been using, still slick with

blood, and cut his throat just deep enough he couldn't use his alter to heal so it would take time for him to die.

I watched him bleed out, gurgling and gasping. The life drained from his eyes, leaving us needing more answers.

Teárlach was there when I returned to my suite. He led me to the shower, stripped and washed me before guiding me into the bath, where he wrapped himself around me. We soaked for a long time, wordlessly.

He whispered words of comfort as he lay in bed with me. He uttered words of love I so desperately needed as he kissed me all over.

My lover worshiped my body for what felt like hours before spearing me on his cock. He made love to me gently, sweetly, holding me close and kissing me deeply until we both came.

It was the most beautiful, sensual experience of my life. I knew then there would be no one else for me but him.

With him still inside me, I said, "I love you," for the first time, knowing nothing had ever been more true.

When he returned the words, my resolve settled. I was keeping Teárlach and protecting my nibblings until The Luna called me home.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

In the weeks after the attack which nearly had Roan losing his life protecting the alpha female, the pack was understandably tense.

The Alpha Mate was far more subdued with his friend so badly injured. He was also hypervigilant over the safety of the children, often pushing himself to the brink of exhaustion before someone had to step in. Usually Blake or one of his brothers. Axel was especially good with the children and Kade. They had a unique bond which deepened over this time.

For myself, it was difficult to see Axel go through the stress of those weeks with so little to offer. My mother had allowed more elves to come to the pack with the stipulation that more were to work on the beta sickness and any potential link to our own fertility problem. This, of course, was all well and good, until the elves struggled with my current position. With ívarr assuming the group lead, particularly when it came to the research, it made very little sense for the elves to come to me for advice. It caused more than a few raised eyebrows, which I explained away with information about my military service.

However, I was beginning to suspect the Alpha Pair knew I was more than I was letting on. If they had told Axel about their suspicions, he had not spoken of it. Perhaps he wanted me to come to him myself, or he just dismissed them as unimportant.

Each time I missed an opportunity to tell Axel the truth, my guilt grew. Especially since I no longer had ívarr's friendship to lean on. This was a terrible situation of my own making.

My friend had kept his distance since our heated discussion. Only speaking to me when it pertained to the research he was conducting or the safety of the elves and pack in our care. The gulf between us had grown so wide everyone had noticed it.

Teagan and Hakeem despaired over it. Often chiding us both, from what I could tell. We each had our pride, likely a family trait, and neither was budging, no matter how much our mutual friends cajoled us to apologize and move on from it.

One of us was going to have to say something. It would not be me.

I had just finished my regular rounds of the lands while Axel was busy with his duties. I would then go to the lab attached to the clinic and process tests, or do other busy work to lighten the load. We might not be friendly, but I would not leave my cousin with more work to do.

“Your Highness,” ívarr rushed to meet me. My glare had him stepping back and performing a low bow. “Apologies, Teárlach, I had forgotten in my haste. It is urgent that I speak to you.”

His tone had me stopping the words that wanted to spew forth. “What is it?” My tone was still sharper than was polite. I tried to moderate it.

ívarr looked visibly upset. A rare thing for him. The man usually wore a mask of indifference, rarely moved to deeper emotions. “The queen has asked for an update. There is talk of removing part of our force because of a lack of results.”

He fidgeted, which was alarming.

“What is it, my friend?” I used a gentle tone with him, more concerned at his demeanor than his words.

Bright eyes met mine, worry plain in their expression. “Parliament has discussed the female alpha. They are now seeing it as a sign the shifters are returning to a wilder time. They want us to fully withdraw from the pack.”

“Remove all our elves and the support we provide to the pack?” I asked, aghast. No, no, no, we could not.

“Everything. They believe your vision to be a farce...”

“Ívarr?”

“Word has gotten to them that you are in a relationship they deem inappropriate. Rumors are that they are considering a petition to the queen to remove you from Sweetwater.”

Leave Axel?

“No! I will not.”

“Teárlach, they may not give you a choice. They will send people for you and they will not care who they have to go through in order to take you home.” Ívarr wrung his hands.

“I will not stay. As soon as I can, I will return.” My magic wanted to tear free from me, something that had not happened since my childhood.

He was not finished. His eyes met mine, a single tear rolling down his pale cheek.

“Then they will destroy Sweetwater, so you have nothing to return to.”

“There must be something we can do,” Teagan said pleadingly. “I love it here in

Sweetwater and don't want to return home anytime soon, particularly since we are on the brink of a breakthrough."

"You are?" I asked.

"You feel it too?" ívarr said at the same time.

There was a hint of a smile as his eyes met mine.

We had joined the others at the research center to discuss the events in Abrocaelum and my potential return. Having the backing of my friends for my relationship with Axel was a balm to soothe frayed nerves. I could not bear the thought of leaving Axel behind and he was not ready to leave his family. Not when they were struggling so badly.

"I do. I feel like there is something around the corner," Teagan affirmed.

"You should tell them about the betas," Hakeem said. The normally stoic elf had a glint of mischief twinkling in his dark eyes.

"Perhaps you should," she shot back. "You clearly want to. Though I am unsure whether the Alpha Mate would want us discussing this information."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"The shifter council knows, soon the rest of the pack will." Hakeem turned to include me and ívarr in the conversation. "Roan and his fated mate have bonded—"

"That's wonderful news!" I cried.

"—they have also bonded with the betas, Tate and Asher. They have the first shifter

poly bond.”

A long silence followed those words.

“A poly bond with fated mates?” I asked.

At the same time ívarr spoke, “these betas had the sickness?”

“Yes, and yes,” Hakeem was grinning. “What are the odds that an alpha female would be born to a pack with the highest amount of betas who contracted the sickness—?”

“But Tate and Asher were not members of the pack when they contracted it,” Teagan added.

“No, that makes it more unusual. The hands of fate have much to do with this,” Hakeem mused.

“This may not be enough to aid us with parliament. They insist the existence of an alpha female is dangerous.” ívarr reminded us of the principal source of our troubles.

“I have been researching the scrolls I was permitted to remove from the archives. They have been illuminating and I believe the evidence there, added to the new poly bond, is a sign we are on the right path.” Hakeem went to the tablet device he had taken to using.

“Here it shows violent incidents between shifter groups and, indeed, humans were lower, with an alpha female as a leader of a pack. It should not be a stretch to convince the queen that their society is similar to ours in that way.”

This was a step in the right direction. All we needed to do was buy ourselves some

time. I felt certain the goddess would show us what she was keeping hidden.

“So? What are our next steps?” ívarr asked my friends. His support meant the world to me. This was a demonstration of his acceptance I had only dreamed of getting since our disagreement.

I went to ívarr’s side and squeezed his shoulder. “Thank you, my friend, for coming to me with this and trying to help me stay with Axel for a little longer. I am sorry for how things have been between us.”

He grasped my arm in our people’s handshake. “My pride prevented me from apologizing sooner. I truly am sorry, Teárlach. As soon as I am able, I will mend things with Axel. I have been colder than he deserves. Truly, I regret my harsh words and distance. You have never been happier than when you are with Axel. I think I felt some jealousy because I have yet to find such a bond.” He gave a wry grin. “Rest assured, I support you and will do what it takes to stay here in Sweetwater. In my heart, I believe this is where we are supposed to be.”

I felt the truth of his words settle over my heart. The elves here had all expressed a love of the pack and the shifters within it. I was sure they would resist any attempts at harm from other elves.

“Pretty words and apologies done!” Teagan cheered. She hugged us both. “Now we need to take this evidence before the queen. We should also see if there is anything in the archives about poly bonds in shifters. It’s so unusual it should buy us some more time here. We are so close to our breakthrough, I can almost taste it.”

“Yes. I feel certain this is the path we have to follow,” I agreed. “Though I should stay here so they do not try to keep me there. I should stay by Axel’s side.”

ívarr nodded. “I will return to the beta sickness research with your help. Teagan and

Hakeem will take news of the poly bond and the research Hakeem has conducted to parliament and our queen. They will buy us the time we need to reveal our true purpose here.”

With our reconciliation complete, we parted to fulfill our duties.

The room was dark by the time I crawled into bed alongside my lover. We had given up any pretense that I lived anywhere else. All my things now resided in Axel’s wardrobe or dresser. In truth, I had very little with me, making it all the easier to slot into Axel’s suite.

Moonlight illuminated my path to the bed, throwing the long line of Axel’s bare back into relief. My heart nearly stopped at how beautiful he was, lit in such a way. He was made for moonlight and shadows, they created such a stunning contrast.

I threw off my clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor in my desperation to feel his skin next to mine.

Drawing him close, I wrapped my arms around him. He made a small sound of pleasure in the back of his throat and nuzzled closer. There were times when I felt his wolf close to the surface, like this particular moment. I felt just how much his alter loved me, almost as much as the man.

All the talk of leaving Axel to avoid a war threatened to break me. This shifter was more than my lover, he was my reason for existing. The long years of my life had felt empty until he arrived. Now, I knew with certainty, I would fade from this life without him.

“Everything okay?” Axel muttered into my neck.

“Just needed to hold you. It’s been a long day.”

“Want to talk about it?” He yawned and stretched before wrapping himself around me more. It felt like every inch of our bodies was touching.

“No, but I have fixed things with ívarr, so something positive came out of today.”

“That, and we are together.”

“Yes, that too. You are my reason for being, Axel. You bring me light, hope, love. I just hope you know how much I love you.”

He yawned again. “If I was more awake, I’d push you for details.” Axel reached up for a long, slow kiss. When he broke away, he smiled, one full of tender affection. “You’re more than I could have dreamed of. I love you too.”

Without being aware of the conflict in my heart, Axel knew what to say to make me harden my resolve.

The elves were staying in Sweetwater. This was where we were supposed to be. We just needed some faith that our goddess had a plan.

Until then, I was going to hold Axel close and never let him go.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

During the time I was estranged from my friend, Roan had formed his poly bond with Tate and Asher. This was only the start of the revelations that rocked the Sweetwater pack.

First, their bond evolved. Changed.

Hiroshi first admitted to James that his marks were changing when he failed to fall pregnant immediately. Understandably, the omega was upset at his perceived failure to conceive. With all the magic in his system, a pregnancy in his first heat with Roan would have been a miracle, and likely would have failed to gestate properly. It was a kindness that his body had more time.

A month after their unconventional bonding, Tate came to the clinic for testing, demonstrating unusual symptoms. He also admitted difficulties within their bonds, with feeling distant towards one of his mates and a lack of intimacy between that mate and another of their grouping.

Teagan and ívarr performed all the necessary tests, even taking samples from Tate's cousin, Jake, in order to compare them since they were close cousins. Their mothers were identical twins, making their DNA as close as half siblings. Though they didn't come up with anything to be the cause of the illness Tate was suffering with, the data collected would be useful later, when we knew the cause.

The day after his visit to the clinic, we knew why Tate had been sick. It was from his transformation into an omega from a beta and the sign of his first heat.

Not only that, Asher, who had also been a beta, was now presenting as an alpha.

Then, just to add more to an already strange case, the new omega had two mates, an omega, and his new alpha. Hiroshi and Tate reaffirmed their bond as Hiroshi also went into heat again.

Unfortunately, the new alpha struggled with his instincts and became overprotective of Tate to his detriment and even Tate's safety. The pair had to be separated, which was heartbreaking for the new omega as much as it was for the new alpha. Hakeem told me of Asher's shame at his inability to control his lion.

He talked about it at length, the subjects of shifters and their behaviors endlessly fascinating to my friend. Hakeem believed the sudden influx of alpha pheromones and the rut he endured whilst Tate was in heat was the root cause of the behavior. The new lion alpha had much to adjust to.

We lost Hakeem back to Abrocaelum as my friend took control of Asher's behavior modification. The young alpha needed to learn the control that most alphas slowly learned throughout their lifetimes. In the blink of an eye, Asher had undergone this massive change. He had much to learn and a very short-tempered lion to contend with.

Tate underwent another barrage of tests, Hiroshi and Roan joining him. Hakeem took the samples we needed from Asher when he was in Abrocaelum. The young alpha was too unpredictable in Sweetwater to spend any length of time at the clinic or with his mate.

Nothing about the tests gave us a reason for what had happened. Tate bore them well, but he became withdrawn as he adjusted to his new instincts as an omega and the loss of his alpha mate. They attempted many visits, but Asher's lion was too volatile for prolonged contact. He was jealous and liable to lash out.

Just a couple of weeks after his heat, Hiroshi presented himself to the clinic with a

positive pregnancy test. James confirmed the pregnancy by finding two heartbeats.

Only hours later, the clinic was confirming a second pregnancy. This time, Tate's.

The former beta had done what we had thought was impossible. Not only had he changed his designation, he had then mated to more than one person, and finally, fallen pregnant.

Though many were ecstatic about the pregnancy, naturally, Tate had reservations. He had gone through so much change. There was a huge scene which half the pack witnessed where it looked like Asher might attack his mate, or more likely, Roan. The Alpha had to step in, with Blake reminding all the pack that an omega had the ultimate choice whether they would carry a baby to term or not.

My respect for the young Alpha rose by leagues. He was an example of what a leader should be.

It made me wonder what would happen if an elf became pregnant after so long. Would they be urged into keeping it no matter their circumstances?

News of the babies had, of course, reached my mother and the parliament. They were delighted about the new lives and what these changes could mean for the elves. It bought me more time to spend in Sweetwater and encouraged more elves to come and assist with the research and necessary protection.

Unfortunately, Sweetwater had an even bigger target on their backs with an alpha female, betas who had changed designations, and now Tate's pregnancy.

Each time something new happened, or there was some fuss from the elves over the pending arrivals, Axel seemed to draw into himself.

There were days I thought that even our love would not be enough to take him out of the darkness.

Naturally, my friends had noticed. ívarr mentioned he had made renewed attempts at forming a friendship, and while Axel was understanding of ívarr's initial standoffish behavior, he had sensed pushing for anything more would not be welcomed.

I wondered at the cause of Axel's recent depression. Unlike his family, I did not fear it was another bout of the sickness approaching. My senses told me a lot of it was bitter envy.

Axel was so devoted to his family. He would have made a fine alpha with a deep core of inner strength, endless patience, and so much love. Axel had to be looking at Asher and seeing a shifter making so many mistakes he would not make himself. I couldn't see him attacking others with little provocation. He and his wolf were steady, dependable. For his omega, he would be a port in a storm, providing protection and love.

He had to be wondering why Asher and Tate were chosen for something so monumental. His faith in his goddess, The Luna, had to be shaken.

As Tate, Hiroshi and Roan got ready to move into their new home, I decided to draw Axel back to me. He needed some extra care to show him he was more than his designation. I did not care if he was only a beta, or only a shifter. He could have been a troll and I would have loved him for who he was.

"We are going on another date tonight," I announced as Axel entered our rooms.

"Are we?" He raised an eyebrow.

"An overnight date, so make sure to pack some clothes for tomorrow. Though if you

want to be naked, I will not complain.” I rose to greet him with a kiss, wrapping an arm around him and drawing him close.

I could feel his smirk against my lips. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

“No.” I snaked my hands under his shirt, eager to get my hands on that silky smooth skin. With great difficulty, I pulled away. “Come, I have plans for you.”

“T, we can’t leave the compound.” Axel looked hopeless.

“I know, which is why I have a tent set up for us under the stars just in the woods. We will cook food on a fire and spend time in nature. Would you like to walk there shifted?”

Axel softened. “We shouldn’t... what if we’re needed?”

Drawing him close again, I hugged him tightly. “We will be close enough to run back. Tonight is your night off. Everyone is covered.”

He relented further. “But...”

“No. This is just for us. For you. Please, Axel, you need this. Let me be your solace.”

The fire was ready to be lit. I did that with a spark of magic before I lay our things down next to the pit.

Axel, in his wolf form, sat on his haunches and sighed. This is exactly what I needed, thank you.

“You are most welcome.”

Seeing no need to hide the spell I was using since we were alone, I spoke aloud to Axel rather than mind speak. “Would you like dinner? There are steaks but if you would rather not cook, we can have sandwiches. Winter packed a hamper for us.” I laughed, remembering my conversation with the cook. “He gave us far too much food!”

His wolf made a strange chuffing noise that sounded like a laugh. Sandwiches are fine. I’m not hungry. I’d rather enjoy the peace with you.

“Do you feel like shifting back, or would you rather have me pet you for a while? I brought the brush you like.”

He would never admit it to anyone, but Axel liked me to use a slicker brush on his fur. He would lie for hours while I groomed his alter form.

Only the pricking of his ears gave him away. I got the brush from the hidden pocket in my bag and set to work, combing it through his thick ruff and down his back to his wagging tail.

My lover’s other form was beautiful with his gigantic size, too wise eyes, and shiny black coat. He was so dark he often vanished into the shadows. I wondered often if it was his extra gift. Chase had his ability to detect lies, Blake had an edge, predicting moves when fighting, so perhaps the other Sweetwater son had his own ability.

After he had enough of the brushing, he shifted and kissed me soundly until I was desperate to have him. “Please,” I begged as he reached for my cock.

Making quick work of my clothes, Axel prepped me to take him. I was grateful I remembered the oil with the relaxant, as it had been some time since I had been on the receiving end of my encounters. All the times with Axel before had been with me fucking him.

His cock stretched me well and I panted under him as we made love with the stars shining above us.

The moon shone on our union, it almost felt like a blessing. We were meant to be, Axel and I. Two souls intertwined regardless of our species. We belonged together.

We lay on what remained of my clothes after, breathless but sated, arms around each other.

“Thank you, Teárlach. I needed this.” His voice was clogged with heavy emotion.

“Of course, dear one. You are my heart and I know when you ache. We will get through this, I promise.” I brought his hand to my mouth so I could kiss his knuckles, sealing my vow.

“I believe you.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Despite the hard work T put into pulling my mind away from all the goings on in the pack, the bond between Hiroshi and his two mates continued to play on my mind. I couldn't help but ask why Tate and Asher had been given the gift they'd received.

Some of it was jealousy. I wanted to be able to have a family of my own, a mate who loved me. While I had Teárlach and knew beyond doubt he adored me, we could never be mates in the sense shifters were.

I was also on guard. Blake's words circled through my head. Kade had great instincts. If he thought T was hiding something, then he was. I was watchful for hints and, aside from the preferential treatment his people gave him, there was nothing that set alarm bells off. He was important to the military; he was older than the others, and though ívarr was technically the leader, it was natural the others would look to T for guidance since he was tasked with the security of the elves whilst they were in Sweetwater.

Still, I watched my lover, waiting for the secrets to unveil themselves. I was careful to guard my heart from falling any harder, as difficult as that was. We spent as much time together as we could, considering how increasingly busy we were. T seemed to spend any free moment at the clinic pouring over the research when he wasn't patrolling our lands, climbing into the trees to make the area easily defensible from aerial attacks, a possibility now that the Northharbor Aviary was causing issues for us.

My senses told me he was hiding something, yet I felt like nothing he could tell me aside from already being married, which I'd immediately dismissed, would actually matter. Whatever he was hiding hadn't prevented him from being in Sweetwater with me for months. Whatever it was, we could get past it.

A couple of weeks passed since our date under the stars, during which time Roan and his former mates had moved into their new home next to our Alpha Pair. It wasn't all smooth sailing for them. I had to discipline enforcers for their behavior towards the omegas. Tate had been so overcome he had fainted, potentially putting his baby at risk.

The truth was, we knew so little about how the pregnancy would progress that anything could bring about a loss. Babies were so precious to a pack. We had to do anything we could to make sure Tate made it to term. Hiroshi too. The healer omega was carrying twins, even more precarious of a situation.

I'd ordered the troublesome enforcers to dig out the corners for new warding spells as punishment. They had to do it in human form because I knew some wolves just liked to dig. Chase had been a nightmare about it, often digging up Mom's flower beds to hide something he thought was precious. Usually something like a toy figure or a shiny stone.

Of course, they whined the entire time, claiming they'd done nothing wrong. How the omegas couldn't be bonded because that's not how it worked and other bullshit. It got to the point where I was just so sick of their shit I decided to give them a lesson in manners. With my fists. Then I didn't let Hiroshi heal them. Aldrin had to, all the while, they listened to a lecture about respecting omegas regardless of their mating status. How they deserve to be treated like people, not just things ruled by hormones.

Handing Blake a list of enforcers to watch didn't make me happy, but I did enjoy how each enforcer flinched whenever I got close.

"What did you do to them, dear one?" Teárlach asked as he met me for lunch in my office one late January afternoon.

Blake had helped the local coven find a missing demon. Turned out one of their own

was not only a witch, he was half demon! He'd found his fated mate, only for that mate to be kidnapped. Something about witches and contracts.

Either way, Basil, fucking terrible name for a person, by the way. Well, he was the same dick who gave Jared potions to try to impregnate Hiroshi. Back when he was forced to go through some of his heat with him. That bastard, Basil, had the demon, Toth.

Basil got away, but Blake now had a lead on a potential new partner for our cider making business, since Toth had an orchard of these fancy apples.

He and Dakota were going through the legalities of how the deal would work if it went ahead. They wanted it all organized for when Cody and Toth were ready to discuss it, so they could get moving as quickly as possible. The demons faced a lot of discrimination, a fact which worried Blake since it was such a good opportunity to improve the brewery.

With them tucked away, there wasn't all that much for me to do. The elves helped with a lot of the security around the babies. Kade even had a new nanny, Cryabell, who watched the triplets so Kade could do his council duties.

Cryabell... I didn't like her. It had nothing, okay, everything, to do with her hogging the babies and not letting me in to hug them whenever I wanted. She kept saying things like schedules and self soothing, which was bullshit, FYI. Babies who stopped crying hadn't soothed themselves. They'd just learned no one was coming, and I hated that idea for my niblings.

So, okay, I'd argued against that tactic, and won because Kade loved those babies more than anything and couldn't stand the idea of them suffering when all they wanted was love.

Now Cryabell was being difficult, not letting me see them when I knew I wouldn't wake them. Planning to get her fired was wrong, wasn't it?

"Hmm?" I answered distractedly. The elf nanny would have to wait.

There hadn't been much time to spend with T recently, with us falling into bed too exhausted to do much other than kiss and sleep cuddled up together. Sometimes he would get me to shift so he could brush me to sleep. I'd wake in the morning with the brush on the floor and T sleeping over me.

"Oh, just showed them the error of their ways," I finally said.

"They look terrified to breathe too deeply around you."

"Added bonus."

His grin was nearly as wide as mine, telling me he enjoyed how brutal I could be when it came to protecting others. We were alike in so many ways. I often forgot he was an elf with centuries of life experience on me. He spent so much time here in wonder at how we lived. He was almost like a new soul living life for the first time, not an ages old elf who had seen kingdoms fall.

Seeing that smile, the delight and affection in his eyes, had me hungry for something else.

I pushed T against the wall and covered his mouth with mine, kissing him hard. My cock thickened in my pants and I rubbed against his hard body. I wasn't quite accustomed to seeing my elf in cargos and a t-shirt, especially with his long hair braided back in an elaborate style, but he was so hot to me in anything he wore. Better if he had nothing on at all.

T groaned as I cupped him, bucking into the touch.

Dropping to my knees, I unzipped him, only to be interrupted before I could get my mouth on his dick.

“Yo—Sir, we need you,” an elf I was yet to learn the name of barged into the room. I should have locked the door. Regardless, this guy was on my shit list. One fucking hour, that’s all I needed.

Seeing my expression, T kissed me sweetly. “I shall return soon and we can eat.”

The conflicted look on the new elf’s face suggested otherwise.

“No, you go ahead and eat when you can. Can we try again for dinner?”

He nodded, kissed me again, and left.

Dinner didn’t happen. It felt like days passed before I got to spend any time with him properly and like a gulf was opening up between us.

Something would have to give. One of our jobs? Our relationship? We couldn’t sustain things as they were. Only seeing each other for minutes at night and in the morning was killing the spark between us.

I knew the elves had too much of a hold on T to let him go. Would my pack and everything I’d built there for myself, my role as Second, be the casualty of keeping Teárlach?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

With the visit to the demon realm going ahead, I was at a loss. Blake wanted to keep the team small, hoping it would hide his absence from the pack. The more people who went, the more chance there was someone would notice. I got the logic of it, but it hurt that I wouldn't be there. Deke, as Head Enforcer, was going, which did make sense. Larken too, since he had experience with the demons, having gone on the mission to rescue Toth.

My job was to watch the people left behind, with Chase beside me. I was in charge until Blake returned.

"I hope we get to visit the orchard soon. The hell-spice apples sound amazing." Chase was keeping a watchful eye on the path leading to the mansion. We often rotated the security jobs. Getting stuck in the same place all the time was a recipe for disaster, usually because you end up becoming complacent.

"They do," I agreed. "Maybe they'll bring samples back with them."

"Oooh, I wonder what Winter could cook up with them!" My bond with Chase rang with his mental thoughts. He didn't often close himself to me. He and his wolf were imagining all the things which could be made with apples, making my wolf also want one. Our wolves loved the apples our orchard grew. They both wondered what was so special about demon ones.

Winter would love to get his hands on demon food, something none of us had really experienced. Demons had really shut themselves away from humans, and the rest of supernatural kind, because of the way witches could enslave them with their true names.

“Hey,” Dakota said as he approached. “Kade texted to say they are coming back with Cody and Toth soon, they want to partner up. Then there’s talk of another demon who wants to discuss buying the heat club!”

Dakota might have sounded excited about it but I shared a look with my twin.

Is that wise?he asked me, just using our family bond.

I bet Kade and Blake have thought about the implications of having a demon run a heat club. Kade would never put omegas at risk of being used or manipulated. Dakota knows the laws, so if he’s keen on the idea, then there’s an angle they can work.

My brother had sound business sense. If he thought it could be successful, then he’d find a way to make it happen. There had to be an angle for the demon as well as us, but if they weren’t concerned, then I wasn’t either.

“Sounds good,” I said aloud. “Where’s Roan?”

“I heard him on the phone with Hiroshi. Kade tried calling him first but texted me when he couldn’t get him.”

“Is there—?”

“Nothing’s wrong with the babies,” Dakota assured me. “Roan was just listening to Hiroshi tell him some work stuff. Probably nothing interesting, but they talk all the time.”

“Gag,” Chase joked. “I’m happy for Roan, you know. After all the shit he went through.”

“Some of the pack are still wary of him,” Dakota said, shaking his head sadly. “That

kid literally risked his life for the pack and they treat him like a pariah.”

Axel!“Axel!” Dalton cried, racing for the door.

“Woah! Where’s the fire?” I halted the beta, my assistant, by grasping him by his narrow shoulders. The raccoon shifter was shorter than me, with medium brown hair and hazel eyes.

“You’re needed since Blake isn’t back yet! There’s a meeting at the science center!”

He shook under my hold. I still hadn’t let go, understanding without needing to be told that Dalton was at risk of coming apart under my hands. He was terrified, yet also hopeful.

Then he said the words that would change all of our futures.

“Hiroshi has figured out why we had the beta sickness.”

They appeared to be waiting for me to start. I ducked into the room, giving a nod to Hiroshi to start the presentation.

I stayed standing, taking note of all who were in the room and the council members on a video screen.

The original elves, Hakeem, Teagan, ívarr and Teárlach were all sitting around a large table with Aldrin and James.

Hiroshi looked shaken. He was nervous as he cued up the documents he wanted to show us. His hands shook and his voice wavered.

“Someone had already found the gene. They just hadn’t been able to compare it with

other samples, or discarded it as unimportant.” Hiroshi put something onto the whiteboard behind him. It meant nothing to me, but I tried to make sense of it all so I could attempt to explain it to my brother later. Blake was hating missing this, but the demons and the investment they were making was too important.

Not that the beta sickness wasn’t important, but what Hiroshi had to say could keep for an hour or two while Toth signed some contracts. I just knew Blake was feeling sick at missing out.

I tried to pay attention as there was a back and forth over who had left the note Hiroshi had found. A tingle of awareness flitted over my skin. I didn’t think there had been a note. The Luna had given Hiroshi a nudge. She was sick of waiting for us to find it, or maybe he was finding it just as he should.

Hiroshi shrugged it off, getting back to the matter at hand. “As you can see, the alpha and omega do not have this gene. It gets interesting when I do this.” He went into detail, comparing the two sets of genes the betas who had been sick for a month had. Then added he thought the mating bite was the point of activation but admitted he couldn’t be sure of it and it would need more testing.

Eventually, I had to take a seat. There was just so much for me to take in. No one had acknowledged it, but I was one of the betas they were discussing. Chase had only been sick for two weeks, so it was likely he had a malformed gene. I had a fully formed gene. I didn’t know which designation I had, just which one I hoped for.

They went around in circles about keeping the information quiet for a little longer. The implications this would have for shifter kind. The elves wondered why they had been drawn here to help us discover this.

There was so much we didn’t know. Was it only an alpha bite that worked? Could betas bite each other? Was there another way to trigger the change?

Then we had to consider if all the betas would want to change. It was a lot to think about. Completely life changing. Not just for them, for their packs, since this was a shifter wide problem, or blessing, depending on how you looked at it.

Either way, we were potentially going to have a new batch of omegas and alphas. People who would have to adjust to the influx of shifter hormones that would dictate their actions until they could get a handle on them.

Babies. We could have a lot of babies in the near future.

Raging alphas. Would more of them be like Asher? Jealous and irrational?

All of this had to be done so carefully. We couldn't just drop the bomb on them and let them figure it out. They had to be guided through this.

Blake would want to tell them soon. Prepare them mentally so no more accidental changes happened, if that was possible. What had happened to Tate and Asher could have been a fluke.

I knew, if I had the gene I wanted, then I would want to go through with changing. The goddess had given me this gift, I had to take it. I believed most would want to do the same, regardless of the consequences.

Teárlach squeezed my hand, pulling me back into reality. If I got what I wanted, I would lose him. If I changed my designation either way our relationship was doomed.

Could I give him up for what I'd always dreamed of?

We didn't know if the bondings would stick if a beta chose to bond with an alpha to go through the transformation. Asher and Tate had already broken their bonds, so I hoped the beta pairings, like Jake and Sebastian, could break their mating and re-

bond if that was what they wanted. It really depended on their designations.

The call with the council ended with a promise to discuss this in more detail with Blake present. Kade would need to be there as the representative of male omegas.

Maybe they sensed I wanted to know, but one by one, the elves and healers left until it was just me, T and Hiroshi.

T kissed me quickly and followed his friend, knowing I wanted privacy to find this out.

“Do you know if I have the gene?” I asked. It was a stupid question. I knew I had the gene because Hiroshi had been so careful not to use my information, though I knew he had it. I’d glimpsed the file with my name on it.

Hiroshi told me I did and I asked which one. My heart was thundering in my chest as he looked through the pile of messy papers, found mine, then wrote a single word in pencil.

Omega.

I felt my heart soar. The Luna had proven my faith in her right. She had given me exactly what I’d wanted since I was old enough to know there were male omegas.

Long ago, when I was maybe four, a male omega had found his way to the pack. He was a wolf, like Kade, so father had accepted him. He didn’t seem to hate male omegas then. That came later. Maybe it was my fault. I was fascinated when the omega went into heat and ended up pregnant with an enforcer. The alpha had mated his omega and they welcomed an alpha son. They weren’t fated mates, so they had a lot of issues. Quite often, the omega was left alone to look after the baby.

One day, the omega left the pack, returning to his family with the child and without his mate. The alpha had died in a challenge for trying to sleep with another alpha's omega.

When he left, I was heartbroken and often asked for my friend. He was the last male omega in the pack until Kade.

Though I was ecstatic about being a potential omega, this news had the ability to obliterate my life.

“Only you can know for now. Please,” I begged Hiroshi.

“But—“

“No, Hiroshi. This could have dire consequences for the pack if this got out.” I'd lose my job as Second to Blake if they knew I was an omega. It was better they suspected I was an alpha when this got out. They would think I wasn't changing or admitting it because I didn't want to lay claim to the pack.

It took him a moment, but he seemed to understand what this would mean for my place in the pack, for Blake's leadership when he tried to keep me as Second, because I knew my brother would. He might have relented and changed Tate's job from enforcer to wing guard, he just wouldn't for me. He would fight tooth and nail to keep me as his Second because he trusted me above anyone else.

“Of course. Congratulations, Axel,” he finally agreed.

I hugged the omega quickly and fled the room.

Alone. I needed to be out in the forest. Needed time to myself to process.

Of course, with that nagging sense us twins shared, I wasn't alone for long.

"Thought I'd find you here. You're as bad as the elf these days."

I tried for a smile. Chase pulled me into a tight hug. I broke away after a moment to brush tears away.

"What's wrong?"

Certain we were far enough away, I spoke out loud, whispering the truth to the only person who could know right then.

"An omega? Really?"

"Yeah," I admitted fearfully.

"Just like you'd always hoped." He caught my shocked expression. "Did you think you'd kept that from us? Me and my wolf know everything there is to know about you and yours. Of course we knew. Just like you knew about me."

"So you don't care?" Fear had words sticking in my throat. Do you see me differently?

"Do you care that I never want to be mated? Am I broken for not wanting all you have?" He raised an eyebrow at me in challenge.

"No. No way. Whatever makes you happy," I said empathetically.

"Same. This is your dream, Ax. I support it, and Blake would too if you gave him a chance."

“He would ruin what he’s built here... and it might never happen. It has to stay a secret for right now. Until we know for sure how to do it. Not just for Blake either, for T... I—“

“Hey, it’s alright.” Chase hugged me close again. “I’m here when you need me, okay? Now go, run. Your wolf needs it.”

“Thanks.” I got up and walked to the woods. Turning around just once to see my brother watching over me.

At the edge of the trees, I stripped and ran through the woods in my wolf form. It was weird being the passenger in my body when he took over, but he took control. I sat back, happy to watch him work through things.

Both of us had a lot of feelings. His were always simpler than mine. He didn’t worry about pack politics or gender stereotypes.

Happy, he told me. I could tell just how much it meant to him.

Not scared? You want a baby too?

Yes, he agreed. Lots of babies. Just with the elf.

My heart couldn’t take it. Steps faltering, I tried to explain. We could have this with an alpha, but not with our elf. To carry a baby, it would have to belong to someone else. Not Teárlach.

Inside, my wolf raged at the thought of anyone else being our mate. He was as besotted with T as I was.

We might be able to get a sperm donor and have to wait until they figured out the

change without a bite, I tried to soothe him.

Wait, my wolf told me. The Luna will know what to do.

I couldn't help but hold onto hope that my wolf was right. Everything would work out. Somehow, magically, I'd get everything I ever wanted.

No, life wasn't that kind. In the back of my brain, a memory formed. I vaguely recalled the time asleep... a dream. A choice to be made.

It would be a choice. Love or a baby of my own.

Wait, my alter urged. He sent me an image of me and T with a baby, a little family. It was such a beautiful dream, I couldn't help but smile through my sadness.

What did it hurt to hold onto that dream for just a moment, as ridiculous as it was? It was only my heart that would get broken.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Leaving behind Axel to find out his fate felt wrong, yet my conscience would not let me stay. I had no right to that information, since I was still hiding something very important from Axel.

Time and time again, I had tried to say the words. To tell Axel something that could tear us apart. Then I would falter. Guilt ate at me daily because of it.

So, I let him have his own secret. When he finally joined me to prepare for the celebration the pack decided to have, I didn't ask him, not because I didn't want to know, but because he should tell me when he was ready to.

It was clear the information weighed heavily on his mind. I could almost feel the turmoil of his alter through whatever bond we had forged in our time together. ívarr did not believe it to be a soul-bond. He thought the shifters were incapable of forming one because they already shared their soul with their animal, not from being lesser in any way. My friend had developed a deep appreciation for shifters and their ability to form a community, something we elves lacked. We lived too long to stay as connected as they did.

Shifters in high spirits filled the lawn behind the mansion where Axel and I lived. They did not know the full reason for the party, but were prepared to celebrate, nonetheless.

I lingered near Axel, letting him have his space and time with his twin. His family surrounded him, none pushing him for answers despite their curiosity. Without discussing it, it seemed we had all come to the same decision; to let Axel come to us when he was ready.

Someone had to have explained the situation to Blake. He and Kade smiled brightly at all the pack and gathered elves, anticipation lighting their eyes.

Though I would have liked to speak to Hakeem, I saw he was busy with the alpha, Asher. He brought his mate to him so they could discuss the news. I could only imagine the relief they shared, knowing they were only the first this would happen to, not some aberration.

The crowd hushed as Blake took his place at the front and explained the first part of why he had gathered them together: the partnership with the demon, Toth. There were the usual rumbles of descent, which Axel silenced with a glower. Then, Blake reminded them of how badly shifters were discriminated against in the past. They still were in some places.

Anticipation grew between those in the know as Blake explained there was more, and allowed Hiroshi to take over the explanation.

The silence grew to almost deafening levels as Hiroshi outlined what I already knew. Hearing it a second time did not lessen the impact. There had to be a reason their goddess had done this at the same time as ours had taken our fertility away. Why had they done this?

Hiroshi made his explanation short, then answered questions. He and Blake reassured people they would not demand the betas change if they were not ready. Many looked curious, far more than those who were scared.

I was the one put in charge of the line telling the betas their potential new designation with a confidentiality spell to hide the result for others. It was an honor to tell them and see wonder on their faces. Each and every shifter was happy with the result, like they had chosen it for themselves.

By the time all the betas had been informed, there was a party atmosphere in the air. Only Axel seemed uncomfortable. I wanted to go to him, reassure him, though I was not sure I would be welcome. Instead, I gave him the space he needed. Likely, too much of it.

As the weeks passed and the testing began, the demons found their place, Axel grew distant. He was still loving. We spent time together, there was just a guardedness that had not been there before.

I felt I deserved it for my deception. My guilt prevented me from just asking, while I knew Axel wanted me to ask. He wasn't ready to tell me. He wanted me to take control like I did in other aspects of our relationship. Axel wanted me to show I cared by demanding the truth from him.

It confounded his brother that I didn't know. As I explained, the truth was only Axel's to share when he was ready. As his Alpha, Blake could have ordered Axel to tell, but out of respect for him, he did not force it, either.

Shifters confused me. I would have expected them to be pleased about the possibility of more alphas and omegas in the world, but when the world discovered the cause of the beta sickness, the attacks on Sweetwater escalated. It got so bad the testing had to stop.

Blake had enough to contend with, but he also felt responsible for his pack mates and took Hakeem's advice over the situation with Asher and Roan. They were stuck in Abrocaelum and, unfortunately; it opened their omegas up to an attack. They were stolen from their home and taken to the former betrothed of Hiroshi.

Omegas would continue to surprise me, though, really, with this pack, nothing should. They continually did the impossible. Hiroshi demonstrated great strength, going beyond what most shifters could do in order to get free and save his alpha's

life. Then, beyond all odds, he and Tate ended up being fated. Tate and Asher were fated. Betas could have fated mates.

Rather than improve things between me and Axel, the news appeared to break something in him. He became more withdrawn, coming to bed later at night, so even the intimacy we had once shared, suffered. He was nearing his breaking point.

I only hoped he knew I would be there to pick up the pieces.

Cutting ties with the council had been a surprise move from the Alpha Pair. While I understood their reasoning, it had left the elves in a precarious situation. The council had funded our presence with the pack. I was just grateful they had given ívarr, as our supposed leader, a warning of what was to come, so we could discuss our plans.

Axel had stood close to me during the conversation with Blake. Perhaps he thought we were going to leave the pack. He had underestimated us. None of the elves in Sweetwater even considered leaving the pack to join the council. We saw the council for who they were: power hungry alphas unwilling to accept change. Yes, there were outliers, however, they were few and far between.

My lover relaxed when I took his hand, assuring him we were staying. Since the revelation of the beta gene, my mother and parliament had relaxed. They understood now that greater powers were at work, we just had to be patient, to help the shifters through this, then our reward would be granted.

By the time the babies were born, the family was mostly healed from their traumatic experiences. Roan had lost the use of his arm, but had gained a brother in Asher, and his father was back in his life. His father had gone one step further, by virtually adopting Asher and Tate as his sons.

They were proof, as if we needed it, that Sweetwater was favored by their goddess

when she gave Roan and Hiroshi an alpha female daughter. She tied the family tightly together by each twin having a different father.

ívarr had been beside himself to see Tate laying his egg and he talked of nothing but the egg for the weeks Tate was roosting. Then they went and made matters worse by allowing him to witness the birth of Hiroshi's twins! My friend had been insufferable after.

The party to celebrate the three new lives mirrored the one where the beta gene was unveiled so much it left goosebumps over my flesh. This time I wasn't sure just being around Axel was going to be enough. My love was hurting. His pain was etched so clearly in how he held his lean body I could almost feel it myself.

"Dear one," I whispered, coming up behind him and wrapping myself around him once the blessing on the babies was finished. "Later, you will tell me what you have been hiding." Axel shuddered, pushing back a sob. "It's time for us to unburden ourselves. Let me ease your worries."

"What if you can't?"

"Then let me share the burden."

Together we left the party after we had given our gifts and congratulations.

I felt the wall between me and Axel crumbling with each step we took to our new hut. It was a mini home, free of the mansion and the many bad memories there.

Axel had told me many stories, good and bad, of his time growing up in the mansion. It was a relief to escape those ghosts to a space untainted by anyone else. It was a temporary home. We hadn't discussed it, but Axel had plans to build something better for us next to his brother and Roan's family.

We entered, and I ensured the door was locked, then activated silencing wards. “Do you want to relax first? Perhaps have a bath?”

He shook his head. “No.” The silence went on for so long, I feared he would not speak. “Teárlach... I can’t... when I tell you this... it could end us.”

“Nothing in this life could do that, dear one. You are my heart. Please,” I implored him, reaching out a hand, “just tell me.”

Stepping close, Axel allowed me to wrap my arms around him. I felt him sob against my chest. “I’ve wanted this my whole life! I’m just scared.”

“Of what?”

“That you’ll see me differently.”

“After these months together, the happiest of my life, nothing could do that. I just need to know so I can fix things to make you happier.”

My words made him cry harder. “You can’t fix it. I’m an omega, T.”

The words clicked and suddenly everything made sense. Of course Axel was an omega. He loved babies, treasured other omegas because it was what he wanted to be.

He wasn’t finished. “That means I need an alpha if I want to have a baby. Not you, my elf. Some strange alpha!” Axel’s silver-blue eyes met mine, his fury clear. “Then I better not hope I’m stuck with him because how can I love anyone like I do you?”

I cupped his cheek. “There’s a way around this. We have time to find the solution.”

His anger faltered. “You... what?” He grasped my hand. “You do understand I don’t

want to squander this gift. I want a baby, T. One you can't give me. That means an alpha will have to—“

“No. It means you can be inseminated during a heat once they figure out how to unlock your omega side. You will not mate with an alpha and it will be donor sperm. In all the ways that matter, I will be the baby's father.”

“But—“

“No, Axel. I will make it happen for you. I'll find a way to give you everything you've dreamed of,” I vowed with all the power I had.

Another shiver escaped him. Desire. I felt it coming from him.

“What about a knot? I'll need one for when I go into heat.”

A smirk quirked my lips. He was thinking of us long term and that fire between us was back. I hadn't lost him. “I have ways. How about I show you?”

Our mouths met in an explosive kiss. Before I could catch up with what was happening, I was naked, Axel under me, also nude.

He was grinning. The weeks of pain between us fell away. “Are you going to be my alpha, T?” he teased.

“Yes. Now I'm going to open you up so you'll take my cock. Then I'll stretch you on my knot.”

Taking the oil from the drawer, I kissed my way down Axel's body, avoiding his leaking cock. Each of us was too keyed up for prolonged foreplay since we had not been intimate in a while, our rift keeping us apart.

I licked over his hole, enjoying the musky taste of him. He cried out as I repeated the motion until he softened under my tongue. More licking, sucking and some nips had Axel writhing under me.

Slicking my fingers, I made quick work of stretching him as I sucked on his balls and ran my tongue over the length of him. I paid particular attention to the crown, enjoying the flavor of his precome.

Unable to wait any longer, I slicked myself, slung Axel's legs around my hips and entered him in one smooth thrust.

He was so hot and tight inside. I could only imagine how he would feel as an omega, slick leaking from him as I fucked him. I couldn't wait to unlock that side of him, to make his every dream come true.

I pumped my hips fast and hard, the pleasure already reaching a fever pitch.

Axel reached for me. My motions slowed as I covered his body with my own. He clung to me as we moved together, chasing our peak.

His emotions were mine. We were linked, body and soul, regardless of what anyone else said. Being so deeply connected to him ratcheted up the feelings of pleasure as we made love.

This was reconnection, a reaffirmation of our love and bond. Axel was mine. I was his. Nothing, not my princehood or his omega traits could tear us apart. I would give him everything he wanted just to make him happy.

"Close," he panted in my ear, his fingers digging in almost painfully to my shoulders.

Knowing I needed to demonstrate I could be his alpha, I whispered a spell, more of

an intention, sending the magic to my cock. The base swelled, forming a knot, just like a shifter alpha, tying us together.

He gasped as I stretched him almost to the point of pain.

I rocked inside him as we both came.

His tears were no surprise. “I didn’t know,” he gasped.

“Knots can be made with magic. Everything else we can figure out.”

Axel clasped my face, forcing me to meet his gaze. “You won’t mind that the baby won’t be yours?”

“They will be mine because they will be yours. Everything of mine is yours just as all of you is mine.”

“T—“

“No, we have been given a gift. Before we would have had to adopt a shifter child. This way you can use a donor. We can have an elf child with a surrogate...” I was getting carried away with myself. Creating a fantasy life.

“It’s a beautiful dream,” Axel said wistfully, almost as if he was seeing the same mental picture as me.

“I will make it a reality. I swear it. You will have a child, I promise.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

When I woke from a night where T demonstrated just how able he was to act like an alpha with three rounds of sex where he knotted me each time, I found him standing at the side of the bed, looking at me.

He was dressed in his fanciest elven clothing. A turquoise blue tunic which matched the color of his eyes, embroidered with golden thread, his family symbol in the middle. The pants he wore were tight fitting, showing off the shapely length of his legs and highlighting his muscular thighs. His long, beautiful, platinum blond hair was tied in several complicated braids, with clasps made of gold decorating him.

In short, he looked otherworldly, expensive, out of reach.

Until he smiled at me. “I’ve been waiting for you to wake, dear one. Can you escape your duties for the day?”

“Uh, maybe?” I framed it as a question. It really depended on what he wanted us to do.

“I would like to take you to Abrocaelum.”

Those words had me shooting upright, ready to spring for the bed. “Are you serious? Let’s go!”

Teárlach chuckled. “Please, calm down. Shower first. I’m sure you would like to make a good impression on my people. You will want to dress... nicely... there is something we must discuss first.”

“Oh-kay,” I said, sitting back on the bed.

“All is well, Axel. Please tell your family where you will be going and get yourself ready. Then we can talk on our way to the portal.”

“So it’s nothing bad?” T seemed to be nervous.

“I do not think so. Perhaps you will have a different opinion.”

Intrigued, I picked up my phone. “I’m going to call Chase and text Dalton. Would you grab us some breakfast?”

Seeing I wanted some privacy, T went into the kitchen area.

He called our house a hut, but it was a tiny one bedroom home. It had a compact kitchen living area, a bedroom big enough for a full sized bed—a necessary item with shifters—and a decent bathroom.

Texting Dalton was first on my list.

Axel: Won’t be in the office today. Anything pressing then ask Chase. Back tomorrow.

He didn’t take long to reply.

Dalton: Everything okay?

Axel: Fine. Heading to Abrocaelum with T.

When he didn’t immediately reply, I called Chase, who answered after two rings.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Just the sound of his voice made me smile. My twin was connected to me in a way Blake couldn't be. We had that extra bond.

“Yeah. I told him.”

“Fucking finally! Honestly, I was going to tell him if you didn't. You were just hurting each other by keeping it a secret. How'd he take it?”

Just as I didn't need to be told he was relieved not to have the gene, Chase hadn't really needed to be told I wished to be an omega. Saying it out loud hadn't been necessary. I'd just needed to say the words. To make them real by speaking them.

While he hated keeping it secret from Blake, he understood the necessity.

As it was, I was happier people were assuming I was an alpha and I wasn't asking to change because I didn't want to take over the pack.

The thought of taking over the pack made me ill. That had always been Blake's destiny. Not mine, even if I'd been an alpha.

I was silent for a minute, but Chase let me be. He knew when to push and when to back off.

“He... uh... there was talk of artificial in—“

“Nope! Don't need to hear it! Fuck dude, that mental image will be with me for the rest of my life! So he was cool?”

“Yeah. He promised I would...” Shit, I couldn't even say it myself.

“He promised you a baby. However, that works.” Chase was using his gentle voice. The one he rarely broke out. “You got lucky with him, Ax.”

“He’s taking me to Abrocaelum today. Has something important to tell me first.”

“Do you think he’s finally going to spill the beans on the secret he’s been keeping?” I could feel Chase’s anticipation. He was as anxious to know as I was.

“Think so. Can you cover for me today? I didn’t have any meetings planned...”

“No worries. I’ve got you. I’d better get a call, text, smoke signal, anything, to tell me what it is he’s been hiding.”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

I got ready for the day as if I was meeting the council or some investors for our cider business. That meant my nicest suit, including a silver tie that apparently brought out the color in my eyes.

Breakfast was a quick, quiet affair, both of us too caught up in our thoughts to really focus on a conversation.

Teárlach smiled when I came from our room freshly dressed and saw what I was wearing. “You look... you’ve rendered me speechless.”

“I have?” I felt a blush rise in my cheeks as I smoothed down the jacket.

He approached and set his hands at my waist, squeezing lightly. “You are perfect...”

“Why do I feel like there is a but in there?”

“Because I had hoped to get you into elven clothing.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? Is that a good or bad oh?” He searched my face for the answer.

“Good. I think.” Wearing elven clothes felt... important. Who were we going to see?

“I would love to see you in the clothing of my people and have had something made for you. May I show it to you? If you decide not to wear it, I will not be offended.”

Knowing he had gone to great lengths for me gave me butterflies. This man, this elf, truly loved me and only wanted to see me happy.

“Please show them to me. I can’t wait to see what they look like.”

Teárlach went to the loveseat where I noticed a garment bag draped over it. “I collected this whilst you were in the shower.” He unzipped the bag carefully, revealing a tunic with a high collar, the style and cut reminiscent of Teárlach’s. It was made of a deep blue fabric with the subtlest sheen of silver through it. Embroidered on the front near where my heart would be, was a howling wolf.

“I thought you should have your family represented in a similar fashion to mine.”

“This is...” I trailed off, unsure what to say to properly voice my feelings.

“Now it is my turn to render you speechless,” he teased. “Can I take it this is a good thing?”

“It is. I love it.”

“Would you like to wear it to my home?”

Without answering, I picked up the garment bag and went to our room to change. The clothing was impossibly soft and stretchy. It fit me perfectly, which I was a tad perturbed by since I hadn't provided any measurements. I chuckled to myself at the thought of T measuring me in my sleep.

I returned to the living room wearing the new outfit and my most comfortable lace-up boots.

Teárlach practically glowed with happiness. “You are perfect!” He motioned to a chair at the breakfast table. “Come, I must sort your hair.”

“My hair?” I touched the soft waves that came to my chin with a nervous hand as I sat. “Why?”

“Well, for a start, I cannot see those lovely eyes when you hide behind it.” I blushed hard. “For another, as you are a warrior for your people, you have earned the right to wear braids.”

That confused me. “Teagan wears braids.”

He smiled brightly. “She does. Teagan served in the army briefly.”

My mind whirled, thinking back to the appearance of the elves. “Most of them wear at least one braid.”

“Ah, I wondered when you would realize. All elves serve in the army, however most only do the basic training. It does mean they can wear the braids. The more of them and the more complicated they are, suggests an elf's ranking.”

“So you’ve served for a long time and are high ranking?”

“Yes, I am... a general, I believe is the correct term.”

With gentle fingers, T got to work on my hair. He worked swiftly, creating a simple style. Two pieces were braided from the front to the back, joining into a single braid at the back.

“Your hair is much too short for anything more complicated, I’m afraid.” T fussed with the strands, smoothing them until he was happy. “I much prefer your hair now it is longer.” He had commented on my hair before, which is why I hadn’t gone to get it cut.

“Come, we should go to the portal. I have a few things to say as we walk.”

We left the house, leaving the door unlocked. There was enough magic in the place only a few could enter without prior permission, so locks were pointless. Not that we had anything to steal. Both of us lived simply.

“Now I’m nervous.”

Teárlach paused, his grip on my hand shifted as he turned me to face him. “If you decide to return to Sweetwater at any point, I will not be offended. When I tell you this, know I did not plan for this to go on for as long as it has.”

He turned and led me away from the temporary homes, the portal was just a short walk from the mansion near the trees that surrounded it.

T stayed quiet until we were clear of anyone else, close enough to see the portal, but not have anyone overhear.

“In my time at Sweetwater I have had only one regret.”

My heart sank. Was it me? Starting a relationship with a shifter knowing we were incompatible?

“No, dear one. Not you. Never you.”

Had I spoken that aloud?

“I feel your doubt. No. You are my joy, the reason I regret my lie.”

Lie?

“When we arranged to come to Sweetwater, I asked my party and the elves that followed to hide something very important from you all for fear of how it would affect how you viewed me. I have since come to regret it because I know none of you would have treated me any differently had you known. It has meant there has been some distance between us as the longer it went on, the more the omission felt like a lie.”

“T? What is it?”

The silence built between us until it was almost painful.

His eyes fluttered closed. He took a deep breath, centering himself, then opened them, looking at me so mournfully, I felt like I would cry at any moment.

“I am the Crown Prince of the elves. The current and only heir to the throne.”

“What?” I stumbled away from his reaching hands. “What the fuck?”

Breathe, my alter urged. He is still your elf. Calm down and think.

Right, I agreed with my wolf. I just need to think.

How could this be? I searched through my memories, willing it to make sense. It didn't take long for it all to click into place. The elf who had started saying 'Your Highness,' but had turned it to 'sir' then the way they all the elves turned to him for guidance. Even ívarr at times. I had thought it strange. Now it all fit.

But where did I fit? The man, elf, I was in love with, was a prince. Not just a prince, actually, the only heir to the throne. One day he would be king!

"Where does this leave me? What about us?" Were we just temporary? Were all his sweet words a lie? All the promises he made just waiting to be broken.

"You are not angry?" T frowned.

I laughed, it was a shaky sound, but there was humor there. "No, T. Confused, worried, scared. Not angry."

"This changes nothing between us," he said firmly. "You are my heart, Axel. Without you I would surely fade."

I wasn't quite ready to hear him. "We knew something was off. That you weren't telling us something. Being a secret prince wasn't what we thought—"

"I am curious to know what you thought."

"Anything from a secret family to an illness. Someone did have a government official as a guess." I chuckled. "Seems Kade won the betting pool."

“You really don’t mind?” He reached for me again. This time I went into his arms, resting my face against his neck. “I swear the only thing I have lied about is my status. What I feel for you is unchanging.”

“Just tell me what it means for us,” I pleaded, desperately clinging to him.

As stupid as it sounded, T being a secret prince wasn’t a problem to me. A scorned mate, a family, a hundred other scenarios had gone through my mind. Just not that. I really wasn’t angry about it either. Only really worried about what it meant for us as a couple.

He was pensive for a moment. “It will be difficult for them to accept you, but I want you by my side. Always. Whenever I see myself as king, in a long distant future, the goddess willing, I see you next to me, as consort. It will be a hard road, yet I believe we will gain acceptance.” He paused, kissing the top of my head to soothe me. “Once we figure out the fertility crisis, I should look for a surrogate, so that I can have an heir. Once we have a suitable heir in place, the pressure will be off us.”

“Just as easy as that?” I drawled, rolling my eyes.

“It will not be easy,” he conceded. “There are many who see shifters as lesser. Their opinions will only be changed by getting to know you, and through you, the pack.” His voice faltered for a second. “Though I cannot give you the baby you so desire, I will ensure you do have a child of your own. We will raise them as siblings, though only the elf child can be the heir to my realm.”

“You’ve thought this through.” His faith and plans were reassuring.

“I’ve thought of nothing else.”

Yes, that helped. His solid confidence we could make it work, no matter the obstacles

in our path.

What do you think? I asked my alter.

The wolf deep inside rumbled and barked. He is ours. Family. He will do as he says.

After the sickness, I had been closer to my wolf than ever. I trusted their judgment.

I broke from our hug and took his hands. Meeting his eyes, I made my choice. “Okay. Maybe I’m being naive, but I want to try this. Let’s see where life takes us, together.”

His joy was clear in his eyes. “Yes, together.”

“Prince Teárlach, would you do me the honor of showing me Abrocaelum?”

He smiled wide, showing pearly teeth. “Dear one, I would love nothing more.”

We toured a village close to the portal, the one where Asher lived for a while. The elves there were very welcoming, asking a lot of questions about my wolf and expressing their joy at seeing me in their clothes. Someone from the village had made the outfit.

I think T took me there because they had the most experience with shifters as it was the place Hakeem often took his charges. If they realized we were a couple, then they didn’t say anything about it, which was the best I could hope for this early on. It would take a while for the elves in Abrocaelum to get used to the idea of a mixed species relationship. The ones in Sweetwater had been the same at first. Wary of offending us by commenting on it. Now it made sense why.

A freaking prince was my boyfriend!

My wolf was still amused by the entire thing.

For the most part, Abrocaelum was much like the pack, except, like in the demon realm, they used magic and renewable technologies to power things. In some ways they were more advanced than us, it was humbling.

“Do not fret, I will not take you to the castle. It is not a simple journey, you would have to shift to keep up with me.”

Teárlach could move as fast as a vampire, though he admitted they usually rode as it used a lot of energy. Even in wolf form, it was a struggle to keep up with him. It was like he became as fast as the wind moving through the trees. I didn't want my first time at the castle to be all sweaty and exhausted from running. We would have to plan properly and likely ride horses there. Horses often didn't like me because of my wolf.

My alter huffed. Stupid beasts fear I want to eat them, not travel.

Many of the villagers asked us to eat with them. “They see me walking through their home and want to boast about hosting the prince to their friends.” T grinned, looking perfectly at ease.

As soon as we had arrived, he had been swarmed by the people, all of them asking multiple questions about Sweetwater.

“You know, if you want the people to accept us as a couple, perhaps you should invite them to spend time in Sweetwater, just maybe in small groups.”

“That is a good suggestion. I shall discuss it with the elves in Sweetwater and with your cousin. It would be best to check if he had security concerns first.”

“And...” I took his arm, “we should have food with them. Is there a community space, like we have in the compound?”

“There is.”

The rest of the time was spent having a feast in the center of the village. Teárlach listened patiently as elves approached and inquired how research was going. I knew it broke his heart being unable to give them answers. Instead, I gave them hope when I explained about the beta sickness and how the elves had helped us find the reason for it. It showed progress was being made.

“Though our time was short for this visit, would you like to return? Perhaps visit my mother? She will be offended when she finds out I was in Abrocaelum and did not see her.”

I thought of the distant castle T had shown me from the roof of one of the buildings. Nerves fluttered in my belly at the idea of going there, then I looked into Teárlach’s hopeful turquoise eyes and knew I would go anywhere, put up with disdain, hate, anything, just to be with him.

“Next time, for sure.”

It was the right thing to say. He gathered me into a tight hug and kissed me until I was breathless.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Hiroshi was distracted as I accompanied Xavier to the clinic with the babies. I'd grown to like Roan's father. He had come into the pack when Roan had needed him most, and after a long period of estrangement. Like many, Xavier had struggled with the unusual bonding, but when it had been important, he had put all of that aside to truly be there for his son and his family.

Now he considered them all to be his sons, and therefore, all the children to be his grandchildren. He lived with them so he could assist them with childcare.

Given how precious the children were, in particular, the alpha female, Jewel, and the rare Japanese tiger alpha, Noah, they had to be guarded at all times. Then there was Maddox, who technically should not exist being that he was born of two beta parents. I was happy to assist with that, especially given with how easily the pack had accepted my royal status.

We had come back from Abrocaelum and I had told Alpha Blake, Kade, Dakota, Jasper, Aldrin... the list went on. If they were important to the pack, then I told them the truth. Perhaps I should have given them more credit in the first place, because it didn't alter their perception or treatment of me.

So, given their easy forgiveness and acceptance, it was effortless for me to step up and help them when they needed it. I genuinely liked the members of the Sweetwater pack and wanted to see them thrive. It was easy to see why they were so favored by their goddess. They were just good people.

Xavier asked if Hiroshi was okay as I took over cleaning out the pump for him. I admired Hiroshi's commitment to feeding the babies by himself. He and Tate were

now breastfeeding, something I had not known the omega males could do. Of course, magic was involved in starting production, but their bodies were capable of it.

Once it was properly clean, I placed it on the side to dry. Hiroshi had explained the importance of sterilization. Not that a simple illness would affect the shifter children. Still, it was best to be cautious with such precious babies.

“Sorry, Xavier, distracted by trying to help Roan,” I heard Hiroshi say as I tidied up the small kitchen area where he liked to pump.

“Help Roan? What’s wrong?” The alarm was startling in Xavier’s tone. He had gone from having a simple conversation to being on high alert in a second.

“No, it’s his arm. I need to figure out a way to boost my healing so I can put a focused stream of it into the nerves and muscles to really repair all the damage there. It’ll need to break up the patchwork I did roughly when he was slipping away.” Hiroshi was twisting his fingers nervously. It was clear to me this was really affecting him mentally. His omega senses must have been working overdrive, especially as such a talented healer.

“Slipping away? Moon above! How bad was it?” Xavier had Jewel on his hip as he smoothed Noah’s hair absentmindedly. His wolf likely needed the grounding touches. Wolves were much more touch oriented than some of the other shifter types. It would have been soothing to both Xavier and his grandchildren, particularly Jewel. Maddox watched them, his head moving between the adults.

“They said it was close, but this, I’ve never heard you make it sound so dire.”

“We nearly lost him,” Hiroshi said in a pained voice. “It’s why I could only patch and not have him lose the arm altogether.”

Xavier looked to be a moment from running out of the clinic to check on his son. He put Jewel back into the stroller and slumped into a seat.

The situation with Roan made me wonder if my magic and Hiroshi's healing ability working together would work.

"Hiroshi, I might have an idea for a way to do this," I said carefully. While I was reluctant to give him false hope, I truly wanted to repay the pack for their continued faith in me despite my deception. "We should discuss this later."

"Really?" Hiroshi lit up with delight.

I inclined my head.

"That would be amazing! Any help you could give me would be wonderful. I really want to do this to help Roan, especially with Jewel being an alpha. I think he would feel better if he had more movement in that arm."

Nodding again to show I understood, I said, "I will return later. Roan should be here."

"After the clinic is closed?" he asked, looking eager to get started.

"Yes." Unwilling to go into it further, letting the idea brew in my mind, I joined the other guards outside, but not before I heard a much calmer Xavier say his goodbyes to Hiroshi.

"I'm going to continue my walk and take the babies to see Daddy up at the main house. Crown Jewel, Noah baby, Maddox my man, say bye to Otosan."

"You must curb your expectations," I counseled in the clinic after it had closed. It was just me and Hiroshi there as we waited for Roan to finish up over in the mansion.

Instead of moving the offices to their home, the Alpha Pair had decided to keep their business separate from their living quarters. It was better, security wise, also. Axel had often despaired of how many people had access to the mansion. It was what had allowed the attack, which had almost cost Roan his arm the first time, well before his near fatal attack during Hiroshi's rescue.

"I know! Honestly, I do. I just really want this to work. To give him something special."

"You do not think a child and a fated mate were special enough? I can assure you the man I know would rather he lost the arm altogether than not have either of you."

Hiroshi slumped in defeat. "You're right. I know you are. It's just I've always been this superstar healer and this is the first time I've failed."

"Failed? I do not see failure. Roan kept his arm, his life, because you used that superstar power on him. I've heard the stories. What you did was remarkable. Had even Aldrin been there, I'm not sure Roan would be alive."

The omega was quiet as he got himself together. "Thank you. I needed that reminder. Even if this doesn't work, at least I'll know I've done literally everything I could."

I rose to my feet warily as Roan entered the room. The alpha was always so busy I had never been given an opportunity to get to know him better. Often I was too busy helping Axel and Deke with the security of the pack and elves.

"Hey!" Hiroshi went over to his mate to kiss him and say hello. "Your dad said he let the cat out of the bag about trying another healing. I just have a good feeling about this one!"

His enthusiasm was catching, yet I saw Roan rub his face wearily with his working

hand. "I'll give it a try." He looked his mate in the eyes. "This has to be the last time, Hiro. We need to let this go. I'm fine without it."

My heart ached in sympathy for the shifter. It must have been difficult to become used to the lack of sensation in his arm, without having to contend with the regular healings I knew Hiroshi was subjecting him to. He probably did not want to get his hopes up.

"Okay," Hiroshi began to explain, "so Teárlach is going to hold on to my shoulder and try a spell that he thinks will focus his magic into me. He's going to be an... I forget how he said it." Hiro looked at me for the right word.

"Amplifier," I supplied.

"Yeah, like in those books you read!" Hiro's smile for his mate was so soft and sweet that I felt like I was intruding on a personal moment.

"Okay, so T is going to amplify your healing?" Roan asked.

"Yes, so I can target the area with a surge of power. It needs to break down what is blocking the area. Then I can use what's left to heal the damage that hasn't repaired itself."

It helped me direct my power, knowing exactly how Hiroshi was going to do the healing.

"So you think it's the initial healing that was the issue?" Roan's brow puckered with a frown.

The light in Hiroshi's eyes dimmed with sadness. "Yes. Simply, I threw as much power at you as I could afford, maybe more, just trying to pull you back from the

brink. I think the too rapid healing left scar tissue affecting nerves. It didn't help that it had already been badly injured before."

Roan took his mate into a hug, gripping him with his working arm. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad. You saved my life. Everything else wasn't important."

"I know. I guess it's just that I'm used to being the best. That sounds ridiculous doesn't it? All over the world I have this rep and I feel like I'm not living up to it with your healing." They shared another private moment that made me wish I'd waited outside until I was needed.

"You are so important to me. I just want to get this right to show you that."

The pair were adorable together, but they had a family to get home to and I wanted to find Axel. "I am ready when you are, Hiroshi."

Nodding, Hiroshi stepped back. "Take off your shirt, please," he said to Roan.

He did as his mate asked, and sat on the examination table, putting him at a more comfortable height for Hiroshi to rest his hands on his skin. The omega was quite a bit shorter than both me and Roan.

The skin on Roan's shoulder was badly scarred from that day. In many circles, a wound such as his would have been life ending. Now it was a morbid trophy of a battle won. Hiroshi had really pulled off a miracle to keep Roan alive after such an injury.

With no cue, Hiroshi began his healing. The glow wrapped around Roan, comforting with a faint prickle to it as it sought out injury. I loved to watch the healers work. We elves could heal our own, but nothing to this degree.

I watched for a moment as Hiroshi's innate magic sought out the scar tissue and began to break it down.

Then I began the words for healing in my native tongue and laid both hands on Hiroshi, directing the power through him. The glow from my magic was a faint pink color. Hardly a surprising color since it meant compassion, nurturing. That's what I felt. Compassion for Hiroshi's mission to heal his mate and for Roan's pain. Nurturing as I wanted to help Hiroshi's magic grow so it could fulfill its purpose.

My magic had only grown to show the color pink when I had mastered a modicum of inner peace. Hours of meditating and training had helped me master my magic, giving me the faint pink color.

It joined with Hiroshi's gold, making it brighter until my eyes hurt with how radiant it was.

Unconnected to Roan, I was unsure how the healing was going, so I continued to push magic through the omega.

I saw Roan's fingers twitch.

"Keep going!" he urged.

Feeling tired but buoyed by our success, I chanted louder, my magic deepening in color as my passion intensified. I was helping! No longer was I just a prince or a general in the army, I was using my goddess given magic to help.

Deep pink and gold merged into a stunning bronze as Roan's fingers truly flexed in a way that proved this was working. He gripped the edge of the bed easily, all signs of pain gone.

Still, the magic continued. I felt a little dizzy, yet I could not stop, caught up in my joy at our success.

“Hiroshi, T, let it go. It’s done! Look!” Roan raised both of his hands in the air, dislodging Hiroshi’s grip on him and breaking the circle of magic.

“T, let him go!”

I did not hear him. The magic compelled me to keep pouring into Hiroshi.

“Get out!” Roan shoved my hold off Hiroshi.

The remaining power snapped back into us with a painful crack, though Hiroshi appeared unaware.

I understood why when I caught the sweet smell in the air. My face paled.

“Okay, I’ll let everyone know!” With one last look at the pair, I turned and fled the room, leaving the clinic entirely.

The healing had worked! Not just on Roan. It had sent Hiroshi into heat.

After I let Xavier know not to expect them home any time soon, I had to tell everyone. This was important. I felt it in my bones.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

“Today’s the day!” Dalton practically sang. “I can feel it. He’s going to restart the testing!”

“Hmm,” I made a noncommittal noise. I knew there were a lot of betas pushing Blake for the testing to resume. There had been many false starts, with the elves wondering why we couldn’t replicate the first change.

Thing was, we didn’t know exactly what had changed Tate and Asher. Was it the bite they got from Roan? From Hiroshi? Was it from both? Or was it just prolonged exposure to their pheromones? All the sex they were having? Were there environmental factors we were missing?

Over the couple of months since Hiroshi and Tate had their babies, testing was supposed to be ongoing. Except it wasn’t just as simple as telling the betas to do x, y, and z, then, boom! they’d be an alpha or omega. We didn’t have the magic formula to make it happen.

Blake had the witches try some potions. Poppy and her wife, Zinna, had been spending a lot of time in Abrocaelum and were working on potions there. They thought they could unlock the gene using magic. So far, they had been unsuccessful.

We had tried it as a form of healing. Nothing.

It was nil for... I’d lost count there. The betas were exceedingly patient, but Blake felt them getting frustrated.

The truth was, we didn’t have a clue why it had worked for Tate and Asher, and

Blake wasn't willing to continually break his pack's hearts until we had more information.

Jake and Sebastian were begging for a chance to try breaking their bond and re-bonding. Today, Blake would give an answer on if he was going to allow it.

"Oh, come on! This is exciting! After all the false starts, it's good to have some news."

"It is," I admitted, "but there's so much research still to do. It's not like there are a ton of alphas lining up to bite betas, especially if they are going to turn into alphas."

"Oh, we had a call from Poppy! The witches might have something this time. I've got a good feeling."

"Right, well, I better get to the meeting. Are you coming to take notes?"

"With the way you remember conversations? Yes," he snarked as he picked up his tablet.

We left for Blake's office together. I got the feeling Dalton had something to say. He kept opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish and occasionally bumping into me. I didn't get a chance to ask before we got to the office, the door standing ajar as the room filled.

Teagan, instead of T, was standing with ívarr behind Blake's desk. Dakota was in a corner seat, looking prepared to take notes of his own. Roan sat with Kade and Deke on the sofa, Chase was at their feet looking relaxed. Aldrin and James were sharing a loveseat. Poppy was on the video screen, a sweet smile on her face. We were the last to arrive.

I took my place behind Kade, massaging his shoulders. Dalton sat on the floor next to Chase, knocking his shoulder in a familiar gesture.

The meeting really didn't take long. There were another couple of treatments the elves wanted to use. Gene therapy from Tate and Asher with compatible betas. Ívarr was assigned the task of looking for testing subjects. Poppy had more potions, each going along the lines of power boosting.

Blake gave the green light for Jake and Sebastian to try re-bonding.

"Axel, can you wait, please?" my youngest brother asked as the meeting broke up. I nodded and stood to the side to let others out.

Kade squeezed my hand, Chase hugged me, "just tell him, please."

Well, it seemed I was getting questioned.

One by one, I watched them filter out, all looking at me curiously. I heard Roan tell Kade he was headed to the clinic to try one last healing. T had told me he might be late for dinner. At this rate, there was every chance he would beat me home.

"Could you close the door? Maybe set a ward?" Blake asked. He took a seat on the sofa and patted the cushion next to him.

I did as I was asked, reminded of the time, months ago, when we'd done something similar. That time, it had been a warning. Was this to be another one?

"If you're going to say anything about Teárlach being a prince," I said as I took the offered seat next to him. "I don't want to hear it. My relationship is off the table for discussion. We'll work it out or not. I love him. He loves me. I have faith it'll work out."

“Me too. I’m not worried about that at all.” Blake shrugged easily. “Look, I don’t want to be having this conversation—“

“Great,” I said, standing.

Blake gripped my wrist. “Axel, please. Just... Can we talk? I feel like you’ve been avoiding anything that isn’t about the babies or pack duties.”

I stared him straight in the eyes. Of course, it was this conversation. It had been brewing between us since I’d been told my results and had chosen to keep them quiet.

“The pack—“

“Is that the only reason you want to know what I’m supposed to be? Worried they’ll want me to take over?” I asked bitterly.

“No! So you are an alpha, then? That’s why you’ve been hiding it?”

I scoffed, then said nothing else.

“Do you want the pack? I’ll step aside for you to take over.” Blake reached for my hand. I felt his wolf and the agitation they both held tightly. I let him take it, trying to calm them both.

“Blake, nothing in this world could take this pack from you, least of all me.” Our eyes met and held.

“Then why didn’t you tell people you’re an alpha?”

“Because I’m not. I wasn’t going to lie to anyone.”

We stared at each other while what I said worked its way through his overloaded brain. He'd recently turned twenty-three, had triplets under one, and a massive pack. He could be forgiven for failing to get what I was saying.

"Blake, I'm an omega."

"You... what?"

"The test says I'm an omega."

"And... you're happy about that?"

He didn't say it in any particular way, so I held in my reaction. I knew he wouldn't get it.

"Ever since you were born, I've wanted to be an omega. It's the only thing I've ever wanted."

"But, Teárlach..."

"He knows. I thought I'd have to give him up to have a baby, but he wants to try a sperm donor when we can figure it out."

Blake's face was a mask of shock. "So you've really thought this through?"

"Yeah. I just let people assume I was an alpha. Not many will want me as Second as an omega."

He winced then. "Yeah, I get it. Old-fashioned but—"

"But there's been enough changes here without that, too. When the time comes for

me to change, I'll step down."

"Ax, no!" Blake's face was filled with conflict. He knew as well as I did the pack would make it difficult for him to keep me as Second. When my omega instinct kicked in, I wouldn't be as quick to attack. I would be more guarded, defending others in the pack instead of taking out the aggressors. Unless I was like Kade, but he only did that to protect his babies.

"It's fine, Blake. It's my choice to make and I'm happy to do that for the good of the pack. Anything to make life easier for you. Goddess knows, you've had it tough since you took over."

"Wow!" I chuckled, since I knew Blake likely wanted to swear. The babies were talking and little sponges that they were, copied everything. Chase was barely allowed to speak around them. "An omega, huh? That's awesome. I'm glad you got what you wanted."

"Yeah, I can't wait. One day I'll have a baby of my own."

"We better get on with unlocking all these alphas and omegas then."

I left Blake's office feeling a lot lighter for finally telling him. We'd parted with hugs and promises he would do all he could to keep me as his Second. It was sweet of him to even think of trying, but I'd already made my mind up. I was in a relationship with an elf prince, my time as Second was coming to an end, regardless.

Dalton looked flustered as I returned to my office. Chase and I both had desks inside the small room, though we tried to stick to only one of us working at a time since the space was so cramped. As it was, Dalton had to have his desk outside in the vestibule, there just wasn't the space for three desks.

“Everything okay?” I asked as I took a seat.

“Um... there were a couple of calls while you were out. I filled some orders and pushed off emails for Dakota... nothing much.

None of that really accounted for how twitchy Dalton was. He paced the room, straightening things that were perfectly fine.

“Are you excited about the testing starting again?”

He cocked his head but avoided eye contact. “Yeah, I was thinking about taking part. I’ve wanted...”

“I’ve seen you with the babies. You’ll be a great omega,” I said honestly. Dalton loved little kids, was awesome at looking after toddlers, and could change a diaper without blinking. The man was gifted.

The corner of his mouth twitched with a smile before it dropped.

“So, I, uh, well, the thing is...” He resumed pacing.

“Spit it out, Dalton, please. It’s been a long day. I need to finish up these reports and go home.” I shuffled the papers about, giving him time to find his words.

“A condition of the testing is a partner,” he finally said, nerves written all over his face.

“And? What’s the problem?”

“I was wondering if you’d be my partner?” He said it so quickly the words ran together. He braced himself on my desk while waiting for my answer.

“What?”

“Would you be my partner? The alpha to my omega?” He looked so hopeful it actually hurt that I was going to break his heart.

“I can’t.” I tried not to show my pity. Dalton hated to be pitied.

“Why not?” He backed away from the desk, frustration written all over him. “We’d make a great couple! I’ve had a crush on you for the longest time. I know you’re with the elf, but—“

“That’s not why, and while I’m flattered, we couldn’t work.” I played with the wolf ring Teárlach had gotten me for Valentine’s Day. It was comforting and designed to shift with me, thanks to magic.

Dalton’s face was so flushed, he looked like all the blood had shot to his face. He was one of my favorite people, despite his tendencies to organize me within an inch of my life. He put up with my shit, and I was just finding out why.

Damn. I had not seen the crush.

“Why, for goddess’ sake, wouldn’t we?” He tugged at his hair. “We’re friends, have fun together, I love your family—“

I took a deep breath and just told him the truth. “Dalton, I’m an omega. Like you.”

He crumpled to the floor, stunned. “What?”

I went to his side and wrapped my arms around him. “That’s what I was just telling Blake. So, while I’m flattered, we just aren’t compatible.”

His face twisted, then he broke out in heaving sobs. “What am I going to do? I... I hoped it would be you!”

“We’ll find you an alpha. Either a beta with the alpha gene, or an alpha who would be getting such a great catch with you.”

Tears streamed down his face. “I can’t believe it. An omega. Like me.”

Tightening my grip on him, I tried to be the friend he needed. I hated crushing his hopes, but I had to live my truth. Telling him now saved him pain later.

“Guess we have more in common than we thought,” I said wryly.

His watery chuckle lifted my spirits. His arms wrapped around me. We would be fine. I just needed to help my friend’s dream come true too.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Stumbling, my body weakening with every step I took, I made my way home to the small hut I shared with Axel. He told me it wasn't called a hut, but rather a cabin. It had a few rooms and all the modern conveniences that I enjoyed. Despite being very plain, the cabin had tasteful decorations. I would have preferred more of the forest to be represented in the home we shared. Still, there was time to make it our own. Or we could choose to wait until our house was fully constructed before creating a true sense of home. We had plenty of time to decide what to do since our home was lower on the list than others.

Time was something elves had plenty of. Regardless of my mother's wishes, I was staying with Axel until I was really needed at home. Besides, I had not completed my mission and solved the fertility crisis. I would not leave without the answers I sought.

Every day we seemed to get further and further away. It felt hopeless at times.

Shifters, elves, others, all called out to me as I made my way home, my energy rapidly dwindling, but my focus was solely on telling Axel what had happened. He deserved to know before I faded.

I could feel the darkness pulling me under. It took all the strength I had to just put one foot in front of the other to get home to him. I should have remembered to charge my cell phone.

For hours after I'd assisted Hiroshi with the healing, I'd felt unstoppable, giving me a false sense of security. Energized beyond anything I had experienced before, I had run through the compound to tell everyone I needed to about what had happened.

A shifter had commented that it looked like I had overdosed on caffeine. They had laughed at me. I had found it odd.

I had only left once I was sure I had done everything necessary to ensure the couple had everything they needed for Hiroshi's heat, so they would not be left hungry or thirsty. The rest of their family was amused but overjoyed also at the sudden heat. A shifter usually had at least one year before heats returned after giving birth.

Ívarr had trapped me in a meeting for hours when all I wanted to do was run through the forest. He wanted to discuss the implications of what our magic meant for the shifters who were extra gifted. We saw all shifters as gifted. They each had an animal soul within them. Those with extra gifts just had something more, a latent magic that manifested in just one particular way, which begged the question, could we unlock them further? Would that help us? Was that what we were there for?

Now, I was finally on my way home to Axel and feeling all of my energy slipping away, like the adrenaline crashes I'd been researching for Ívarr as a way to induce the beta change. If I looked down, surely I would see my energy seeping into the ground.

Hands found me. Unknown voices, or perhaps I was just too exhausted to pick each person out. They spoke to me, assuring me they were helping me home. I could only manage to speak Axel's name.

Everyone knew about us. I hadn't needed to tell them. It was rare to see us without each other now.

Suddenly, he was in front of me. Axel had his hands on my shoulders, his shifter strength the only thing holding me up.

"T? What happened?" I felt his worry, and heard it in his voice. It shook with fear. His eyes—his terror was stark.

“Hiro... healing... weak... must sleep.”

There, in his eyes, was a deep understanding. Axel was my safe place in a world I didn't quite understand. He lifted me into his arms, a reversal, yet still reminiscent of that day months ago when we shared our first kiss.

Gently, he laid me on the bed, then removed my shoes letting them drop onto the carpeted floor.

I felt his cool palm brush the hair from my face. “Then sleep. I'll be here when you wake up.”

Just like I was for him.

I knew I was dreaming instantly.

The air carried the scent of honeysuckle. The grass beneath me was spongy-soft, warmed by the late afternoon sun.

Trees surrounded the clearing I was in. Without looking, I knew it would be a perfect circle.

Wildflowers with their satin petals tickled my fingers in the gentle breeze.

Perfection.

My dream stretched out, time passing without notice as I took in the details of this world my imagination had created. I knew it was coming from me, because I was clothed in my favorite soft pants Axel favored and I wore no shirt. My hair was unbraided, flowing like silk in the wind.

Another clue it was a dream was the absence of sound. There were no birds, no bugs, the air made no noise as it rushed over me. It was completely quiet, as if I was in a soundproof bubble, or like I'd been rendered deaf. Though when I muttered, "just a dream," I heard the words both in my mind and in my ears.

For what felt like minutes, but it could have been hours, I lay there, watching the clouds pass over me. I made a game of it after a while, too lazy to sit up and explore.

The clouds took on shapes, which I told to the butterflies and bees that passed me by. I'd somehow thought them into existence. These weren't the butterflies and bees of Abrocaelum or Sweetwater. These were creations of my imaginations. Fat, furry bees laden with pollen and massive, colorful butterflies who were eager to balance on my fingers.

If I thought about it hard enough, I was sure I could dream other things into this world.

Not Axel. I would never want an echo of the man who held my heart. Only the real thing would do and he was safe in Sweetwater, likely frantic as he watched over me.

As I dreamed, I was conscious of time passing in the back of my mind. I was sure my continued absence was worrying Axel. I snorted, sure I was downplaying my lover's reaction. He was likely trying to tear the world apart to get me back to him.

The air turned cold, the sky darker, a likely side effect of my concern for Axel's wellbeing leaching into the dreamstate I found myself in.

Night came, the moon high and full in the artificial sky.

"Hush, child. Your dearest is fine," a pleasing feminine voice said.

I sat up, looking for the voice, yet unable to find her.

“He cannot hear you, my lady,” I replied, still scanning the area I found myself in.

There was a figure under a faraway tree. Could it have been her?

She tittered a laugh. “Oh, you are charming. Those words were for you.”

Her voice was pleasant and easy to listen to. I felt no threat from her. No, there was something more. Affection. Love. Care.

“How can they be?” I asked, honestly. “I know them to be a lie. Even now, here, so far away from my love, I can feel how hard he is panicking. We are connected.” I clasped a hand to my bare chest, feeling the tether to Axel there, next to my heart.

“That you are. Apologies for my white lie, then, sweet elf.” She was not offended, only amused.

“Thank you, though I knew you meant no harm, only to soothe me.” I felt compelled somehow, as if telling anything but the whole truth would cause irreparable damage not only to her, but to myself.

“I find you quite captivating, Teárlach Skanicudal, Crown Prince and heir to the elven throne of Abrocaelum.”

The figure became clearer, like the distance between us had halved. Though I could not see her clearly, I could see she was tall, probably taller than me. Dressed in a white flowing gown, she had pale as moonlight skin and silver hair as long as Teagan’s, brushing her knees. It flowed like water, completely unbound or braided. She wore night blooming Jasmine in her hair.

“Thank you, my lady. What, pray, should I call you?”

“I have many names. You may call me Luna.”

Luna, as in... the shifter goddess, The Luna? How was this possible?

I shot to my feet and sketched a low bow. “The Luna, you honor me with your presence here.”

“No, dear elf, the honor is mine. Only someone with true faith and pure love could find themselves here with me. You have proven to have both.”

“How? I am nothing but a soldier, my lady.”

“Are you?”

She was closer. Her eyes were dark, a void. There was no pupil, like the eyes of a demon, yet she was still the most beautiful thing I had seen aside from my Axel.

“There,” she said, lifting a long finger and pointing to my heart. “You love one of my wolves in a way so deep and pure nothing could part you.”

“It’s true. I would fade without Axel. I’d do anything to give him what he wants.”

“Anything?” Her red lips twisted into a smile. She seemed to read my soul. “You really would. Tell me, Teárlach, would you like Axel to become an omega?”

“More than anything. I want him to have the baby he longs for.” She glided closer. So near to me I would have felt her breath if she was human. The Luna waited for me to finish my thought.

“I only wish I could be the one to give him a child. Our child. It’s impossible.”

“Teárlach, with love, nothing is impossible.”

Then the dream faded to black. The Luna, if she had truly been there, was gone.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

When T had stumbled home, shouts of alarm following him, I hadn't been overly concerned. Yes, he looked drained beyond anything I'd seen in him, but he had said something about healing. That was enough of an explanation for me. I'd seen healers and witches do a lot of magic and the aftereffects. I knew the score.

So, instead of freaking out, I got him comfortable in our bed and called my brother, hoping Blake knew what the hell was going on.

I'd been late getting home. Calming Dalton had been no small task. He had been so deeply embarrassed I wondered if he'd quit and hide from me. I knew he hadn't been thinking about my relationship with T. He'd just been caught up in his dream of having a baby, and I was his friend, safe. Dalton knew I'd reject him gently if that's how things went. If not, he would have someone he trusted for the next adventure.

Breaking his heart was the worst, but when I left him, we had new common ground and I'd repeated my promise to help him get what he wanted.

"One day, hopefully not too far away, we'll be sitting outside on the grass together, our babies playing side by side." I left him with that hopeful image and a small smile on his lips.

Then I'd gotten a call about a potential incursion along the perimeter of the factory. Perhaps the aviary shifters had thought the noise from the machinery would cover their attempts to get inside, or we hadn't thought to cover that area from aerial attacks, but they were wrong and some of them had paid with their lives for their arrogance.

There had been no one left alive by the time I'd gotten there in my wolf form. My alter was still furious he'd been denied a fight.

Keyed up with nowhere for the energy to go, I'd focused on making dinner for T, worried he was so much later than either of us thought he would be. I'd ended up eating alone before T stumbled into our home, enforcers holding him up.

It was far too late to bother my brother by calling to ask about the situation, but I was too worried about T to think about my nibblings.

"Yeah?" Blake said warily as he answered.

"Do you know why T is passed out after healing?" I asked as I tried to clean up the mess I'd made in the kitchen.

"Has no one told you what happened?"

Was that anger in his voice?

"Would I be calling you at midnight if they had?" My exasperation got the best of me. "Sorry."

"Nah. Fair point."

"So what the fuck happened? He could barely walk. I got a sentence out of him and nothing since."

"You're never going to believe what he and Hiroshi did—"

"This was the healing on Roan that did this?" I interrupted.

“Axel, they gave Roan back full use of his arm!” I could almost feel the wonder through the phone.

Heading back into the bedroom, I stared at the sleeping form of my lover. “That’s... a miracle.”

“More than that. They healed Roan so much the magic went and healed Hiroshi right up. Sent him into heat.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “What?”

“Yeah. Teárlach came rushing in to tell us, to make sure Tate, Asher and Xavier knew not to expect them home. Then he went to ívarr and Aldrin with it. This is huge!”

“Massive! I didn’t know healing like that could make a heat happen.”

“Makes sense when you think about it. An omega, male or female, is recovering after birth, getting everything going back to where it was and stuff.”

Snorting a laugh, I cut him off. “Yeah, I get it. The healing put Hiroshi to his pre-pregnancy state.”

“ívarr thinks it’s likely it went further than that. Hiroshi had been through some trauma, remember? All the potions he took.”

“Right, from the shit with Jared.”

“And he’d been run down from the stress of looking for his fated and all the work he’d done when they had betas sick over in the Northarbor Pride.”

“He really thinks the magic undid all that damage?”

“Well, he won’t know until—“

“He does a million tests. Right. So where does this leave T? It’s like he’s not even here, Blake. I’m worried.”

“Listen, he’s done a lot of magic. If there’s no sign of him waking by the afternoon, then we’ll get Aldrin to look at him. ívarr will likely be there in the morning wanting to continue his questioning.”

“Continue? What do you mean?”

“ívarr kept T at the clinic for hours after he found out. Aw, fuck, you were at the factory, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, we got nothing from that. The magic is holding. All the patrols are working, though we are likely down tonight with Tate at home.”

“Tate went in. Xavier’s got them in hand. Larken and Micah are there if he needs them.”

“Cool. Well, I’m going to get some rest and hope T is up and about in the morning.”

“Okay, keep me posted, alright?”

“I will.”

“Axel?”

“Yeah?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s got you to come back for.”

Knocking woke me. The sun was streaming through the open window. T never closed it or the curtains because he loved the breeze and light to fill the room and I always had him to curl up under the covers with, so I never got cold.

While the nights in Sweetwater could be chilly, we were heading for a scorching day. My t-shirt and boxers clung to my sweaty skin. T looked unchanged. He wasn’t even reacting to the temperature. His skin was cool to the touch. Honestly, it terrified me. He felt like he had one foot in the grave. Was I going to lose him?

Whoever it was knocked again, clearly impatient with me.

“Coming!” I yelled as I headed for the door. I opened it to ívarr and Teagan. Behind them and closing in fast, was the familiar form of my twin’s alter. He practically bowled the elves over in his haste to get into the house.

Chase shifted and stood, uncaring of his nudity, in the middle of the living room. “Dude, I just got told! Why didn’t you call me?” He came to my side and wrapped his arms around me.

“There was nothing to do last night but see if some sleep would do the trick,” I explained into his hair. Just having my twin beside me made me feel better.

“Okay, but I’m here now. Gonna get some clothes and make you some coffee.” He squeezed my shoulder and headed for the bedroom. I heard his exhaled, “fuck,” as he caught sight of T. “Don’t you break his heart, elf, or I’m coming to hell to find you.”

The words almost made me chuckle.

“May we see him?” ívarr asked.

“Sure,” I said, leading the way to my bedroom. “Maybe you can do something. I’m worried something is really wrong.”

Chase left my room, fully dressed in some of my clothes, to go to the kitchen. The look he gave me told me he knew all the worries I was hiding but didn’t express.

Those worries grew sharper, digging their shards into my heart as the elves shared a concerned glance over Teárlach’s sleeping form.

Shit.

“We’ll try pushing some of our magic into him,” Teagan said with false cheer, “and get Aldrin here to do some healing. His energy levels feel really low.”

“Is that why he feels like he isn’t here? Is he dying?”

Another looked between them. “No,” ívarr finally said, “though I cannot be sure when he will come out of his. His mind appears to be on another plane.”

“He’s not here? He can’t hear us?” I’d hoped, probably in vain, that I could call him home.

“Not at present. No.”

Teárlach had resisted all efforts of healing. Aldrin, the elves, even the witches, had all tried, yet nothing had happened.

“I cannot say what is keeping him in this state. His energy is still low, though not dire, like before.”

Frankly, I was sick of ívarr being in my home. I liked him well enough, but I still felt

like he was blaming me for this. This was a slip back to how we used to be, before ívarr warmed up to me and my place in T's life. We needed to clear the air, especially if T meant what he said about making me his consort, eventually. I just didn't have the energy to deal with it.

All I wanted to do was curl up in my bed with my elf.

"I wish we had a Seer here," Teagan remarked. "Janet is a sweet old bear. I just don't know how accurate her visions are."

"Never been wrong once." Chase had a fierce look in his eyes.

"You misunderstand," she said with an apologetic look. "She is not accustomed to us. Our goddess has different plans for her people than The Luna has for her shifters."

"Janet said Teárlach is where he needs to be," Chase said with a stubborn set to his jaw.

Leave it, I chided my brother. The elves mean well. Maybe they're right and we need an elf Seer.

"Who gets visions in Abrocaelum?" I asked aloud.

Teagan and ívarr did that silent speaking thing they did. It was Teagan who answered. "The queen, mainly. She is our living connection to the goddess. Teárlach was given a vision prior to us coming to Sweetwater, though he had never had one before. Some believed it to be a sign his time to rule is approaching."

"So we need to ask the queen?" Please no, I pleaded with the universe.

"Yes," ívarr answered. "It would be best for you to ask."

Clearly I had used up all my luck.

“I can’t leave T. I won’t,” I said stubbornly.

“Obviously.” Chase grinned. “Why don’t I go? An elf can escort me. Once I get an audience with the queen, we can do a video call.” My brother always had my back. With his plan, he eased some of my fears.

“Oh!” Teagan stood, looking hopeful. “I’ll go. We can leave right away.”

“You’d do that?” I asked, taken aback.

“Teárlach is my cousin and a dear friend. I want to see him well.”

My brother and Teagan became animated as they made their plans to visit Abrocaelum. I heard talk of heading to his rooms to get his phone first since he’d left all his things at home. I tuned them out to concentrate on T. Still no change.

“The queen will not make things easy,” ívarr warned as he continued to watch T for changes.

“I know she won’t approve of us, but I need to do something. It feels like he’s slipping away from me.”

“Just be prepared to fight for him as he would for you.”

Chase and Teagan made great time getting to the castle. My brother shifted and ran alongside Teagan’s horse for the journey to the queen. It was an easier pace for him to keep up with than if she had run the entire way there.

“We’re just waiting for parliament to end before we can speak to her.” Chase’s

concerned face filled the screen. “Ax, I’m not sure how helpful they’re going to be.”

“He’s their prince. They want him alive.”

My twin looked uncomfortable. “Not if it means helping you. Just be wary, okay?”

The call ended, and another hour passed before Chase video called again.

A face so similar to Teárlach’s was in the place where Chase should be. “Hello Axel, beloved of my son. I am Alyalsha, Queen to the elves of Abrocaelum.”

“Hello Your Majesty. Thank you for speaking with me.”

“We are on our way to Sweetwater to help my son with one condition.” It was only then I noticed she was in a carriage.

“Why? T is fine.”

“Look again, shifter. Can you see the change in him?”

I’d barely taken my eyes off him, but I looked again and my stomach dropped as I understood what she meant.

“Something has gone wrong,” his mother continued. “His energy should have recovered without more intervention. I have been told to come and share my energy with him. It is the only way. Unfortunately, my assistance comes with a condition.”

“A condition?”

“Believe me when I say I am unhappy with the constraints of this bargain. Aid should be offered freely, however, as I am the only elf who can speak to the goddess, and my

heir is the reason for this visit, I am sure you can appreciate my parliament's caution."

"I guess. It depends on the condition."

"They—"

"Just them, or you too? I apologize for interrupting. I just need to know."

"In this matter, we agree."

"Okay." I sighed, feeling trapped. T was slipping further from me. "What do you want?"

"We would like you to end your relationship with my son."

"But—"

"Understand this. No matter what he has told you, the court will not accept a shifter as consort."

I'd always known this, ever since T confessed his identity, I knew we wouldn't have a happy ending. I just hoped for more time.

"Your time together is limited. Once my son has the answers we seek, he has agreed to come home."

It hit like a punch in the gut.

"However, I am not completely unfeeling. I know he loves you, so I sought a bargain with parliament. They have agreed to a year."

“A year?” I’d take any time with him that I could.

“Yes. Once Teárlach has had his year with you, he is to return to Abrocaelum and will produce an heir.”

I looked at my love. His color was worsening. Nothing we seemed to do made any difference. ívarr was working on him with the numerous potions we had been given. There really was no choice.

“Are you sure you can help him?” I wanted to ensure none of this was in vain. I’d only agree if it would work.

“Yes. I am the only one who can.”

“Then I agree to your terms. One year for your help getting him back.”

“I will be there shortly. The portal is up ahead.”

ívarr looked at me with almost dismay. “You did not need to agree to those terms. You know Teárlach will be angry when he finds out.”

“He has to wake up to be angry with me. I’ll deal with it then. I’d rather live without him knowing he’s happy somewhere than let him die.”

“We do not know it is so dire.”

“Look at him!” I pointed to the sleeping form on the bed. “He’s fading. Nothing we’ve done has helped. I feel him pulling away from me.” I grasped the front of my shirt. “Argh! I... I just feel so helpless.”

The elf stared at me. “What is done, is done. I suggest you put on some clothes. The

queen does not need to see your undergarments.”

I scoffed at him, but did dress. Just in time, as Chase came racing inside. “Fuck! She’s scary! We’ll find a way around this deal, okay? I’m not letting her take T from you.”

Teárlach’s mother swept into the room behind Teagan and ahead of two guards. “Take me to my son,” she ordered, wasting no time.

She perched on the edge of the bed and placed a pale fingered hand on his graying forehead. Her eyes, the same startling shade of turquoise as Teárlach’s, closed. She let out a hum and just sort of sagged.

A guard, clearly prepared, held her steady, sitting behind her on the bed. She was so pliant in his arms; it spoke of a connection there. The guard wore richer clothing than the other. Maybe he was important to her.

We waited. I barely breathed as I watched them. Chase’s eyes flickered over the bed and over to me.

What’s going on?

Shh! She’s trying to speak to their goddess.

Slowly, the color drained from the queen as it seemed to seep into Teárlach. She didn’t quite meet the shade he had been, though it was close.

Queen Alyalsha, leaned more heavily on her guard as her eyes opened. “He will be well. Unfortunately, I must return to Abrocaelum to recuperate from the exchange of energy. My goddess demands it.”

“I... thank you.”

“It comes at an unfortunate price. Enjoy your time together, as short as it is. Please, tell him I fought for longer.”

At that moment, I saw her true self. She was just a mother trying to do a difficult job in extraordinary circumstances.

“I will.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Chase asked as the elves all left. ívarr and Teagan escorted their queen back to the portal with her guard.

“Could I just be alone for a bit? Just half an hour or something. I just need to process.”

I’d need him when this was over. It could be sooner than a year when T found out what I’d agreed to in order to save his life.

I just hoped he would forgive me.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

I became aware I was dreaming when a strange light filtered around me. The trees differed from those I had become used to; the ones surrounding the Sweetwater compound. These were taller, thicker, darker, imposing. They whispered their secrets in languages I had never heard before.

Sounds assaulted me from every direction, making me wish for human hearing. The trees, the wind, birds, animals, all called out to me as I walked the path to my unknown destination.

There was an air of promise, or perhaps threat, as I wandered my way through the darkness, my way only illuminated by the light of the full moon and a blanket of bright stars.

Where I was going, I did not know, or even care. All I knew was I had to keep moving. To stay still was to perish. That I felt in my bones. Stillness was stagnation. Ennui was death. It was true of all elves. When a malaise came over an elf, an apathy they could not shake, they became disconnected from nature, from life, and slowly faded into nothing. There was no promise of such a death returning their soul to the earth or our nameless goddess. It was just an end.

My heart had a home. He was calling to me. Axel was the light of the moon, calling me to return to him soon. Through the dream, I felt our connection and his fear. The condition of my body, the distance of my soul, had him scared I would not return.

Nothing would stop me. I would be by his side soon.

Owls hooted their warning. My pace was too slow. I needed to draw every ounce of

strength I had to make it to the end of this makeshift road.

Picking up the pace, I ran until it felt like my feet were bleeding, then ran some more. With every breath I took, I got closer to my destination.

There, at the end of the path and my stamina, I paused before the massive tree. It loomed above me, blotting out the light of the moon and draping it in shadows.

Eyes.

Millions of eyes looked at me from every species of owl I had ever seen, and more I had not. They all focused their gaze on me, judging me. They looked into my heart and held my future in their wickedly sharp talons.

“Please, I just want to be with him!” For Axel, I would go to my knees and beg.

“Who?” they asked in one voice, feminine. Hers. My goddess was here.

“Axel Sweetwater. The shifter who owns my heart.”

“Why?” Shudders worked down my spine, hearing them speak.

“The Luna. Fate. Whatever you want to call it. As soon as we met, there was a connection I could not shake, not that I wanted to. I love Axel.”

“Choose.”

I got to my knees then, sinking my hands into the dirt. “I choose a life with Axel Sweetwater. A life giving him the happiness he deserves even if this means my own life is shorter. Living without him would be no life at all.”

“Done.”

As one, they rushed me. Wings, talons, sharp beaks brushed me, tore into me, making me something else.

The noises in the room were extremely loud. Far beyond what my elf ears could take. I winced, setting off a chain reaction.

Everyone quieted, giving me immediate relief. Then my arms were with filled my Axel. My shifter lover smelled of distress and fear as he squeezed me tightly.

“I didn’t think you were ever going to wake up.” His tears were warm on my chilled skin.

Wrapping my arms around him, I returned the embrace. “Nothing can keep us apart.”

“That is untrue.”

“Shut it, ívarr,” Chase barked in an uncharacteristically harsh tone. My friend snapped his mouth shut, chastised. “We are all going to leave you alone to talk as soon as ívarr and Teagan have checked you over, T. Glad to have you back with us.”

Chase’s eyes were expressing a warning I didn’t understand. I was too tired to focus and just wanted to hold Axel.

There was this feeling of doom inside me, but I waited until I had gone through the necessary checks before I voiced them to Axel.

“What happened?”

“It can wait, T. I only just got you back. We thought you were going to die.” He

snuggled closer, his bare skin warm against my body. He had helped me bathe after the others had left, though he had left my hair loose, as he preferred it that way.

“Axel, please... I need to know.”

He sighed against me. “You’re going to be angry with me, but you need to know I would have done anything to save you.”

“I didn’t need saving, Axel. My energy was only low from the healing. I gave too much.”

His patient eyes met mine. “That was true, at first, anyways. The others helped replenish your energy some. Then you just wouldn’t wake and we wondered if there was something else going on. We decided we needed a Seer.”

A pit of dread formed in my stomach. “No.”

“I’m sorry. They said she had a direct line to your goddess and could help. Before I knew it, she was on her way.”

“She came here?” I straightened, worming free of Axel’s grip. I looked around our modest home and saw it from her eyes. For a brief moment, I felt a sense of shame in the home I had made with Axel, before anger came flooding in that she had come to our home and made me feel such a way. Not only that, she had seen me so vulnerable.

“Yeah, and just in time. I don’t know what was happening to you wherever you were, but it was bad, T.” Axel kissed me, his lips lingering, his eyes closing as if even the memory pained him.

“I can only assume this help came at a price,” I said once Axel moved away.

Wrapping myself around him, I tried to assure him I understood, though I would not have made the same decision in his position.

Axel winced. "I had no choice."

So it was very bad. What could they have asked him for?

"I'm sure it felt that way, yet I would not have left you alone. Somehow I would have found a way."

"T, you were going gray on the bed, hardly breathing. I thought you were going to die and your mom was already on her way when she made the deal."

"What deal?"

"We only get a year together before you have to go home and make an heir."

"No."

"It's what the parliament demanded. We don't get to pick."

"They don't get to dictate my life for me. I choose you. I love you. Our future is not theirs to decide."

"I love you too, which is why I agreed. You alive somewhere else is better than you dead and gone. I couldn't take it. You were fading and..." Axel broke into deep, heaving sobs.

"Shh dear one. They will not take me. I am yours forever. They just don't know it yet."

Axel eventually wore himself out by enthusiastically showing me how we would spend our year, by riding my cock until he came and then sucking me down.

Quite the homecoming.

Once I was assured he was in a deep sleep, I left our home and went to the lake, where I knew ívarr would be waiting for me.

“How is he?”

Long gone was the elf who did not believe in my relationship. He was now a staunch supporter. I knew I could get him onto my side, especially since I believed he had a connection with the witch/midwife, Michaela, and would want to be in Sweetwater for the long term.

“Exhausted. Guilty, though he is not at fault—neither of you are.”

“It was an impossible situation. We truly feared for your life and Axel only went to your mother for answers, not the aid she gave.”

“Do you believe there is a way out of this fool’s bargain?”

“Undoubtedly. Especially since you are the one paying the price, not Axel. You did not agree to the terms set, so how can you be made to abide by them?”

“So you will help me fight, when the time comes?”

“You have my sword and my wit, should you need either.”

“I fear we will need both before it is done. Axel... we cannot be parted. I do not think the court understands the depth of our bond.”

“It is only just something I have come to recognize for myself,” he mused. I watched him pace along the water’s edge. “The bond you share has to be witnessed to grasp it. I saw, when you were lost to your dreams, the tether between you. With faith and time, Axel could have done what your mother did. He just did not see it. We were fools to suggest he speak to the queen. I should have put a stop to it. I am sorry.”

“You know this could lead to war?”

“Why do you think I offered my sword first? Those vultures in parliament have been looking for a way to exert more control over our queen. Using you is just the first in their moves to do so.”

“I’m grateful for your friendship. I just hope Mother understands.”

“She will. I think the love Axel had for you moved her. You should return to your wolf, my prince.”

“Thank you, ívarr. Pass on my thanks to Teagan, too.”

“Our cousin wants you to know she will also fight when needed. I think Axel’s brother impressed her today. It is a shame he does not wish for a romantic or sexual relationship, I think she would have liked to try one with him.”

He was so serious, I couldn’t help my laugh. He smiled at me, a true smile that stretched across his handsome face.

“I didn’t know Chase had confided in you.”

“Chase wondered if the goddess took their preferences in mind when giving or not giving, in his case, the gene to change designations. He told me then about being aroace. Then he had to explain those terms. It was an enlightening conversation.”

We stood there a moment longer. “All will be well, prince. There is too much here that science cannot explain to be anything more than the work of our goddess, or perhaps The Luna.”

I clapped him on the shoulder as I turned to head home. “Something tells me you’re right.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

We returned to our usual routines in the days that passed after Teárlach woke, ignoring the elephant in the room. My elf assured me he had everything in order. There would be no countdown because he wasn't leaving me. All I had to do was believe him.

T was different, jumpy, after he woke. He slept less than before, and when he did rest, he often woke from dreams about owls. There were moments when we were together where he would startle as if he had seen something in the corner of his eye.

The anxiety he was feeling was leaching into our relationship, making my alter furious. Aside from being concerned about Teárlach's health, I wondered if this was a side effect of what had happened. Other elves wouldn't want to attempt healing the way he had unless we figured it out.

"We're going to see ívarr," I announced after another bad night where T barely slept and when he did, there were two nightmares. He'd even gotten out of bed one time trying to shoo an hallucinated bird away!

"All is well," T replied unconvincingly before eating more of his muesli.

"Not buying it," I said, flatly. "Do you remember chasing the owl out of our bedroom?"

He looked confused. "I thought that was a dream."

"This is why you need to see ívarr, or at the very least, Aldrin. Someone might be able to give you something to help with your sleep. You need rest, T."

“This is unnecessary. My sleep pattern will return to normal shortly.”

“If this was me hardly sleeping, having nightmares and seeing things, what would you do?” I fixed him with a ‘don’t bullshit me’ look.

He sighed. “Alright. I will go see ívarr. We can ask him if he has made any progress looking for the legal precedent.”

“It’s a lot to put on ívarr when he’s also supposed to be overseeing the testing and looking for a reason for the elves’ infertility. Shouldn’t we find someone else? Is there anyone, maybe someone in Abrocaelum, you could trust to check into this?”

Teárlach thought for a moment. “There is someone. I can send someone with a phone so we can speak to her.”

“Who is she?”

Grimacing, Teárlach set his spoon down. “The most likely candidate for carrying my heir.”

“Excuse me? Did you say they have someone lined up already?” I felt nauseous at the idea of T having a baby with someone else, but it was worse knowing there were already elves in line for the job.

“Several eligible ladies. I would likely be required to marry the chosen one and it would all depend on her DNA profile.”

He said this matter-of-factly. As if it was perfectly normal and reasonable for his parliament to arrange this for him. I guess it was for a prince. This was all he had known.

With me, he had the opportunity to have love, possibly for the first time. If they forced us apart, what would happen to him? Would he fade like he said he would?

“You would like Kelda. She is ívarr’s youngest sister and his total opposite, though they share a love of science. She is the most eligible because she has some royal blood.”

“She’s your cousin!” I said disgustedly. I couldn’t imagine being with my cousin, not that Deke was my type at all.

“Yes. Neither of us wants the match, if that helps.” He gave a sly smile, attributing my reaction to jealousy.

“Cousins!”

T laughed, the first genuine, stress-free laugh I’d heard from him in days. Since he had healed Roan.

“Why doesn’t Kelda want you?”

“I believe she is like Chase. In all the time I’ve known her, I have never seen her romantically involved with anyone. I don’t think the idea of motherhood appeals to her, unless it was something she was doing for herself.”

“Doesn’t that mean she would be great to have your heir? As a surrogate, I mean.”

“Yes, though I know parliament will prefer I am married to the child’s mother to give the child more legitimacy for the claim of heir.”

“But your mother... you’ve never mentioned your father.”

“Mother was briefly married to my father. He fell in one of the many battles with the fae. She decided not to remarry even though parliament wished her to. There was brief talk of a union between her and a fae lord.”

“Oh, shit!”

“Yes,” T smirked. “Mother shut that down, as you would say.”

“So Kelda,” I said, changing the subject. T hadn’t talked about his father for a reason. Maybe he was really young when he died. It was possible he had no memories of his sire.

“I will get a device to her. We can talk and she can decide if she wants to help us.”

“You may as well give her your phone, for all that you use it,” I teased.

Teárlach’s grin said it all.

After explaining the reason behind our visit, ívarr subjected Teárlach to extensive tests, stretching my elf lover’s patience to the limit.

Aldrin took one look at him and pronounced the solution. “You need sleep. True, deep, healing sleep. Your sleep-walking and seeing things? A sign of extreme fatigue. From what you are saying, you are having hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations. Both as you are falling asleep and waking up.”

“That doesn’t account for some of the others.” T was frowning.

“No, perhaps there is something else happening. We won’t know until we sort the sleep issue out first. I’m going to give you a sleep tonic Kade swears by. Poppy made it, of course, so I know it’s of exceptional quality.” T tried to interject. “Just for a few

days while we wait for ívarr to check through your results.”

“There’s no need. I agree completely with the diagnosis and treatment plan.” ívarr was still studying his tablet. “I trust you, Aldrin, even with our prince.”

The healer smiled, a faint blush on his tan cheeks. His mate squeezed his arm with pride written across his face.

My phone rang, drawing everyone’s attention. “Oh, it’s your phone with a video call,” I told Teárlach, holding up the device.

“Answer, please. ívarr, it is your sister.”

“Kelda? Why?” The serious elf almost had a confused look on his face.

“We thought you had far too much to do, so I wanted to ask her to help me,” T said as I was busy answering the call.

“Help you in what way, cousin?” The lady in question asked.

He briefly explained, noting how much her brother had to do. “Of course I will help. I am delighted you have found love, cousin! Oh, I had some files I wanted to send over to my brother. Can you tell me how to transfer them?”

The elves went through the complicated process of moving the data from Kelda’s hub to the tablet ívarr was holding. Aldrin and James just watched with me while they talked.

Over the course of their conversation, the air shifted. Tension filled the room. “These results are troubling.”

“You see it too, brother?”

“I do, clever sister. It does, however, pose more questions.”

“Such as whether this is specific to our prince or are more of our people affected?” she asked, soaking up the praise from the brother she clearly adored. Kelda was much like ívarr, with dark, straight hair, bright blue eyes. Her features were finer. She looked like a pretty porcelain doll, with her rose blush and porcelain skin.

I was not jealous of her. She barely even looked at Teárlach, though he was part of the conversation.

“I would like Teagan to look at these results, if you do not mind?”

“Teagan would be useful. I was unsure if I was letting my personal biases against this color my reading of the data.”

“Biases, sister? No. You are too fair for that. I see the exact same thing, though it is true I would not like to see you married to this brute.” He aimed a teasing smile towards T and I nearly fell off my chair! I couldn’t believe the stoic elf could crack a joke.

“We would make pretty babies until they died of the horrible genetic disorders thanks to our DNA,” Kelda mused, with a twinkle in her eye.

“Um... what?” I blurted out when I got what she was saying.

“Cousin, is this your shifter? He’s very handsome. I will certainly give you my assistance in keeping him.”

“He is my beloved, Kelda, and I appreciate the help. We will need it to stop

parliament from going to war over this farce of a bargain.”

“True. I apologize,” Kelda said to me and the other shifters in the room. “The long and short of it is that I’ve found some troubling information in the genetic profiles of the candidates for Teárlach’s wife. It seems in all of them, they are too closely related to produce healthy offspring.”

“All of them?” Aldrin asked.

“Yes. The pool was reduced to fifty women. All of them were a poor genetic match, including me. Especially me. These pairings would lead to children with serious genetic defects that would reduce their quality of life dramatically.”

Teagan burst through the doors then. “Your highness! There is a contingent from Abrocaelum. They say they are here to take you home.”

We met them outside of the science center. ívarr caught Teagan up with the genetic bomb his sister had just dropped. T was looking a little green. I wanted to get him home as soon as possible.

“They’re not taking you,” I warned my lover. “I will fight each and every one of them. My alter wants to fight.”

“Don’t shift unless absolutely necessary.” T laid a calming hand on my arm, then laced our fingers together. “They will not take me.”

“I am going to ask to speak to your mother,” Kelda said, her hair fanning out behind her as she ran through the halls of the castle.

The carriage was a surprise, as were the guards on horseback. They stopped in front of us and a brown-haired elf left the safety of the vehicle.

“Ellgar!” Teagan hissed. I felt her tense beside me.

“Not a fan?” I whispered.

“Later,” she answered in an undertone. The other elves were close enough they could hear us if they tried to.

“Prince Teárlach, I am here to accompany you home. Would you like help with packing your things, or can the shifters manage it?” he said with a sneer, raising my hackles. T’s grip on me tightened.

“Welcome to Sweetwater, Ellgar. I fear you have wasted your journey.”

“Wasted?”

“Were you not privy to the terms of the bargain? I am to have a year with the shifters.”

“Lies!”

“Those were the terms.” Queen Alyalsha’s voice was heard from the speaker of the phone. Kelda had reached the queen’s side quickly. “All of the parliament signed the document. I am looking at your signature here. So it leaves me wondering what you thought you could accomplish by traveling to Sweetwater in order to renege on our bargain just days after it had been agreed. Surely your memory has not faltered since then?”

“Forgive me, my queen. There are some of us who believe it is necessary for your son to begin procuring an heir right away.”

“Now? When no young have been born for over fifty years? You think it will

magically happen for my son where others have failed? He is there to find the reason.”

“Yet, he has not. Instead, he has had a dalliance with a shifter far below his station. He talks of making him consort!” Ellgar spat.

Huh. Word sure got around about that. Though, I guess we hadn’t been particularly stealthy over our relationship, or T wanting to make it permanent.

“No, he has not. Yet. Though there has been a breakthrough which needs more investigation. My son is keeping his side of the bargain thus far. We will keep our side or suffer the consequences. You remember the goddess was invoked, correct?”

Ellgar sputtered out a denial, then an apology. Without a further confrontation, he got into the carriage and the elves left.

Queen Alyalsha was still on the phone. “May I keep this device? I shall share it with Kelda so that she can provide you with updates.” She looked so hopeful.

“Of course, Mother. I was not very good at keeping track of it. The phone will be safer in your hands.”

“Thank you, Teárlach. I am concerned by this pattern Kelda has found. This should be a priority. I feel it is important.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” ívarr said. “The shifters can continue with their testing, and I can look into this more with Teagan and Kelda.”

“It will not upset the shifters to take people from their project?” The queen looked genuinely concerned.

“No,” I said. “As Second-in-command to my brother, I can confirm we would prefer resources were given to this instead. This could be the breakthrough needed to find the cause, and hopefully the solution to the fertility crisis your people face.”

“Thank you, Axel. You and my son have a year to find a way out of this bargain or to find the reason our goddesses put you two together. Fate is at play here. I did not wish to tempt it by tearing you apart, but I was given no choice. One year is all I could get you. Make it count.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

As I had expected, Blake was understanding and supportive of the elves' need to concentrate on the troubling information Kelda had uncovered. Despite not having a scientific background, he recognized the magnitude of the problem.

If all elves were truly too closely related to have further generations of elves, what did that mean for our species? How did the shifters fit into this?

Our goddess had sent us to them for a reason, that I believed with my heart. I just wondered sometimes, when my faith slipped, if she had done it as a form of punishment. Here we were in our time of need watching the shifters flourish with this gift their goddess had given them. Were we no longer worthy of her love? Had we forgotten her?

When I was avoiding sleep, I had found myself with too much time to contemplate not only the situation with Axel, but my faith and life.

Aldrin had been right when he gave me the sleeping tonics. More of a restful type of sleep worked wonders for my health and general wellbeing. I was still troubled with odd dreams, except the tone of them had changed. Owls were a constant companion, though they no longer felt like a threat.

There were times when I wondered if I was being tested, especially when I discovered many of our people were refusing the genetic testing. They did not want to believe the problem was them. Some wanted to blame the fae, others the shifters, particularly because they were having lots of babies compared to before. A faction wanted to believe our goddess was the issue. They thought we had slipped too far from what our goddess wanted us to be. We weren't following their rigid social

structure, worshiping frequently enough, being pious appropriately.

Of course, they blamed my mother, and me by extension, for a lot of it. Her recent truce with the fae was a mistake. She was a weak leader in their minds. She had not done enough to secure our future. Her husband should not have gone to war leaving us behind when I was too young to really remember him. My mother should have remarried, even if it was just a political alliance. A donor should have been found sooner to give her a female child.

I had heard a lot of criticism of my mother and her rule over my time in the army, so I had grown somewhat immune to it. Around the pack compound, there was some dissent, however these elves had spent time with the shifters and knew their goddess had tested them. They seemed to think this was our test and our goddess would arrive with the solution and renew their faith.

It was a nice thought. I planned to be more realistic. If it was time for elves to die out as a species, we would fade knowing we had done our best. As long as I got some time with Axel first, that was all that mattered to me.

A few weeks had passed since the healing with Hiroshi, who had announced his pregnancy. Other elves had been reluctant to combine their magic with shifters since, though they had been given a sanitized version of my story. All who had been involved believed something else had happened to me during my recovery. I would have awoken after a couple of days had it not been for the strange malady that came over me.

ívarr maintained I would have come out of it on my own, just for Axel's sake, and had not needed my mother's intervention. He had grown to be quite the romantic now that he had a woman to woo. Michaela was certainly softening his sharp edges. It was a pleasure to witness and something for Kelda to tease her brother over.

Walking back from Axel's office with yet another security update turned into an afternoon date, complete with blowjobs in the woods behind the house, I began to feel peculiar.

My temperature began to fluctuate, like I was suffering from a fever. I debated going to the clinic to have Aldrin look at me, but wondered if I had just eaten something that didn't agree with me at lunch.

With my new cell, I texted both ívarr who was expecting me at the science center, and Axel, who would worry if he heard I had vanished. He needed to know I was home and safe. Though it was likely he would cut short his day to come home and check on me.

Messages sent and replies received, I headed back to our house. All I wanted to do was slake my thirst and fall into bed.

My skin felt like I was on fire. The fabric of my clothing itched and scraped over sensitive skin. The light of the afternoon stung my eyes.

All around me were shapes and colors, all blurred or out of focus. I winced at the throbbing in my head. It felt like something wanted to burst free.

Scents were impossibly strong, turning my stomach.

Sounds were far too loud, making me wince. I wondered if I would have the strength at home to cast a silencing bubble, or perhaps Axel had a witch ward to give me some peace.

Walking slowly, avoiding people as much as possible, I made it home. I poured a glass of water from the dispenser in the fridge. It was blessedly cool on my parched throat.

I set the empty glass down, suddenly feeling freezing. I wanted to burrow into our bed and surround myself with the scent of my mate.

Axel.

Regretting telling him not to come home, I stripped off my clammy, itchy clothing and got into bed. Wrapping the woolen blanket around me, I shivered, teeth chattering together.

It was tempting to call for Axel. He would know what to do. The only thing preventing me from doing so was a meeting he had to attend about a recent attack.

Wishing for him, I tried to lie down, to ease the ache in my limbs.

Something felt very wrong.

Instead, I focused my magic, trying to warm myself up, only for it to work too well. My blanket heated then with a flash of light, incinerated to ash.

The laugh that escaped me sounded manic, even to my own ears.

A fever came over me again, making me long for the cool waters of Sweetwater Lake. I sweated and panted, writhing with the sudden pain washing over me, locking my muscles.

I cried out, afraid of how quickly this illness was affecting me and the rapid changes of symptoms.

Pain ripped through me. Every nerve ablaze with a biting sensation.

Curling into a ball as best as I could, I tried to breathe through it all. I couldn't reach

my phone, it was too far from my cramping fingers. Using magic was a risk I could not take, not after the blanket.

Then I was cold again. Ice felt like it was running through my veins, chilling me from the inside out.

“Axel,” I called into the empty room, scared and alone.

No, I had faith.

I remembered a distant dream of a woman under a tree.

Unnatural.

My mind lost its peace with another fever. This was unnatural.

This wasn’t an illness, it was a curse.

Unless it was a blessing.

I woke slowly.

Everything looked different, my sight so much sharper than before. Everything in our room looked the same, just bigger.

Or I was so much smaller than before.

Looking down, I saw white feathers and creamy taloned feet ending with wickedly sharp claws. In my agitation I fluttered long wings. My claws, so sharp, dug into the bedding, creating holes.

What on earth had happened?

Why did I have talons?

Perfect for catching prey, a new voice said in my mind.

Who are you?

I am you, but more.

That does not answer my question.

You may decide to give me a name later. There is much for us to discover together.

This strange voice was cryptic. They did not feel threatening. I felt no urge to panic.

I took stock of what was happening. Trying to be rational and calm. Nothing would come from acting hastily.

I was an owl.

A snowy owl, from the reflection in the dresser mirror, just like that of my family line. My body had either changed, or my mind had slipped its hold on sanity, or my consciousness had escaped my body and entered some owl that just so happened to be on our bed.

Looking around myself, I saw no trace of my elf body. No. I was now in this animal shape or had lost my mind.

You are quite rational. You are the owl, or rather, we are the owl. You are just seeing me while you come along for the ride, elf.

An owl!

I got the impression the voice I was hearing was laughing at me.

Somehow, I had turned into an owl and had a voice speaking to me, like that of shifters with their alters.

Did that make me a shifter now?

Unless this was a dream.

Under me, I could feel the sheets from the bed and the remaining ashes from when I burned the blanket during my attempt at magic. I tweaked at a feather with my sharp beak earning a grumble for the alter voice and a bite of pain.

No, this was really happening to me. I had shifted!

What did this mean? Was I no longer an elf? Would I only shift once? Was this part of the strange illness I had?

I think that was me being born, my alter remarked. I'm sorry if it was painful. Can we go outside? I would like to see the sky.

Give me a moment, please. To adjust.

We should explore, it, or rather, he, suggested. Yes, I think we will be friends. First, let's explore. I want to feel what the wind is like through our feathers.

Was I wasting this opportunity by staying in the house?

Taking that as an agreement, my alter took charge of our body and flew out of the

room, tracking the air currents to the front door. The closed front door.

Open it, my owl demanded, keeping us suspended in the air in front of the door.

I cannot. My magic was too volatile. I could damage the house.

Again, he took over. He flew to the window and screeched. It shattered with the pulse of energy and sound he emitted.

You think too much, he chided.

Glass gone, he took us out of the window and into the open air. The street on which we lived was quiet, it was around dinner time for most.

We flew into the air, rejoicing with a cry as we soared high. We circled over the trees, over the water, dripping low to touch it with our feet.

Together we explored the territory of our pack and checked for intruders. We called to a raven friend. They stopped their flight, returning to the ground to call for help. They did not understand who we were.

The raven was interesting, we caught the scent of omega, which reminded us we had a mate to track down and claim.

Purpose centered our mind. We had to find Axel. He had to know we were now a shifter like him.

It did not take us long to locate his office. There were more cries as we closed in on the mansion.

Outside of his office window was a handy planter filled with summer flowers. We

landed and tapped on the window with our beak.

“An owl? Seriously? I don’t think the aviary has snowy owls. I’d have to check.”

Axel was on a call about my presence in the compound. They thought me to be an intruder because I could not use the pack link yet.

“You sure the owl felt friendly?” There was a pause as the person answered. Through the glass and across the room I could not catch all of the reply. “It came this way?” He was nodding. He turned and caught my gaze. “I’ve found him. Call you back.”

He hung up the phone and came to the window. Without a trace of fear, he opened it.

“Teárlach? Is that you?”

Since my alter had used magic without any backlash, I tried to link our minds again.

It is me, dear one.

“You’re an owl.”

I am. I share an animal soul. There is another voice. He was quite insistent I find you.

Axel smiled. “He was, huh?”

Yes. You are so beautiful to us both, you’ve bewitched him already. I wanted to show you this since I do not know if this is permanent. Will you come explore the forest with me?

He opened the window further, then stripped and shifted. As a wolf, he climbed out of the window and brushed up against me.

Oh, wow! You smell amazing!

What do I smell like?

The same honey and jasmine of before, but also rainwater and...

And?

Alpha.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

The call I was on would have sounded ridiculous had it not been for the recent incursions from the Northarbor Aviary. They were the loudest protestors over our testing of the beta gene. The aviary preferred the status quo for the designations and they hated alpha females, seeing them as unnatural, when it was probably alphas like them who had killed off the last alpha females.

So hearing there was an owl flying around our territory was a cause for concern. Hearing Tate say he thought it was friendly was just strange.

A number of scenarios flitted through my brain. It could be a member of the aviary who was looking for sanctuary. It could have been an actual owl, not a shifter, perhaps one who had been a pet. Maybe it was a messenger owl or a lone shifter.

All of those went out of my mind when I turned to see the owl looking at me. Those large turquoise eyes fixed on me.

No, that owl could only be Teárlach.

The strange bond we had pulsed with his nearness. It really was him.

How was this possible?

My worries vanished when he spoke to me, asking me to explore the forest with him. As irrational as it was, I would go anywhere if he was by my side.

Shifting, I joined them on the planter, which was not designed for our combined weight. It groaned under us as I rubbed along him in my wolf form.

Alpha. My wolf loved his new scent as much as I did.

He smelled so good!

I hopped down from the planter before it broke. All I really wanted to do was wrap myself around Teárlach, to roll around in that alpha scent, but we didn't know if this was going to last, so we had to make the most of it while we could.

Leading the way into the woods behind the mansion, I felt Teárlach following me, the gentle breeze from his wings ruffling my fur.

Under the canopy of the trees, I took a deep breath, soaking in the scents of the trees and plants, and more of the gorgeous scent of Teárlach. An alpha. I couldn't believe it.

I had waited all my life for someone to love like I did him, and here he was, proving to be everything he said he would be. All my hopes now were pinned on it being a forever change. That this wasn't just one night. When the clock struck midnight, this wouldn't be taken from me, from us.

We ran, or rather, T flew and I bounded like a puppy through the seemingly endless trees that bordered the Sweetwater lands until I was exhausted. We played, explored, and enjoyed this time together. Both of us as animals like I had never dared to dream of.

T followed me to the lake so I could drink from the crisp, clear water there. He perched in a nearby tree; the branches dipping low enough I could almost reach him.

My alter longs to fly again. Shall we race to that clearing?

The one where we had our first date.

Yeah, I'd like that. Catch me if you can!

I shot towards the trees again, weaving in and out as I dashed as quickly as possible.

Fun! My alter was loving this game of chase with our alpha.

It is, I agreed.

Wind ruffled my fur, and I panted hard, but I was winning. Until T put on a burst of speed and shot ahead of me into the clearing.

He landed on the ground, hooting in triumph.

Rubbing around him, I soaked in his scent.

I don't want this to end, I told him.

Me either. I'm scared this is a dream.

It can't be. I've never dreamed anything this realistic.

If this is all I get, then I'm glad I got to play with you in our alter forms. I'm glad I got to hear the voice of my alter, even if it's just something I dreamed up.

Then Teárlach shifted in front of me, the owl making way for the man.

My wolf went close, sniffing all of him, still finding the honey and Jasmine, the rainwater and alpha.

You smell the same. Shift back.

“Does it not hurt to shift back and forth quickly?”

No. Just makes you tired. Elves have magic, shifters are magic.

He shifted again; the owl replacing the elf. He hooted with joy and shifted back into his elf form.

The seamless transition between owl and elf made it feel like this could be a forever thing.

Somehow, Teárlach had been changed.

“Shift, please, Axel. I want to kiss you.”

I did and launched myself at him. His arms wrapped around me as we stood naked under the night sky.

Our mouths met in a hungry kiss as my hands wandered his body. I wanted his scent covering my body. Wanted him to claim me.

I must have spoken it somehow because T broke away only to pepper kisses along my jaw and down my neck. He held me close as his lips met the place where most put their bites at the base of my throat. T licked over the skin, making me shudder in his arms.

“I claim you as my mate. From now until The Luna calls us home.” He uttered the words to bind us together.

Teárlach bit down, a sharp bite of pain giving way to exquisite pleasure. He pulled away, some of my blood on his lips. I kissed him savagely before kissing my way to the spot where I wanted him to wear my mark.

He was an elf, but he had a shifter form. There was no promise this would work. Yet I wished for the bite to take hold as I repeated his words and bit into him, his blood filling my mouth. I wanted to hear him, feel him. Wanted to be tied to him.

I want that too.

His mental voice overflowed with all the love he had for me. I saw myself through his eyes and knew I'd never be loved in such a way again.

You're bleeding!

It's just the bite. I'll heal.

No, it's too much!

Teárlach cupped a hand over the bite, sending healing energy into it. The glow of his pink magic lit up the night.

That's enough, T, I'm fine.

"No, just a little more."

He sent more of his magic into me until a golden pulse pushed us apart.

We stared at each other in shock for a moment.

"T? I don't feel right," I said as a cramping began in my gut and my chilled skin began to warm.

My wolf perked up their ears.

Teárlach sniffed the air as he stepped closer, cupping my elbows. His pupils dilated.
“I think you’re in heat.”

“What the fuck?”

I felt the slickness gathering in my hole, the desperate emptiness that accompanied it.
A need to be filled. To be stretched.

He was right. I was in heat.

Which meant I was an omega!

We are. My wolf was so joyful. Our dream had come true.

“Does this mean...? Could you be...?” I had a hundred and one questions, though none of them were more important than this burning need.

“I don’t know, but we have to hope if we’ve been given this gift, then that’s why.” T stood tense, his pupils dilated, as he held himself back. “Surely The Luna wouldn’t give me the chance to be your alpha for nothing.”

As I stood there, slick running down my thigh, shaking with my first heat, I remembered that long forgotten dream where I was asked to choose.

Then it had been easy to think I would have chosen to be an omega, mating any alpha, to have the baby I so longed for.

It was easy to think of giving up true love when I’d never had it before.

But I had chosen love. I’d chosen Teárlach, even if it meant I’d never have my dream, because the reality of having him was better than anything I could have

imagined.

And now, I really believed my goddess had rewarded that sacrifice by giving me everything I'd ever wanted.

"I can't wait. Please, T, I need you."

He wrapped me in his arms and slowly lowered me to the grass as our mouths met.

Here?

Yes, the scent of your heat has me barely holding it together. Plus, it is fitting, is it not?

He shared the mental picture of him sucking me off during our first date, in this very clearing.

I love being able to speak to you while you kiss me like this.

It's wonderful.

T draped my leg over his, opening me up so he could trace a finger down my crack to my wet hole. He slipped his finger inside, making me gasp.

Yes! More!

More of his fingers stroked inside of me, hitting my prostate and making me cry out his name.

Omegas had it so good! I was a mess of sensation, needing to be filled more.

I brought our lips together in a messy kiss. Please, I begged, don't make me wait.

He pulled his finger from my hole and flipped me. I can't wait. Need to be inside you.

In one thrust, T was fully inside me. He set a quick and brutal pace as his rut took over. His grunts filled my ears as he fucked me hard.

My arms shook, fingers curled in the grass as I met his thrusts, wanting him even deeper. I needed the stretch of his knot or I was going to lose my mind.

T pulled me up so he could kiss me. Our teeth clacked together, but it was passionate and beautiful. He felt even bigger at this angle and hit me just right. My eyes rolled back, and I moaned against his lips.

His hand wrapped around my cock and he stroked me in time to his thrusts. He got rougher as his dick expanded inside me. Not with a magic knot this time. This was his real knot. I don't know how I knew the difference when I barely knew my own name, since I was delirious with pleasure.

Just the idea of being stuck on his knot as he filled me with his come had my orgasm rising. The perfect stretch of his cock and the bite to my mating mark did the rest. I came over his hand, milking him.

"Goddess, you feel amazing!" he rasped against my neck as he stroked over my skin.

"I..." Tears began to fall. This had been a perfect first time as an omega. I couldn't believe I was in heat!

Already I felt the low simmer of arousal bubbling away. The need to be filled and surrounded in my alpha's scent.

“It’s okay, dear one. I’m with you.”

Teárlach let me cry as we waited for his knot to go down. He kept kissing and stroking me, his alpha instincts to protect me working hard.

“When my knot goes down, we should shift and go home. Let’s ride out the rest of your heat in comfort.”

“That sounds nice.” My knees were sore from the hard ground and I really wanted to shower off the woods from my skin.

“As soon as you are out of heat, there will be a lot for us to deal with.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me, please. I just want to enjoy this and celebrate our mating.”

He pressed a kiss to my lips. “That is cause for celebration, but I must also join the pack. I’m a shifter now.”

“T?”

“Yes, dear one?”

“Race you home.” I pulled away from him and shifted in a fluid motion. If you catch me before I get home, you can fuck me in the shower.

I ran like the hounds of hell were on my tail, laughing and yelling to anyone I passed that I was in heat, so someone would tell Blake.

Shifters and elves alike shouted their congratulations happily. I would have felt sorry for my brother, but I was too busy making sure I got home before my mate did.

Teárlach, though, made it home before me and made good on my promise, fucking me hard against the shower wall, then on the kitchen floor as I tried to eat.

My heat was unstoppable for two whole days, but even as it waned, I still craved him. Being close to him, covering myself in his scent, was necessary to get through the day. I had sympathy for my omega brother-in-law. No wonder Kade was all over Blake all the time. Omega instincts were wild!

So when I woke on the third day, no longer burning with heat, I still asked T to make love to me sweetly, even though I was sore. I longed for the connection and the feel of his knot reminding me this was real.

This was no longer a dream.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Staying wrapped around Axel was very tempting, but reality was intruding in a very real way. My phone, now charging on the dresser, kept buzzing with calls and texts. I got out of the warm bed, put on some soft pants, and took my phone, heading for the kitchen.

Our family and friends had checked on us. A wellness check, Axel had said. The provisions they had left had been useful since neither of us particularly liked to spend much time cooking and often ate dinner at the main house with the pack. Something that was more important now that Blake was down to mostly spending business hours there then retreating to the safety of the home he shared with Kade and his children. Axel being there kept the hierarchy in place. Deke and Chase also played their part in keeping the single alphas and betas in line while Blake was absent.

Sure we were okay, they soon left us to enjoy what remained of Axel's heat. They were ecstatic for us. Over the moon that Axel was finally an omega.

I sighed as I looked at my phone. These calls and messages were just the reminder that we couldn't ignore the real world forever.

The door rattled with a knock. Someone had replaced the broken glass and cleaned up the mess for us, for which I was thankful. My new alpha instincts did not want to think about Axel cutting his feet on the broken glass, or how the house had not been safe the first night because it was open to the elements.

"Ax? T? I'm coming in. Be decent or whatever!" Chase's cheerful voice came only moments before the door opened. He came barreling in, arms full of fresh cut flowers and a basket likely laden with food.

I met him in the kitchen, relieving him of the burden. He gave me a one armed hug and went to the bedroom to wake his brother, who I hoped was putting some clothes on.

One thing I had to become accustomed to was that with mating Axel, I had Chase in my life too. These brothers could not be separated, they shared too deep of a bond for that. It helped that I truly liked Chase. His energy was different, yet complimentary to Axel's.

Together, they were an unstoppable force, especially with Chase's ability to detect lies. Blake used them well, never taking advantage of the weapon he wielded in them. Chase being the shield, Axel the sword. Though I did wonder how life was going to change for Axel now that he was an omega.

Their conversation drifted toward me. "Are you happy, Ax?"

"Never been happier." Even I could tell that was the truth. No special ability needed.

"What about being Second? There's already been talk. The alphas aren't happy."

From my place in the kitchen, I heard Axel's sigh. "I knew there would be. Blake and I talked about it before. You will take over being Second—"

"What? Me? No!"

"Chase, we've been sharing the job since I started it. You know what needs done."

"But—"

"No. You're the only one who can do the job unless we pull Deke as Head Enforcer and promote an alpha for his job. That job needs an alpha, we can't step in there, not

that the enforcers would listen to an omega anyway.”

“Hey! That’s not true. Melody would. She’d get the betas onside.”

“Yeah, but I’d never have the alpha power needed to control unruly betas or alphas. They’d walk all over me. So you have to step in as Second.”

“Larken could be Head Enforcer.”

“Too much of an unknown. The other alphas don’t trust him enough to submit. Plus, do you want Deke talking to other packs?”

They both laughed, erasing the tension in Chase’s voice.

“Okay, fair, but you can’t just abandon me to the job.”

“I would never!” Axel said playfully.

Sounds followed of them rough housing. I feared for our furniture, so I entered the room. “Coffee?”

They both nodded and, thankfully, stopped their tussling. Chase rested his head on Axel’s stomach, seemingly happy to be petted by his twin.

I returned to the kitchen and found my phone, deciding it was best to return calls as I put together breakfast for us. Since he had called the most, I started with ívarr, who answered my call quickly.

“Tearlach, is it true? Have you bonded to Axel?”

“I have,” I answered warily, picking up on his panic.

He let out a weary sigh. “Goddess help us. I thought it was a false rumor.”

“I’m afraid not. What is the issue?”

“My sources say parliament is deeply troubled by this news. They do not sanction this match. I hate to suggest this, my friend, but perhaps it is best you dissolve it—just temporarily, until you gain permission from your mother at the very least. It has weakened her rule.”

This was alarming news. My alpha side balked at the idea of ending my bond with Axel, even for a short time. At the same time my elven heart felt ashamed I had not gained approval from my mother. My shifter instincts would not allow the thought of it. I was at war with myself.

At the end of the day, it was disrespectful to her, and Axel, to go without her blessing. Despite having a shifter side, I was still an elf. She was still my queen.

“I will discuss this with Axel before I make any decisions.”

Axel was rational. I knew we could discuss it. There was likely very little we could do to fix this with parliament. They had been against us all along. My mother was the one who deserved an apology.

“As you should. Teagan suggests you visit the omega bear, Janet, before you do anything else. Janet often speaks for The Luna. Perhaps she will have an explanation that will satisfy parliament and prevent this situation from getting worse.”

“That is a good idea. Please, thank Teagan for me.”

We made our goodbyes and ended the call. This would not be an easy talk, but I knew he would have an idea of what we could do.

The cabin which housed the ancient omega bear was in the center of the omega area of the compound. Janet had joined the pack from the bear sleuth when they rejoined the pack and the Alpha retired to be closer to his children. Blake had decided to ensure Janet's safety by putting her in the heart of the compound where the other omegas could watch out for the blind elder.

As such, it did not take us much time to reach the cabin. Axel's hand tightened on mine. Though he had agreed to temporarily ending the bond, I could feel his reluctance. Only my duty as prince to my people kept me from disagreeing with ívarr's plan. Axel had seen the wisdom in it, yet I had seen how it stung his fragile heart to even think of it.

His new omega instincts took this as a rejection. I felt it from his wolf who was slowly adjusting to their new omega status. My owl wasn't taken with the plan either. He thought this was a mistake, showing weakness to those who did not matter when it came to our bond.

On Axel's other side, Chase stood with a grim expression on his face. Truthfully, he had fought against the plan far harder than Axel. Our bonding and Axel's transformation into an omega meant as much to him as it did his twin, he was just more vocal with his opinion.

"Enter, boys. I want to meet this elf." We were barely at the door when the old voice spoke.

I blushed. It was embarrassing to admit my failures. I had been remiss in my introductions to the pack. For the last year I had been on Sweetwater lands, I had only visited the omega compound a handful of times and never Janet.

"My apologies," I said as I entered and approached the elder. "I should have visited well before now."

“Yes, you should have. I could have saved you a lot of heartache. Well, maybe not. The Luna only tells me things when she is good and ready.”

“Has she spoken to you lately?” Axel asked warily, perching on the sofa next to me.

“Oh yes. Plenty of things. Now come sit so I can tell you. I don’t have much time left.”

“You don’t? Where are you going?” Chase looked alarmed as he took the offered seat on the sofa on the other side of Axel.

“Pour me a glass of that sweet tea, darling.” Chase grabbed the glass and jug. The liquid sloshed over the rim of the glass when she spoke next. “I’m dying. The Luna calls me home. Just a few things to do first.”

Janet said it all so cheerfully it was hard to grasp what she was saying.

“You’re dying?” Axel asked, his face pale, eyes wide.

“Well, we all are darling, but I’m going sooner than most. I’m very old you see, you might not be able to tell.” She winked one of those milky white eyes.

“You will be missed in the pack,” I said. “Everyone speaks so highly of you.”

“Of course they do!” She laughed, the sound ending with a cough. Janet took a sip of her tea and smiled. “Candace makes the best tea. I shall miss all my omegas, especially you, Axel. I am so grateful the goddess gave you your wish before she took me home.”

Axel’s eyes filled with tears. “I am too.”

“Now, get rid of that silly plan for an unbonding potion. Won’t work, darling, since you and the hybrid are fated.”

“Hybrid?” I asked, stunned by the news the old shifter was imparting.

“Fated?” Axel gasped.

Janet grinned. “Oh yes, our prince is just the first to come of the elves who can shift. It’s a return to the old ways, after all. And you two, didn’t you both feel that pull as soon as you met? Axel, when your eyes met Teárlach’s, didn’t you feel that spark?”

“I did.”

“There you go! That was your latent gene telling you your match was near. Teárlach just had to love you enough to gain his other form.”

“So there’s no undoing our bond?” I had to know. To hear the words properly.

“None.” The voice that left Janet was not her own. It resonated out of a dream. There were flashes of a woman. A tree. “You are fated mates, never to be torn apart.”

My eyes met my mates’. I could hardly believe it, we were fated. Nothing, no one, could tear us apart. The relief was staggering, it nearly brought me to my knees right there and then. Unable to hold back, I turned to Axel and kissed him sweetly.

I love you, my mate.

I love you too. While I love you calling me mate, I prefer dear one. Nothing has changed for me.

Then I shall always call you my dear one.

“Be grateful you can’t see them, Janet. They’re disgustingly in love.” Chase made an exaggerated grimace.

“Oh, I can feel them darling. It’s very sweet. The goddess knew giving them a choice was a risk, but she is glad they chose love over duty and dreams. Who knows, she might reward them further down the line.”

There was a twinkle in the elder shifter’s milky eyes, which suggested that reward was closer than we could guess.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

We left Janet's cabin after a couple of glasses of perfect sweet tea. I had never had the drink before and it was a new favorite. I would have to ask Candace or her sister, Melody, for the recipe so I could keep some in our refrigerator.

"If it is not too much trouble, I would like to join the pack officially now that we are mated. Blake also deserves to know our happy news as soon as possible."

"So you aren't just putting off telling ívarr and Teagan?" Axel teased.

"Well, that also. I think it is prudent to be tied to the pack before heading to Abrocaelum."

"Okay. I think you should ask ívarr, Teagan and Hakeem to come with us. They started this journey with you, it feels important for them to continue it."

Axel's face was thoughtful as we walked towards the mansion. Blake would be in his office, since it was barely lunchtime. I planned to make this a quick visit, though with Axel's brother-in-law near, that was unlikely. As long as they fed us, I would be happy. I had not realized how much food it took to feed a shifter until I was one myself.

Meat, you need more protein, my owl lectured.

He was a good companion. He and Axel's wolf got on so well. The time they had played together was a favorite memory for him. He appreciated my magic and the life I was building with my mate. It soothed him that our bonding was unbreakable because he had hated the idea, though he had stayed silent, seeing the action as

necessary.

“I will ask my friends to come with us. It is past time that the parliament sees what we are doing here.”

“Can I come with you? To Abrocaelum, I mean.” Chase asked. He was subdued after our conversation with Janet. His heart was softer in some ways than Axel’s and the idea of losing the elder shifter weighed heavily on him. He wanted to explain to Blake so the pack was prepared for her loss as well as they could be.

The mansion was busy with many shifters shouting out their congratulations as we passed. I made note of the ones who only gave a perfunctory greeting. They were to be watched. My owl approved of this plan.

“Congratulations, Axel. I hope I get to change next,” Dalton said as he came to meet us, a fixed, almost fake smile on his face.

Dalton would not go on my list, for I knew his pain. He had set his sights on Axel, which was understandable, my mate was attractive and principled, he made a good mate. Now he was stuck seeing Axel with a mate who was not him, and Axel was an omega, which Dalton desperately wanted to be himself.

Axel pulled his assistant in for a hug, clearly feeling his pain as his own. “I hope so, too.”

We eventually made it to Blake’s office, where Kade and the babies were waiting for us. Preparations were underway for their first birthday. At first, I thought the office had been decorated for them and not us. The little ones were adorable as they chased balloons around the floor.

Pop!

Felix began to cry as one burst in his face. He settled as soon as Axel picked him up and cuddled him close. Kade smiled, as happy as I was that Axel would let those instincts out now.

“Alpha Blake, I would like to officially join the Sweetwater pack.”

Blake studied me. “No calling me Alpha Blake all the time, only when it’s necessary. We’re brothers now, okay?”

“I can do that.”

“Then welcome to the Sweetwater pack.”

My new Alpha made quick work of the vow and we celebrated our mating with our family over lunch provided by Winter from the kitchen. The beta had even made Axel’s favorite cake, a red velvet towering monstrosity, that Kade had to wrestle Greyson away from. The alpha pup loved it almost as much as his omega uncle did.

We left and headed towards the science center where ívarr, Teagan and Hakeem were gathered.

“Are you ready to go?” Teagan asked.

I looked at my mate. He was nervous. Chase, beside him, also looked anxious over what we were about to face.

“About as ready as we can be. They will not like what we have to tell them. Janet confirmed I am just the first to have an animal soul.”

Hakeem’s eyes widened, then he smiled. “I would love to change forms. My work with the shifters of Abrocaelum would be much easier.”

“I’d love wings,” Teagan sighed with a dreamy look on her face.

“Hmm, I do not want an animal soul, though I admire the shifters.”

“You’re all about the witches these days, aren’t you?” Teagan teased, playfully tugging at his arm.

ívarr just smiled. “Only one witch. She was hoping to come with us, if that is alright?”

“Michaela’s coming to Abrocaelum? Is she bringing her bike?” Chase was practically bouncing.

“Bike? Do you mean a bicycle?” ívarr’s face was set in a frown.

The roar of an engine came from down the street. Chase made a noise of delight while Axel and Teagan shared grins.

“I think he means motorcycle,” I told my friend.

The witch came to a stop in front of us and removed her helmet. “Hey, I thought since we would be making an entrance, I’d go big.”

“Go big or go home, right?” Chase rushed to examine the machine. “Can I ride this another time?”

“Sure,” Michaela said easily. She got off the bike and went to a box on the end where she withdrew another helmet. “Wanna ride with me?” She brought it to ívarr, who was blushing! Never in my life had I seen the man blush.

“I’d like to, but I’m afraid I will fall.”

“Just hold on tight to me. You trust me, don’t you?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Okay, then we need to braid this hair first. Don’t want to get it all messed up. May I?”

ívarr didn’t answer, just approached the bike and perched on the seat, making him a better height for Michaela to quickly tie his long dark hair into a braid.

The moment between them seemed so intimate, I felt as if I shouldn’t be watching it.

“We should head to the portal. There, those of us who can, should shift. The others will take our clothes.”

“Actually, I decided you needed something fancier, all of you, so I’ve got that handled.” Teagan knocked her foot against the bag beside her. “I also got horses for me and Hakeem. Someone is waiting at the other side of the portal for us.”

Dread lined my stomach as we made our way to the portal where the elves waited for us to cross. The ones guarding were friendly. Some expressed shock and awe when I shifted, letting my owl spread their wings.

It was the first time ívarr, Hakeem and Teagan were seeing my new form, so I waited, perched on Axel’s arm, for them to touch my feathers.

“Come on, get your helmet on. Let’s get this done.”

Now I saw what ívarr liked in his witch. She had a take charge personality.

I could only imagine what the people of Abrocaelum saw as we got near to the castle.

A witch and elf on a motorcycle.

Twin wolves racing and an owl flying above them.

Followed by two elves on horseback cheering them on.

We were a disaster waiting to happen. Hopefully the court waiting in the throne room would be the focus of any calamity.

Michaela parked her bike in the courtyard where Teagan and Hakeem dismounted. The stunned page took charge of the horses but gaped at us the entire time.

“Stay shifted until we are in front of the queen,” Teagan said.

Happy to agree, I landed on my wolf.

Are you alright, dear one?

Nervous as fuck and grateful only you can hear me right now.

Nope. Heard you too. Both of you, but since I’m also nervous as fuck, I think it’s okay to be using the pack link.

Chase never failed to make me smile.

I am grateful you are here, brother mine.

The doors of the throne room ahead of us were open, the entire cabinet of parliament assembled before us. My mother was looking particularly regal in a dress of cream with flashes of the green she favored.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ellgar yelled.

“Ellgar, you will hold your tongue until our guests are ready to speak to you.”

I flew into the room, stopping in front of my mother, flapping my wings to stay afloat until I remembered my magic. I used it to hover and speak to her.

Hello, Mother.

“Teárlach, it brings me joy to see you so. I had a dream about you.”

Returning to the others, I shifted. Teagan threw me a robe so I could cover myself. It was a deep green, embroidered with an owl. Axel wore the same color with his wolf. Chase another shade of green, also with his alter.

“Apologies for the manner in which we greet you. I felt it best to provide proof of my change to prevent any doubt of my truthfulness.”

“An effective tactic.” Mother smiled, a truly genuine one which reached her eyes.

“We, my mate and I, consulted a Seer today. She confirmed, with the voice of The Luna, the shifter goddess, that I am to be the first of many elves with an animal soul.”

“Preposterous!” Ellgar yelled. Many others agreed with him. Many glares and accusations of trickery were aimed our way.

“Silence.” Mother’s body spoke, yet it was not her voice. “My elves have fallen so far from what they used to be. There was a time before Abrocaelum, when many could shift into animals, and you lived with the other species, loved them.”

The crowd could only stare as our goddess continued.

“Only love will save you now. You are too interbred. Disease would have flourished had I allowed you to continue as you were. Your prince is the first. He put love, true love, before his duty and earned his fated mate and animal soul. He is your example. Follow or perish.”

With her final words, Mother collapsed. I rushed to her side and pushed some healing magic into her.

“I am well, my son. The goddess was displeased and I felt her ire. She apologized for the headache.” Mother smiled as she touched her head.

ívarr and Teagan came forward, Michaella between them. “May I do anything to help? I’m a witch but also a nurse.”

“Thank you for the kind offer. Perhaps we can do that over tea. I would like to know everything.”

“My queen, I would like to introduce Michaella, my partner. Is that the correct term?” ívarr asked his witch.

“It’ll do until I get an upgrade to wife,” she teased, earning another blush from ívarr.

“Oh, I approve of this match already,” Mother said, standing. “Those who truly want to listen are welcome in the dining hall for tea. Those who are going to wait to see what else our goddess is going to say, will have to wait. She has had enough of you today.”

Teagan giggled, prompting the rest of us to laugh. We tried to keep it quiet as we followed my mother, but I fear we were not successful.

By the time we departed Abrocaelum in much the same fashion as we arrived, we had

caused quite the uproar. However, my mating to Axel had been approved by my mother. I apologized for not gaining permission first, which she waved off. She was very understanding about the circumstances.

When I had wished to be the father of Axel's future child, I could not have predicted I would gain my owl form, or that I would be an alpha. I thanked The Luna for giving me more than I could have dreamed to ask for.

Not only did I have a fated mate, an animal soul, I also had a pack, a larger family than I could have even imagined.

"I think we got off easy, don't you?"

"Hmm?"

Axel traced my arm as we lay in our bed, relaxed after a warm bath and a couple of orgasms.

"The fallout from you turning into a shifter/elf hybrid. It seems almost too easy."

"Easy?"

"Do you not think?"

"No, because there were many, many nights when I wondered if you would be taken from me. Where I worried if I would have to break my vow to you about giving you a child. How I ached for it to be me, not some random alpha who would give you a baby. To make you an omega myself. How I hated the idea of having to go back to Abrocaelum and make a child with someone who wasn't you."

"So you think we'll have our own child?"

“I think we can guarantee it. The Luna, my goddess, would not have done all this, to leave us barren. My mother said this was the reason.”

“Are you excited?”

“Yes. Even if it doesn’t happen right away, I’ll still be grateful. All of this. You. I get to keep you, so even if it’s just us for a while, I’ll be happier than I could have imagined.”

“You know all the right things to say.”

“I am just telling the truth.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Almost every day since my heat, I woke up expecting that heart stopping moment when my scent had changed to signify I was pregnant. The closer we got to the two weeks, the most likely time I would detect the change, the more I feared I was going to be disappointed.

Really, I shouldn't have doubted my goddess. She had made Teárlach an alpha because I had chosen love over my dream just so I could have everything I ever wanted.

So when I woke to the sweetest scent ever imagined, I burst into tears.

My wolf was there to soothe me. They were delighted with the change in our scent and what it meant. Happy, they kept repeating

Happy tears, I told them.

"Dear one, what's wrong?" T asked, horrified as he pulled me closer to him. Even before he was an alpha, he was a cuddly sleeper.

"Scent... changed..." I barely managed to get the words out around my sobs.

"These tears are because you are happy, correct?" He sounded confused.

I pulled away. "Are you not excited?"

"Axel, I've been waiting for you to wake up for hours now. I think my shock and relief have worn off. Sorry if you..."

Laughing, I brushed my tears away. “Hours? Why didn’t you wake me?”

He cupped a hand over my stomach. “You are growing our babe. I wanted you to have all the rest you need.”

I couldn’t resist nuzzling into his neck. “You’re already killing it as a mate. Why are you so sweet?”

T smoothed my hair back and kissed my forehead. “You make it so easy to love you.”

“If I’d tried, I couldn’t have dreamed you up. I love you so much and can’t believe we’re having a baby. I’m carrying your baby!”

Pushing me onto my back, T kissed me deeply before kissing a path down my body. He stopped at my stomach. “I’m about to do wicked things to your papa, don’t listen in.”

There wasn’t a part of me that wanted to remind T our baby wouldn’t be able to hear him yet. It was simply too adorable for words to have him speaking to our baby.

Our baby.

Yes, baby. My wolf was doing little hops in my mind. They were utterly delighted by what was happening. We have lots of babies for our alpha.

The reality of what was happening hit me then. I wanted to cry some more. Damn hormones. I also wanted to tell everyone we knew.

All of that went out of my head as T kissed lower, bypassing my increasingly interested cock, down my balls, taint to my hole.

As I hardened, I felt slick leaking from me. Teárlach licked at my hole. “So sweet, dear one. I could live on your slick.”

I shuddered with arousal and the sensation of him licking and sucking at my pucker. “More,” I begged as I threaded my fingers in his silky hair.

Giving me more of what I wanted, T nipped and teased me until I was leaking slick and precome over the sheets and was on the verge of crying with frustration.

“Quit the edging and fuck me!” I growled.

T raised his head, a wicked smirk on his face. “I’m celebrating!”

“Use your dick right now, or lose all sex privileges.”

The smirked widened. “Well... if you put it that way.” He grasped my hips and pulled me into the cradle of his groin. “How about you ride me?”

I took hold of his cock, lined it with my entrance, and sank down slowly, loving the feel of him stretching me. Teárlach was perfect. I’d been made to fit him.

We moved together, rising and falling, hearts beating together, sharing breaths.

Push and pull, just the feeling of him inside me, holding me tightly as we brought each other pleasure.

This was truly a celebration as we made love in the early morning light. A new chapter of our lives was about to begin.

I tucked my head against his throat and sucked a mark there as he tightened his grip on my hips.

His thrusts quickened. Got harder as his knot began to form. He reached for my cock, to stroke me to completion.

“No.” I batted his hand away from my length and up towards my nipples. “Pinch.”

Just the touch on my sensitive buds had my orgasm roaring through me. I shuddered and panted as his knot locked us together and his come filled me.

Teárlach sucked a mark on my neck as I recovered my breath. Even when his knot deflated, he stayed with me encircled in his arms.

“Breakfast for Papa, then I thought we could call our families, tell them the news?”

“I’d like that, but shouldn’t we confirm it first?”

“Why don’t we warn them and ask my mother if she would like us to call her to hear the heartbeat?”

“Maybe she would like to visit again, so she could come to the clinic with us?”

I wished my own mother was here to see this. She would have loved seeing me so settled and happy. Being a grandmother... my heart panged. Wherever she was, I hoped she could see just how well we were all doing thanks to her love and guidance.

“We could certainly try to arrange that. If not, a video call will have to suffice.”

My mate left our bed for the bathroom. He started the shower for us and even washed my hair for me before he rinsed off and went to start breakfast.

“Can I do some of your braids?” I asked as I caught him deftly braiding as our pancakes cooked.

“If you would like to, then I would love that. It is intimate to let a partner braid your hair.”

“So Michaela braiding ívarr’s hair was a big deal.”

“Very. It is something only for family members or very close loved ones. Mother has two close companions who help her with her hair when she is required to have something elaborate. She can wear many braids as the head of our army.”

“She’s had many battles.”

“So many, I believe we have lost count. She was quite the warrior before she ascended to queen. Mother served under her father, the king, at that time and this was a test. She was to learn when diplomacy was the better option by seeing the scars war inflicts on our people.”

I took the pan off the heat so I could focus on T’s hair. The comb he offered had wide teeth to make sectioning easier. Taking care to be gentle, I ran the comb through his hair, separated the piece I wanted, and took my time to make a neat and even braid all the way to his waist.

His fingers traced it. “Perfect. Would you like to do another?”

“Could I?”

“Of course, but let me get some fruit to cut while you do that.”

We spent breakfast together peacefully, just enjoying the quiet time together before we told everyone. I finished up Teárlach’s hair, then he made sure I ate a balanced breakfast.

“Chase will be here soon,” T said as he located his phone. I smiled at his back. He still was useless with it. Worse, now that he had the pack link to pass messages along for him.

“Did you call him?”

“No, he left a message saying he felt something was off. He was just giving us time to get busy—“

“Never say that again. Ever.”

T laughed. “It felt strange in my mouth.”

“Trust me, it was stranger in my ears.” I laughed, feeling so nervous and excited for what the day held. “I’m just going to tell Dalton I won’t be in for a bit and ask for an appointment at the clinic, okay?”

“Yes. Chase won’t be long.”

When I returned to the kitchen, Chase was finishing off what remained of my breakfast while T made him some fresh pancakes.

Chase leaped up from the seat to wrap me in a hug. “I’m so happy for you both. Cannot wait to meet this nibbling!”

“Let us sit in the living room so we can ask my mother to meet us. Do you have an appointment?”

“Yeah, we have a couple of hours before it.”

There was a knock on the door before we even got a chance to sit down.

“I’ll get it,” Chase said. “You two start the call.” The door opened. “Oh, uh, nevermind. Teárlach, your mother is here.”

“What?” I went to join Chase by the door and saw the carriage outside. Blake and Kade were inside with the queen and their kids. “What the hell?”

Teárlach went out to help his mother exit the carriage. “Apologies for interrupting your announcement, but I was told I had to be in Sweetwater today.”

“Announcement?” Kade asked, eyes going wide as he caught my eye. “You are! Oh my goddess! Thank The Luna!” he cried as he ran to hug me, my brother and the kids just behind him.

“Uncle Axel is going to have a baby!” Blake told the little ones proudly. “Say congratulations.”

The nibblings all parroted their father, looking so cute and earnest, I nearly cried.

“Congratulations my son and Axel. You will make fine parents and it gives me hope there will be more young in Abrocaelum soon.” Though the queen looked happy, there was also pain in her eyes. “I was sent a message to come here today. Your Seer’s time has come. We are to be there so she can see Axel before she goes.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t quite believe it was so soon. When Janet had told us her time was coming, I thought she meant months away. It had barely been two weeks since she had given us the news.

We walked the short distance to her cabin. Even the nibblings came. Blake and Kade didn’t want to shelter them from what was a natural part of life. Plus they felt she might like to see them again before she passed since she would miss their birthday party.

Aldrin and James were already there, a bag of equipment beside them and somber looks on their faces as they stood by the elder shifter's bed. Someone had moved it into the living room, the only space big enough for all of us.

Everyone greeted Janet, even the little ones. Felix gave her a kiss on the cheek which she smiled at with a gnarled hand cupped over it. "Oh! This is more than I could have hoped for."

Dakota and Jasper arrived, packing out the house. Hayden was content to stay on Dakota's hip while Angelica went to Janet and squeezed her hand. "Do you have to go, Miss Janet?"

"I do, baby, but your papa is going to be the voice for the goddess now. She told me this morning. So be good for him, okay?"

Jasper gasped in shock while Kade openly wept on Janet's other side. I struggled with my own emotions. These omega responses were frustrating, but I'd never give them up. James's chin wobbled, eyes filling as Aldrin rubbed his back. None of us were holding up well.

"Yes, Miss Janet. I'll miss you."

"Want to know a secret?" Angelica nodded. "I'm not ever going to be far. Like the moon, I'll be watching over you."

"Okay." Angelica stepped away.

"We wondered..." Aldrin began. "If you would like to hear Axel's baby."

"I'd love that." Janet's voice was weak now. "Come sit beside me, Axel."

She was so frail and small, there was plenty of space for me to scoot up beside her and lie down. We shared a smile as James readied the machine and poured the cold gel onto me. I winced.

“You’ll never get used to that, I’m afraid. There’s more babies in your future. This one, well, she’s just the start.”

“She?”

The room filled with the flub-flub noises of our baby’s heartbeat. The most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

I still couldn’t believe it. T’s eyes met mine, probably reflecting the same awed expression. We were going to be parents.

My wolf was still doing their celebration hops, now coupled with delighted yips. More babies! they cried. A girl!

“Ah, yes. There she is. She’s going to be feisty but so beautiful. The first of many, for you, and for the elf kind. As soon as she’s born, those floodgates are gonna open.” Janet smiled peacefully.

“Really?” I don’t think Queen Alyalsha meant to ask out loud.

“The princess is just the first. The elves must return to the old ways, when they knew the truth. There is just one goddess.” Janet’s voice had taken on that tone which said The Luna was speaking through her.

“I am both The Luna and the elven goddess. We are one and the same.” This time the voice came from the queen. The air became charged with power. Even the children sat still.

Hold on. What?

Everyone stared at the queen until Janet giggled, the sound ending in a cough. James rushed to give her a drink of water when Jasper spoke in an alien voice.

“Shifters came from the elves. I protected them by making them look human when Abrocaelum was made and those who could not shift refused them entry. Then I altered memories and the archives. Helped hide their past because of the discrimination they faced from their ancestors.

“I stopped my shifters from mixing with other species to protect them. Yet the elves and fae stole them and used them. The alpha males hunted the alpha females until I made the betas. So much to fix, so little power.”

The voice returned to the queen, leaving Jasper sagging against Dakota. “I had to wait until your prayers returned you to your faith and amplified my power. My shifters were ready. The pieces of the puzzle are in place. Now we can start again. First with the princess.”

We all stared at each other for a while, the air returning to normal.

“I won’t... miss... that feeling,” Janet rasped out finally, breaking the silence. “But... I’ll miss being a part of it. I’ll... watch over... you all.”

The room remained quiet for a long time, letting us all grieve in our own ways as Janet took her last breath, the light leaving her eyes, while the smile remained on her weathered face.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Death was a natural part of life. As an elf who had lived far too many years as a soldier, I had seen countless people fall. Never had a death touched me as much as Janet's had.

Each of the shifters and even my mother had said their whispered goodbyes before leaving the cabin. All lost in our own grief and feelings.

There was so much to process. All the revelations the goddess—The Luna—had shared weighed heavily on me. Though she had explained she had hidden the truth to protect her beloved shifters, I still could not understand how we had missed that they were one and the same.

Having forgotten our goddess's true name finally made sense to me. Instead of renaming herself, she had just let it slip out of memory. Rather than tell a lie, she omitted that part of herself, likely suffering in the process as we forgot her.

We left Aldrin and James to attend to Janet while Blake went to the mansion with his family to begin the preparations for the funeral. Janet had wanted a party, a true celebration of life and love, not something depressing. So that was what the pack would give her.

Chase went with them, picking up little Elliotte while her brothers shifted and raced along the pathways between the omega compound and the main house.

Since Jasper was still stunned at the revelations and his new ability, Dakota took him home. He wasn't in the right mind to be teaching at the school, and Blake knew Dakota wouldn't settle at his desk to do any work while his mate was upset.

All of us had to process what had happened in our own time.

Axel and I remained in the carriage with my mother until it got to the portal, where we said our goodbyes.

“Take care of him, Teárlach. Do not let his grief overshadow what should be a joyous occasion for him. What you have created, your child, is a miracle. Celebrate it,” Mother urged before she let me leave the carriage.

“Everything okay?” Axel asked as I joined him by the portal.

“Mother just wanted to remind me to focus on the good things of today. Not our sadness.”

“The queen is very wise. Janet would be telling us off right now, moping instead of rejoicing.” Axel turned and walked the path towards our little house.

“So I would like to take my mate home, make love to him again,” I said, catching up with him to take his hand. “Then I think we should shift. I’ve heard it’s very important for shifters to spend time as their alters to maintain a healthy pregnancy.”

Axel’s pace picked up, he let go of me to charge ahead. “In that case...” He laughed as I chased after him.

We didn’t make it to our bedroom. As soon as Axel entered the house, he stripped off. I hurried to close the door so no one else but me could see the long, lean lines of his body. He had little body hair before his transformation to omega, now he had even less. His hips had widened some, curves softening to prepare for carrying our baby.

He was a wonder to me. I could hardly believe he was all mine.

My clothes joined his in a trail towards our bedroom. Even after all these months, a whole year together, I'd never get enough of him.

I caught him in the short hallway next to our bedroom and took his mouth in a fierce kiss. He jumped into my arms, locking his legs around my waist, rubbing his hard cock against my stomach.

His hands went into my hair, keeping my mouth on his until he broke away to gasp, "right here. I want you to fuck me right here."

Cupping his ass, I slid my cock over his crease and leaking hole. His slick was enough of a reason to love him being an omega now. The head caught on his rim and he moaned. I pushed inside his tight heat on a groan. I'd had him already today, but it was never enough.

I set a fast pace, desperate for all his sounds of pleasure and almost out of my mind with how he was making me feel. Each thrust into Axel was heavenly. He had truly been made for me.

Pictures on the walls rattled and threatened to fall. I paused. One could hurt Axel, hurt our baby.

Still inside him, I turned us and walked the short distance to our bed, grateful for our small house. I laid him on the bed and covered my body with his.

Kissing and stroking his body, I rocked into him, showing him with my body just how much I loved him. I whispered words against his lips, my mark on his throat, his chest, telling him just how much I adored him.

Axel was my world, and with the miracle he was growing inside him, that world was expanding, making room for that little life. Our daughter.

My thrusts picked up as Axel neared his peak. We came together and lay entwined on the blanket for a long time afterwards.

“Nap as our alters? My wolf would love to curl around your owl.”

“I would love that too.”

Clean up was easy with magic involved. Soon I was in my feathered form, Axel’s wolf surrounding me. His fur was soft and my owl couldn’t resist grooming him with our beak. The wolf settled quickly, letting sleep fall over them as we continued our work.

Thank you, I whispered to a goddess I was sure was watching.

“Congratulations!” people called out as we walked by. Since he was still officially Second, the pack treated him as such. There would be an announcement during the funeral about Chase taking over.

“I’d forgotten there are no secrets in this pack.”

Axel laughed. “None. I dunno how Hiroshi, Roan, Tate, and Asher kept everything quiet for as long as they did.” He inclined his head towards the group. A pregnant Hiroshi was being waited on by his family. They had found him a comfortable seat to rest in while the babies played in the grass, the light from the bonfire lighting their precious faces.

Per Janet’s wishes, all the children of the pack were present. Everyone was wearing their brightest colors. I was in green, Axel in blue. I’d requested a tunic be made to compliment his eyes. The creator had put his wolf on there along with symbols representing royalty, which he was now, not that he knew it. We would have that conversation later. Much later. I didn’t want to add to his stress.

We gathered in small groups, keeping the gathering informal, also to Janet's wishes. Tables were laden with food, games were at the ready, for after the pyre was lit, everyone was trying to be upbeat. I caught lots of sad smiles which turned genuine when they spoke to Axel.

"Jason and Eva made it. Blake hoped they would." At my look of confusion, Axel clarified. "They were the Alpha Pair of the bear sleuth before it rejoined the pack. They knew Janet for years."

"I am glad they could attend."

A signal went up as we reached our space near the front, telling all in attendance their Alpha was ready to speak.

"Thank you all for coming today. We are here to celebrate two lives. One just beginning and one ended. Axel has confirmed he is pregnant with his mate's child. Congratulations to my brothers on this new life!"

Blake waited for the cheers to die down.

"Unfortunately, this means Axel is stepping down as Second and Chase will be replacing him. Axel will assist Chase with the role, as Chase did for him."

There was some grumbling in the crowd. I caught plenty wondering why he was stepping down and more complaining he was still in a supportive role and not an omega role, whatever that was. The omegas, and plenty of betas, particularly the female ones, understood that being an omega was not a weakness. Bearing children was not for the weak. Omegas were the strongest of us all.

Unfortunately, plenty of the alphas and alpha leaning betas did not understand this. They thought their physical strength made them superior.

“Settle down.” Blake’s voice was a deep rumble which carried, magically amplified by the witch at his side. “Poppy is here to light the pyre. It will burn only for a few minutes. Once the ash is cooled, we will spread it through the woods where Janet liked to roam in her bear form.”

Kade took center stage. “I met Janet at a really difficult time in my life. Thanks to her, I found myself, my home, my family. She helped me find love and set Dakota on the path to become my dad, not just my best friend. With her guidance, many of us have found the other part of ourselves in our mates. We’ve found our joy and made our dreams come true.

“We didn’t just love her because she was the voice of The Luna. Though her prophecies always came true, it was always her love we went to her for. She loved her pack dearly. Each and every one of us. Her light was so bright, the world seems dimmer today. It was an honor to be there in her last hour, to let her know just how loved she was in return. Thank you, Janet, for your love and kindness. Thank you, The Luna, for the gift of our beloved pack mate. May she watch over us with your blessing.”

“With your blessing.” All the assembled shifters echoed the prayer.

Poppy took her turn at the front. “I’m grateful I had the chance to get to know Janet before she passed. She always had words of kindness to share. She never met a stranger, that one!” Laughter broke out. “Janet eased my fears at one of the darkest times of my life. Her heart was of the purest gold. She will be missed.”

“My turn,” I whispered before I pressed a kiss to Axel’s head and took my place next to Blake.

“In her last moments, Janet revealed just how close shifters and elves are. We share the same goddess. We were you before we forgot the gift given to us by The Luna. I

was grateful to get to know Janet, however briefly. She will be missed. Now we will honor Janet and The Luna by freeing her spirit, letting her return to The Luna's side."

At my last words, Poppy said the spell to light the pyre. It flashed with many colors, magic fueling it, burning hotter than any natural fire could.

We watched it burn in awed silence until I heard a child's voice. "Papa! I see her. Look!"

Sure enough, behind the fire, her figure illuminated by the moon, was Janet, standing tall, whole, young, her bear next to her. Beside Janet on the other side, less bright but just as welcome, was The Luna, still as otherworldly as she had been in my dream.

Janet waved, a huge smile on her face as she and the fire winked out.

The party continued on well into the night. Those with young children left when the little ones started falling asleep in the grass.

Most of the partygoers were in high spirits after our ghostly visit. They believed The Luna's appearance was a good omen for the pack. The council were going to regret the divisions when word got out.

"I ate too much," Axel complained as we walked home.

"Nonsense."

"Then why do I feel nauseous?"

"Because you are pregnant, dear one. I also think the run through the woods after you had eaten a third hotdog was a bad idea."

“Yes, you said.” Axel rolled his eyes, then laid a hand over his belly. His steps paused. “Will you still love me if I puke?”

“Even if it hits my boots. You know I like these boots.”

“Good.” Axel doubled over and threw up in a bush. I rubbed his back soothingly as he purged his stomach. “Yuck.”

“Better?”

He straightened and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, grimacing. “Is it bad I feel hungry again?”

“Not at all. Why don’t we get you inside, get you a glass of water, then you can decide if you want me to head back for a slice of the red velvet cake I saw you eyeing?”

“That sounds amazing. I’ll apologize to our neighbor tomorrow.”

I waved a hand, using the soil to cover the mess. “No need, all fixed.”

His smile warmed my heart. Such a little thing pleased him so much. Axel was so easy to be around.

We weren’t far from the house, so it took only a few minutes to get Axel settled on the sofa. He drank the glass of water obediently. I already knew I was going back for the cake. His wistful expression when we had been offered some to take home should have been a reminder to always take his favorite cake. It was foolish to leave without it.

“There’s a message on your phone.” Axel handed it to me. “You’re never going to

get the hang of these things, are you?”

“I’m old, Axel.”

“Uh-huh. Teagan manages just fine. Aren’t you the same age?”

“Thereabouts.” I opened the message. “It was Mother sending her apologies for missing the funeral. She would have liked to attend, but parliament is in unrest over the revelations.”

“Will everything be okay?”

“It’s going to be a long road. We will get there.” Maybe it was wrong of me to be so dismissive, yet I struggled to have the mental energy for people who refused to believe the truth. My focus was on my mate and child. They were my priority.

“Now, you rest. I’ll be back with the cake soon.”

I kissed the tip of his nose before heading back to the gathering. Everywhere I went, people said hello and congratulations. It had only been a short time since I gained my shifter side, yet I felt more comfortable with shifters than I ever had with my own people.

Perhaps it was my royal duties which created a barrier, but here, in Sweetwater, they treated me just the same as everyone else. I was just Teárlach, or better yet, Axel’s mate.

“Cake?” Winter asked when I approached the table where he was packing away the leftovers.

“How did you know?”

“Listen, I’ve worked for those boys for years. I know better than to not leave Axel a slice of his red velvet cake. I only made it for him. Oh, and Greyson. That kid would eat it all day if we let him!”

“Thank you, Winter.”

“You’re welcome. I’m so happy for you and Axel. A mate and a kid wasn’t for me. I think I’m more like Chase than Axel, but I’m glad he got that. You’ve made him so… content, I guess. It’s good for him. You’re good for him.”

“I… I appreciate that. Axel… he’s such a gift. My life is so much fuller with him beside me.”

“Best get home to him with that cake.” Winter grinned knowingly.

“Yes, thank you for saving him some.”

“There’s a slice for each of you.”

My footsteps were light on my way home. It had been an emotional few days, yet I held hope in my heart because I knew Axel, and our baby, were goddess blessed.

“Dear one?” Axel didn’t move when I returned. I rounded the sofa to find him fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with his even breathing. Setting the cake down, I lifted him into my arms and took my exhausted mate to bed.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Pregnancy was... I had no words for the wonder it was. Sure, I'd had morning, afternoon, and evening sickness, heartburn, soreness everywhere, and was generally exhausted, but it was the greatest time of my life, growing our little one.

The pregnancy hormones were to blame for the tears I shed during my nibblings' birthday celebration, something that was nearly cut short because of another attack, not because I thought they were just too adorable in their outfits and covered in cake.

I used that excuse again for Hayden's birthday, and Halloween. Pregnancy was hard, okay?

While I was over halfway through my pregnancy, we were nowhere close to getting the elves to believe even part of the recent revelations.

First, they did not believe Teárlach was now a shifter. Parliament had spread rumors of magic cast by our witch friends. They believed it to be a ruse. Propaganda to make them accept shifters as more of their equals.

Then, they flat out refused to believe their goddess and The Luna were one and the same. An idea we could not back since she had gone quiet on us. ívarr believed it was likely because of the energy she would have used in order to tell us, especially when she switched between Seers. Then there was the appearance at the funeral. All the pack believed her, as did the elves who gathered with us to say goodbye.

ívarr had needed nothing other than Teárlach's word it was all true before he believed us. Those who knew us knew we wouldn't lie over something that big.

The worst problem we were having with parliament was they did not believe my baby was Teárlach's. They refused to recognize our mating as legitimate and had begun a smear campaign against me. They claimed I had tricked T into believing he was the father and had used donated sperm, or worse, had another alpha on hand, to finish my heat.

It was ridiculous and hurtful. So much so, T was refusing to go anywhere near Abrocaelum. His mother had come to Sweetwater for a scan appointment so she could see her granddaughter, but other than a few calls, he was keeping his distance.

T was determined our lives were better away from the toxicity of the court and parliament. His mother did her best, but she was one person against many. Ellgar had too much influence over the rest.

To be fair to Teárlach, the pack had welcomed him with open arms. They treated him like he had been a shifter all his life. He was now spending time with the wing guard because his flying ability was more important than his rather basic research skills. My mate was a fighter, not a scientist. Not that he wasn't smart, he was just better at reading intentions than statistics or lab reports.

While I was working, and even overnight sometimes, he took his turn touring the skies with another flier. They would work shifts and cover the more vulnerable areas of our territory.

Word had gotten out about my transformation into an omega, and about Teárlach's ability to shift, to other packs all over the country. It was crazy to me that the old council and even the Northharbor aviary believed it was possible for T to be the father of our baby when his own people denied it!

Thanks to the news getting out, the attacks had been less frequent. We had a few shifters come from other packs, hoping we could help them solve the mystery of

unlocking the beta gene.

Chase, as Second, was instrumental in checking they were being truthful in their intentions. We were welcoming to new pack mates only after they had been questioned about their intentions.

So far, it seemed to be an alpha bite was the only way to trigger the change, which was untenable for mated pairs of betas like Jake and Sebastian. They deserved to stay together. Also, it only benefitted beta to omega changes. No alpha wanted to mate another potential alpha, especially if they had a reaction like Asher and his lion did.

So only Dalton had his dream. He was an omega. Things were just... complicated with his mate. He was keeping their arrangement quiet for the most part, aside from when they had shown up together at the clinic wanting a spot in the trials. His choice in a partner was unexpected but I hoped things would work out for them. Their idea was unconventional, yet they were going into this with their eyes wide open.

Dalton was desperate to have a baby by any means necessary. We just had to hope he could have a baby soon, or he would drive Chase out of his mind.

I'd already cut my time in the office to not rub my growing belly in his face. Not going to the office was easier than having to listen to his complaints, which made me a shitty friend. It also meant I didn't have to hear the crap some of the enforcers were talking about me.

Which is why I was packing up the last of my stuff in the room Chase and I shared as an office. I was done pretending I could do this job without the support of the enforcers.

Betas, like Melody, had tried. The others were just so stuck in their ways. They couldn't see that I could beat their asses if I wasn't pregnant.

My alter grumbled an agreement with me. They didn't see the stupid gendered expectations as anything other than nonsense.

Being pregnant was the problem. They saw me as weak. Less. All because I was growing a child.

The baby kicked within me. Every time she did that, I wanted to just soak in the feeling. For so long, this had been my impossible dream. Now I had it all, my elf as my fated mate, my baby, and my family around me.

A job didn't matter.

Except, in my heart, it did. It hurt like fuck that they were rejecting me, that their opinion of me was so fragile, a change in designation could ruin it forever.

"Ah-ha!" Dalton cried as he rounded the corner into my office dressed smartly in a shirt and bow tie covering his shiny new mating bite. "I knew Chase was keeping me away for a reason. Explain yourself!" he demanded.

"I-uh-fuck!" I dropped the photo frame I'd been holding into the box.

Dalton's false smile fell. "Axel, please don't avoid me now. I thought we were friends!"

"We are!" I protested, automatically moving to soothe him.

"So friends avoid each other?" He held himself stiffly, arms crossed over his vulnerable middle.

"No. I... I just didn't want to hurt your feelings."

He hung his head. "I don't want you avoiding me because you have what I don't. You know that, right? Even if I never get to have a baby, I'm still an omega. I'm a step closer than I was before. It doesn't mean I don't want to experience it through you."

"I... never thought about it like that."

Drawing closer, he reached out a hand. "Can I?"

Nodding, I clasped his hand and placed it gently over my bump.

"Oh! She kicked!" She was really going for it.

I laughed, relieved at seeing the wonder in his eyes without a tinge of jealousy. Maybe I hadn't been giving Dalton enough credit.

"Of course she did. She's happy to meet her Uncle Dalton," I said, extending the olive branch, hopeful he would forgive me for avoiding him these last weeks.

"Uncle Dalton?"

"Outside of my family and my mate, you're the closest thing to a best friend I have. So would you be her honorary uncle?"

Dalton threw his arms around me and cried into my chest. I just held him and let him get it out before giving him the space to back up.

"I'm going to be the best uncle ever!" Dalton's grin stretched across his face.

"Just don't let Chase hear you say that, okay? That's starting a war you can't win."

His eyes twinkled mischievously. "This is going to be fun!" He turned to leave the

office before turning and leaning against the frame.

“Ax?”

“Yeah?”

“Just... don’t avoid me anymore, okay? I’m not jealous of what you have because I don’t, yet. I can be happy for you and sad for me at the same time, alright?”

“Yeah. Besides, it’s early days. Plenty of time for it to happen.”

He brightened. “Exactly.”

Blake rapped his knuckles against the doorframe a little while later. My stuff was nearly all packed away.

“Packing?”

I rolled my eyes. “Clearly.”

“You don’t have to do this, y’know.” He crossed his arms, a defeated look on his face.

“We can’t keep going like this, Blake,” I said, chucking the last things into boxes. How had I accumulated so much shit? “You punishing the ringleaders is doing absolutely nothing to change their minds.”

“Kade had an idea.”

My hands paused on the next thing to throw in the box. My brother-in-law always had the best ideas. “Yeah?”

“He thought you should become head of security for the omega compound. Being as you are a very well trained omega yourself. Some of the most sensitive omegas struggle with even the mated alphas.”

“But—“

“Before you say anything. I spoke to the alpha in charge there. His omega daughter just started having heats, and he’s struggling. The idea of being around while... yeah, he can’t be impartial now. He actually sounded relieved when I floated the idea.”

“Oh-kay.” I thought about it. The job was the ideal one for someone of my skill level and experience. It was better I was now an omega. They wouldn’t be afraid of me like the alphas. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll get that set up. Are you and T having dinner here tonight?”

“Nah, we’re going to the new house. It’s time to start moving stuff over.”

“Baby stuff?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I remember that time. Vividly.” He shuddered. “Babies come with so much stuff!”

“So much! Where’s the baby going to go after all the stuff gets delivered?”

Blake laughed. “You’ll figure it out. Plus, there’s always the next baby!”

Teárlach wouldn’t let me carry any of the boxes to the golf cart or from the vehicle into our new home.

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid,” I muttered.

“You are precious and carry our treasure. I’m just the muscle.” He did a little flex, which made me laugh.

“Fine. I’ll just sit here and get fat.”

“Impossible. Certainly not with your sickness.”

Being plagued with morning, noon, and night sickness wasn’t the highlight of being pregnant, but I couldn’t complain. I was getting everything I wanted, and it really hadn’t been that bad. I’d figured out most of my trigger foods and learned not to wait to eat. T kept crackers by the bed for me to eat in the morning so I wouldn’t puke up breakfast.

“Can we sleep here tonight? My wolf wants to get our scent over more of the furniture.” He looked at me with a glint in his eyes. “Not that way!” I yawned. “I’m exhausted, though I’m not opposed to an earlier wake up call.”

“Hmm, I love morning sex. Alright, dear one. We shall sleep here tonight and tomorrow I can spend the day moving our things over whilst you check out your new place of work.”

“You don’t have to waste your day—“

“It’s not a waste when I’m spending it on my family. Getting our home ready is a pleasure. Something I have never had. Please, give me this.”

“Okay.” I was happy to give him a new experience. His face lit up with happiness and he kissed me quickly before returning to get the last of our things.

Teárlach had a shift with the wing guard, so after a frothing session and a nap, he left me to sleep. He would wake me in the morning and we could christen our room properly before I went to work, and he caught more sleep.

Except, perfect plans don't always work out as you hoped.

"Axel, dear one, wake up. There's exciting news!" T's voice was louder than normal. Buoyant with joy.

"Hmm?"

"Hiroshi had his baby!"

"What?" I shot up, a wave of dizziness almost taking me back down again. "She's early!"

Teárlach handed me a glass of water, which I sipped gratefully, followed by a cracker.

"Yes, but she's perfectly fine, just on the smaller side. An omega wolf. They have called her Kanako. Is it not a beautiful name?"

"It is. She's healthy?"

"Very! I got to hear her cries, but I did not go in to see her, though I was invited. I thought we should do that together, perhaps later."

"I'd like that." My mate was so thoughtful. He knew I would want to be with him when he met the newest baby in the pack without me having to voice it.

"Later then. I look forward to our baby meeting Kanako. I hope they will be friends."

T settled on the bed next to me wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

“Me too.” I played with one of his braids.

“It makes me sad that the elves in Abrocaelum are still resistant to the truth. That they can deny what we have.”

“We’ve got time to show them.”

“There will be no denying their princess when she arrives.” He laid his hand on my stomach, rubbing gently. “This little princess will prove them all wrong.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Our new home was beautiful. It was a perfect blend of our different tastes, filled with lots of natural light, letting the trees behind our house feel like they were inside with us. Although inside was warm and outside the branches had a fine dusting of snow thanks to the wintry weather.

In truth, the house was very simple and likely rather plain compared to the other houses in the neighborhood owned by our Alpha and his family and Roan with his. It had been easy to ask for more rooms to be added after we had been told to expect more children, but it was not a big home. We had all we needed and nothing extra.

Though we had not discussed it, I knew Axel wanted as many children as the goddess decided we could handle. Even with his prolonged morning sickness, he enjoyed carrying our child, seeing his body grow and change. He reveled in each new thing, documenting it in a baby book for our daughter to enjoy when she was older.

Once he was out for the day, checking on his new office and learning about his new job in greater detail, I began the task of organizing our home to our mutual tastes.

Since Axel was keen to sleep in the new house to allow our scents to soak into it before he gave birth, I worked on the bedroom first. The elves had grown many plants, some native to Abrocaelum, which thrived in Sweetwater. I placed them around the room on the new wooden furniture I had commissioned. They brought the outdoors inside and purified the air. I knew Axel liked them and hoped to see them flower in the spring.

The bed was a custom made thing due to my size, with bedding also custom made. It was all natural fibers, and because shifters ran hot, we did not require many blankets,

though we had a lot of them. Axel would need them when it came time to create his birthing nest. I changed the sheets since the others were dirty after our... activities. Happy our bed was once again clean and comfortable, I set about putting our clothes into the dresser and closet.

Pictures and trinkets were last, giving our room a truly personal feel.

Content with one room fully unpacked, I quickly did the bathroom and then the kitchen.

I was unpacking dishes to put through the dishwasher when Chase arrived.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” I asked.

“Nah, it’s lunchtime. I was going to have it with Axel, but thought you might like some help and company.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you. I neglected to get some food.”

“Got you covered.” Chase held up a box. “Winter ordered some staples in for you and made us some sandwiches. He even put in his homemade chips.”

“Great. Could you put the cans and such in the pantry?”

“Sure.”

With Chase helping, we got the kitchen quickly organized. Before putting them away in the cabinets, we washed and dried all the dishes and pots.

“Why are you doing all this without Axel?” Chase asked thoughtfully as he leaned against the counter, eating chips.

I thought for a moment about how to answer. “He deserves to come home and really feel at home. He is doing so much just growing our baby. As his alpha, I feel it is my job to ensure he has a clean and comfortable home.”

“Huh. I know plenty of alphas who wouldn’t see this as their job.”

“I plan on being a different breed of alpha. My mating with Axel is a partnership, which is why he is working right now, benefitting our pack, because I understand his need for independence. Money is no issue for either of us. He likes to be needed.”

“The Luna did good work with you and Kade, I swear. I bet if I’d wanted a mate, she would have given me someone great.”

“Teagan is just waiting for you to decide—“

Chase’s laughter cut me off. “Nah, we would be a wreck. Teagan needs someone more dominant than me. She’s so beautiful and strong. Smart, too. She would walk all over me, which she thinks she would like, but she’d get bored in a heartbeat.”

Something told me Chase understood my friend’s needs better than I did. “We’ll just have to find her a powerful alpha.”

We ate together in the kitchen before Chase helped me situate the living room in a better way, so my reading corner made the best of the fading winter light. There wasn’t a TV since neither of us had the time, nor the inclination for one. Something Chase had very strong feelings about.

“I can’t believe you don’t have a TV!”

“You can have one in your room.”

“My room?”

“Yes, it is over here.” I led him to the addition to our two-story home.

On the ground floor, on the other side of the utility room, was a small apartment. It had a spare bedroom above it and its own staircase, which led to the upper floor. I had asked about the need for it. Axel explained it was another method of security. Chase had his own exit and his bedroom was next to the staircase, so he could guard the children.

Axel never had to ask about adding the apartment for Chase. We both did not want him remaining in the mansion, which was basically a bunk-house for single alphas now. The offices and a large dining hall remained there, but the important people to the pack lived elsewhere. Deke even had his own small home.

Chase belonged with us, his family. If, at any time, he wanted a house of his own, we would help him get settled.

His eyes went round with surprise when he saw the room. He pushed back any other deeper emotions he was feeling.

“You didn’t have to do this for me. I was okay where I was,” he said quietly.

“You’re family, Chase. You belong with us. I want to do the baby’s room with Axel, but I’d like to help you settle in, if you would like that?”

“I’d love that, thank you.”

Helping Chase really did not take that long. A couple of his enforcers carried his bed to the house, and he did not have much in the way of belongings. Somehow, part of what he owned was already at our house.

He hugged me briefly after we unpacked the last box, then returned to work just in time for Axel to come home.

“The house looks great.” Though he had a smile on his face, it was stiff.

“I did not do the baby’s room. Just all the others.”

“Why?”

“I thought it was something we should do together.”

“The rest of the house wasn’t?” I got the feeling he was genuinely curious about my reasoning.

“Not really. I know how you like things ordered. It was very dull unpacking rooms such as the kitchen and bathrooms. If you do not like where I placed things, we can change them. I mainly did the heavy lifting for you. I didn’t want to have you tire yourself out. Plus Chase helped.”

“He did?”

“Yes. I showed him his apartment. Should I not have done that?” I worried I had overstepped.

Axel smiled wide, relaxing fully. “No, I’m glad it was you. Sounds stupid, but he’d believe you wanted him here over me. If I’d told him he’d have said I wasn’t obligated, with you, well, I think he would’ve figured out he was a part of our family.”

“So I did well?”

“You did good. Thank you for not doing the baby’s room. I wanted to do that together.”

I washed up quickly so we could visit with Roan and his family. Kanako was a little beauty and had already wrapped everyone around her little finger. Her sister, Jewel, was very protective of her, so we did not get to hold her for long.

“Where’s Larken?” Axel asked as we were leaving, noticing boxes by the door.

“Um... he’s moved into one of the cabins temporarily. We’ve got a new guard, Ingal.” Hiroshi was unusually close-lipped over the situation.

“An elf is moving in?” Axel asked, surprised. Raising an eyebrow at him, he spluttered, “obviously there’s nothing wrong with living with an elf. I’ve got one of my own!”

Hiroshi laughed, clearly relieved we were no longer talking about Larken. “Yeah, Ingal is fascinated with shifters. He’s keen to get his own animal form. I guess he thought if he became part of our family it might unlock it.”

“Since we do not fully know the wishes of The Luna, we can only hope he is right. Congratulations on the new arrivals to your family. Health and happiness to you all.”

“And you!”

We returned to our home where I began dinner. “I’m not so hungry for food right now,” Axel said, grinning as he tried to climb onto the counter.

I gave up on the food preparation and hoisted him up, running my hands up his thighs. “Hmm, what are you hungry for, my mate?”

“You, inside me, knotting me. We have to get our scents everywhere. Before Chase comes home.”

I nosed a path up his neck and along his jaw, pressing the gentlest kiss on his lips. “Well, in that case.”

He wriggled out of his pants and flung his t-shirt on the floor. Just the sight of my naked mate had me hard and ready for him.

“Right here?” I asked as I stripped.

“Yeah, right here, right now.” I could see slick forming a little puddle under him. His cock was full and leaking against his stomach.

Without needing much more urging, I lined up and thrust in.

“It reeks of sex in here. I hope you cleaned the counters. Don’t tell me where you did it, just let me pretend it was on the floor.”

“As if I would have sex with your brother on the kitchen floor. Just the living room floor,” I teased.

“Dude. No.”

Axel was resting against me. After our first round, I fed him a snack and then he’d wanted more. The rug on the living room floor was very soft. Axel had liked it against his bare skin.

“Can we do the baby’s room now?” Axel asked sleepily as he roused against my shoulder.

“You are not having sex in my niece’s bedroom!” Chase looked horrified.

“What? No, I mean get it unpacked.” Axel frowned at his brother. “Why are you talking about sex?”

“Y’know what? I think we should just focus on the baby’s room. You go do that. I’ll cook.”

“Chase can cook?” I asked Axel.

“He’s pretty decent when he takes the time. Consider yourself honored.”

We left Chase to cook and took the stairs up to the baby’s room. She would not sleep in there for a few months, but it helped to have somewhere for all the clothes and stuffed animals people had been sending for her.

I let Axel tell me where to place the bigger items and carried boxes over to where he needed them while he unpacked them, folding the contents neatly into drawers.

“Could you put up the shade? She can sleep in here for nap time, help her get used to it.”

“Of course. Where would you like the rocking chair?”

One of the elves had worked with one of the ogres from the factory to carve a beautiful rocking chair and footstool.

“In the corner there, please.” He observed the placement, then looked around thoughtfully. “Do you think I should try nursing, like Hiroshi and Tate?”

The question came from nowhere, but I knew my answer. “I think only you can

decide what you want to do with your body. Kade did not and all of his babies are perfectly healthy. As long as our daughter is fed, I do not mind how that happens.”

“I think I’d like to try it.” Axel tilted his head as he explained. “Get the full omega experience. There’s room for a playpen at work so I can take her with me. Plus, there’s the community center with the other babies, I think it would be good to have that reason to slow down and just... be with her.”

“Then that is what you should do. Can you also express it so I can have some daddy-daughter time?”

He smiled. “Sure. You’re going to make such a good dad. I’m glad it was you I got to do this with.”

As was I.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

“T? T you need to wake up!”

“What’s wrong?” My conditioning from my time on the battlefield had somewhat worn off in my time with Axel. He had never woken me so urgently. Automatically, I rose from the bed.

“Get up! Dress nicely. Your mother is here!”

My body jolted to a stop and I sat heavily. “What?”

“The portal guard has just informed me your mother and her retinue have just entered Sweetwater. They want to go over the research, meet with Jasper, and see us. We’ve got ten minutes to get to the science center.”

I stayed frozen for a minute, then dashed to the closet. Upon finding one of my finer tunics, I looked for the one made for Axel and threw it to him. “Change your clothes, please.”

My mate looked down at his round stomach stretching the fabric of his t-shirt. “Uh, I don’t think that will fit.”

“There’s magic woven into it. It’s fae silk, so it will stretch.”

Axel looked at the garment appreciatively. “Huh. Why don’t we have more of this material?”

“Because it is insanely expensive. The material is reserved for royalty.”

He looked horrified. “Why’d you waste it on me?”

“You, dear one, are Prince Consort whether the parliament accepts it or not. They will eventually see the error of their ways. Right now, it is important for you to look the part. So get dressed.”

Dressing in my outfit and more formal boots, I quickly combed my hair and braided a few sections. Axel joined me, making quick work of my hair so I looked ready to see the queen.

Rather than walk, or shift, Axel had taken to using the golf carts to get around. This was usually because he had some sort of paperwork with him that was easier to carry this way. Much of the administration of the omega compound was now his job. The omega, Georgia, who had been running the place wanted to take a step back, or rather just focus on the rehabilitation of the struggling omegas. She would work on her therapist’s license and help them that way.

We took the cart to the science center, where there were a few carriages waiting for our arrival.

The fan fair which came with being royalty was terribly boring. I made the best of the situation for Axel who was struggling with his nerves. He was also cold. I wanted to get him inside where it was warmer. He was too pregnant to be on his feet for so long.

Ívarr welcomed everyone into the science center and into a hastily organized meeting room. Mismatched chairs were set out in rows facing a long table at which I sat with my mother, Axel, Ívarr, Teagan, the Alpha Pair and Aldrin. James stood to the side ready to see to the refreshments on offer.

I caught Axel frowning at James. “What is wrong, dear one?” I asked in an

undertone.

“He shouldn’t be serving just because he is an omega. He did a lot of the research and he’s stepping in for Hiroshi while he’s on maternity leave,” Axel hissed.

The pack had convinced Hiroshi to take more time off now that he had three young babies of his own, plus little Maddox to look after. His discovery was the one which had led us here. I looked around the room. “Hiroshi is probably relieved not to be here right now. You know James wants to be able to get you a drink if needed.”

James’s omega instincts were strong. Coupled with being a trained nurse, he had a nurturing side a mile wide. He had already fussed over Axel’s seat, insisting he get a more comfortable one.

Aldrin smiled, suggesting he could hear us discussing his mate.

ívarr stood and began an outline of the situation as we knew it: The Luna was the same goddess as ours. Shifters had started as elves but when Abrocaelum was formed, The Luna changed their appearance to look human so they could hide while the elves who could not shift left them behind.

We are also far too interbred for comfort. Any subsequent generation of elf would likely be beset with severe genetic disorders. The goddess had done us a favor by preventing any more children being born.

Many of the elves present looked distinctly uncomfortable during this talk. Some looked angry. They were the ones I kept my eyes on.

My friend continued his talk, stating the only way out of the fertility crisis was to breed with other species since this would lead to greater genetic diversity. He argued that one species would dominate over the other, so any children born would be full

elf, or full whatever other species.

Mating with other species was something we could do, outside of shifters since they could only have young with other shifters, but had never attempted in living memory. At least the elves in Abrocaelum had not. The elves who had come to settle in the human world would not communicate with us. It was likely they had more genetic diversity and were completely divorced from us at this point. Did they even worship the goddess?

Ívarr also mentioned he believed it would only work with other species if there was at least a partial soul-bond. His cheeks flushed when he talked about this, something Axel also noticed.

I shared a look with my mate when Jasper interrupted, Dakota at his side looking worried. Axel jolted. Neither of us had seen them arrive.

Jasper took on the tone which said the goddess was speaking through him. The air in the room was heavy with her presence.

“A soul-bond for the witches, the fae, the humans, all the races but the shifters. To have a child with one of my shifters, you will need to recover your animal soul. I will not repeat myself.”

We could all feel her anger. Then the voice switched to my mother.

“You know me as your goddess, yet my name is Luna.”

Mother smiled, though it was not her smile, it belonged to the goddess. It was wide, threatening. She saw those gathered who doubted her.

“I have always been The Luna of which the shifters speak. They have repented their

past, shown growth and courage. They are ready to have their alpha females returned to them. This current generation will have no beta infertility except where chosen. They are ready to reclaim their fertile past.”

She then looked at Aldrin. “You are so close to the key, so I give you this boon.” Her smile for him was patient, loving. “Tether them not to one alpha but their Alpha. Let the betas who are destined to be alphas take the bite of the pack. Then they can change their chosen omegas. However, this comes with a price. The alpha will never be able to leave their pack. So let them choose well.”

“Thank you, so much! We appreciate this gift and the work you have done through this pack,” Aldrin spoke with the reverence our goddess deserved.

Her smile was radiant. “Kade set you on this path, he asked for me when it was time to start my plan. He and Blake were destined to bring change.” The goddess looked directly at Axel’s protruding stomach. “The princess is next.”

With that, she left. The air in the room lightened. Jasper shakily took a seat, James rushing to his side as ívarr took care of our queen.

I only had eyes for my mate. “No pressure, right?” Axel quipped.

Many of the queen’s retinue decided to return to Abrocaelum, too overwhelmed with all the information of the day to possibly consider new revelations.

After refreshments and the arrival of our Alpha Pair, we sat down to truly discuss everything.

ívarr took my mother through the results of the genetic testing. Proving, though he did not need to, he was telling the truth. We were all cousins, some closer than others, but there was only a tiny percentage of us who could procreate without issues. Too

slim a margin for our goddess. We needed the genetic diversity shifters, and other species offered.

“How do we go about creating a soul-bond?” Mother asked.

“I can only say mine with Axel came accidentally out of a deep love for him.”

“So only romantic love?” Blake asked.

“No,” Jasper said. He was on Dakota’s lap, drinking carefully from a cup. “Platonic love will do. A deep appreciation for a person or family. Meditating on it will help.” He sipped again. “Sorry, I’m getting flashes. It’s love that’s the key but a soul-bond does not have to be romantic.”

Blake looked relieved. “There are plenty of the elves here who have not found their mate yet, and they fit into families.”

“You’re thinking of Cryabell, aren’t you?”

The Alpha smiled at his mate. “I’d love for her to bond with us, or for her bond with the kids to be enough.”

“I should like to have an animal soul,” Mother said, suddenly surprising us all. “I will meditate on my growing love and appreciation for this pack who have saved my kind. On my son-in-law who is giving us an heir we can be proud of. Goddess willing, this should give me feathers. I would like to fly.”

Jasper was nodding, tears running down his face. “I’m sorry, I’m very emotional today. The Luna speaking through me... it’s a lot.”

Mother patted his hand kindly. “I understand since I, too, feel raw, from her voice.”

“Yes! That’s it exactly.”

They shared a look of mutual understanding. It was then that I could see us as one species as we once were. No wonder the goddess had sent us here. We were the same.

“So how do we do this bite thing? Because as much as I love the pack, I don’t want Blake biting all the alphas.”

We laughed, as Kade intended.

“It must be something in the protein which stimulates a heat in an omega. Maybe it is designed to trigger the change. If we take samples from you Alpha Blake...” Aldrin began.

“Aldrin, between us all, I’m just Blake. If you need samples, I’ll give hundreds if it helps my people.”

ívarr spoke next. “With magic, from the witches, I believe we could boost the effects of the protein into triggering the change. This could be administered in the form of a potion, I think.”

“Yes, great thinking, my friend. Michaella could help you with that if you would like.” Aldrin smiled at ívarr.

“I wanted to discuss my relationship with Michaella, Your Majesty,” ívarr said, addressing his queen. “I would like permission to marry her and complete a soul-bond.” He looked earnestly at her, his eyes slipping over to me. “She is unlike anyone I have ever met. Michaella challenges me to be better but also gives me the... freedom to be myself. She makes me feel so loved. I just hope I do the same for her.”

“She adores you, my friend,” I could not help but say.

“Yeah, she does,” Axel agreed.

Aldrin and James just nodded while Teagan grinned.

“Oh, ívarr, you do not require my permission, yet you have it anyway.” She sat close enough to reach for his hands, taking them in hers. “Congratulations. I just wish your mother was still with us.”

“Thank you, I wish that too.”

“A wedding!” Teagan clapped her hands with delight.

A smile played about ívarr’s mouth, though he kept his head down, hands still clasping my mother’s.

“Two weddings. Teárlach and Axel will have to confirm their union the elven way. Not until after our princess is here,” Mother said primly.

Axel raised his eyebrows at me. “Did your mother propose to me for you?” Mother’s face colored, she slipped a hand free to cover her mouth.

“I think she did.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

February came around so fast between celebrating the winter holidays, Hiroshi having his baby and gaining some new pack members. We now had a shiny new alliance with another pack and were connected by a portal.

Thanks to the new pack, several omegas had found their mates and betas had met potential candidates for making their transitions with.

Having allies was important, even with the attacks lessening. The trouble wasn't over and I wasn't naive enough to think my baby would end all our troubles. There would be pushback.

Northarbor, well, the aviary, loomed over us. They had lost much over the last few months, but weren't ready to admit defeat, to recognize that times were changing. Alphas could no longer hold onto the old ways. They had been false to begin with.

The end of my pregnancy was approaching, and with it was a ball of anxiety which wanted to burrow under my skin.

Fears over the birth and beyond kept me from sleeping until exhaustion pulled me under. I was struggling to get anything done at work because I kept falling asleep at my desk, because I had been worrying so much.

I knew being scared was natural, especially since I had not grown up as an omega. If I had been, I might have been a tad more prepared. At least I would have had more omegas around me growing up, some sort of education, but since my transformation, I was woefully unprepared for what came next.

At first, it was little things. Like a blanket had to have both of our scents on it before it was placed on our bed. Then it was the furniture placement. I knew better than to move anything myself, even though I was strong enough, because T would be upset. So I asked him to move the bed, move the dresser, then to move them back when that was wrong too.

“What’s he doing?” I heard Chase ask T.

“Nesting. Or the early stages, I believe.”

“Cool. Hiro said he needed something in the nest from all the people in the house, so I’ve been sleeping with this blanket so Ax can line his nest with it.” Chase lay the purple blanket on the pile of other blankets I’d made.

I picked it up and took in the soothing scent of my twin. “This is what I needed. Thanks Chase.”

“No worries. Is this a couple thing? The nesting? Or do you need anything else?”

“Um...” I thought for a moment, listening to my agitated alter. They had adjusted better than I had to their new reality, but the birth bit was freaking them out. “My wolf wants you to sit here and just watch over us, if you can.”

Chase crossed the room to sit cross-legged on our bed. “Here cool?”

I nodded and returned to the placement of all the cushions and blankets. This nest was for a princess, so it had to be perfect. Rationally, I knew, being my first nest and with the lack of reading I’d done about the birth, this nest was likely to be a mess. There was time to refine it. There was still a week until my due date.

“Dear one, are you expected into work today?”

“No,” I said distractedly. T waited for me to elaborate. “My parental leave has started. Aldrin wanted it to start a couple of weeks ago.”

The doorbell rang. “I’ll get that,” Chase said as he leaped from the bed.

“Would you like me to help?” Teárlach leaned forward to inspect the nest.

Sitting back on my haunches was hard with a massive baby bump. He caught me as I nearly toppled over.

“Please. I can’t get the sides right.” My frustration was written all over me. I gripped the blankets in tight fists, ready to scream. Nothing was right about this nest.

I was a bad omega.

“Whatever you are thinking, dear one, get rid of it. That’s your fear talking. Omegas have done this since there were shifters. The goddess said there were many children in our future, so of course you can do this. We just need to have faith.”

Mate is right. We can do this. My alter interrupted the moment with my mate.

Do you like being an omega? I’ve never asked.

Yes. Special. Our baby loves us. She is ready to come. Soon.

“My alter agrees with you.”

“Your alter is very smart, just like you. This is normal.”

“Oh! Look at how big your nest is!” Kade came in, holding a couple of blankets. “I... uh... wasn’t sure if you’d need our scents, too.”

He held the cream and yellow blankets out for me to take. As soon as they were in my hands, I relaxed.

“This is exactly what I’ve been needing! I know where they need to go.”

Kade’s pleased smile and Blake’s proud expression showed me just how important it was for them that my nest and birthing experience was perfect.

“Where are the kids?” Chase asked, as if he just noticed they weren’t attached to their parents.

“We’ve had some contact with some of the leadership over in the Northharbor Aviary. They are trying to broker a truce now they’ve learned about the elves and the beta gene. We had a video call with them, but asked the community center to take the kids for a while.”

“Do you trust them?” I asked, suspicious of both the timing and the offer.

“Hell no.” Blake gave me a flat look. “I’m willing to listen to them, but it will be a long time before we can trust a thing they say, or reduce security.” He sighed. “I’m just glad we have Greenbriar.”

“Yeah, that pack is cool. Alligators! We’ve told them about the elves and are getting them up to speed.” Chase had settled into being Second well.

“Cryabell is working on her meditation!” Kade’s eyes lit up with joy. “She hopes a family bond will be enough.”

“That’s great news!” Teárlach said cheerfully. “I hope we get more elves with animal souls soon.”

The room was beginning to get too noisy and full. Kade caught me squirming and fussing with the blankets I had just placed.

“We’re overstaying our welcome. Call us back for the birth if you want. We won’t be offended if you want less people there.”

Just the thought of them not being by my side nearly gave me a panic attack. Fucking hormones. “No! I want you there, I just...”

“It’s okay, Ax. You’re overstimulated. Shift with T and get your alter scents over the nest now it’s done. Just chill today and we’ll come back as soon as you need us, okay?”

I was relieved Kade got me. It shouldn’t have been a surprise. He was an omega. A born one. He would understand the process better than me.

“Thank you.”

Kade looked wistfully at my nest. It hit me. He didn’t get the chance to prepare like I had. His birth came on too quickly for anything but a hastily built nest.

“It’s a great nest. Can’t wait to meet our niece!”

I’d been in my shifted form for two days. My alter wasn’t letting me shift back. They knew our daughter was close to arriving and wanted us to rest and heal before she made her way into the world.

Kade had been right. I’d needed that day of shifting with Teárlach to get the scents almost right. When I’d shifted back, I’d asked him to head to Abrocaelum and get something with his mother’s scent on it so she could be represented in the nest.

He brought her back with him.

The elf queen of Abrocaelum had been in my bedroom as I lazed around in my nest, fat and snacking on potato chips.

Teárlach had not been allowed to sleep in the nest that night. Not until he apologized for neglecting to warn me about her arrival. He had forgotten his phone. Again.

Two days after that incident, I shifted and my wolf didn't let me turn back. Instead, they asked our mate to bring us food in the nest and even hand feed us. Diva!

"I think today will be the day, dear one," Teárlach stated calmly.

Why was he so calm? I was pacing the nest.

Yeah?

"Oh yes. You've been in early labor since yesterday."

What?

"My magic has been masking the labor pains. Your brothers are on their way, as is Michaella. Aldrin and James will arrive in the next couple of hours. Hopefully, in time to see the birth. I'll shift once they are here."

Why have you been taking my pain?

"I did not want you to suffer. Your wolf knew. Did they not share it with you?"

Clearly not.

My wolf was unrepentant. In fact, they were quite cheerful about it. Elf takes pain, makes birth easier.

Our family filtered through the door. After her last visit, the queen sent her regrets that she would have to miss the birth. Like Blake, she had much to do with all the revelations. So many of her people were attempting their own soul-bonds to gain an animal soul.

I was grateful she wouldn't be there. While I liked her, we weren't close, yet. It would take time. Teárlach still kept her at a distance, though both were making more of an effort in their relationship.

Pain ripped through me.

It's time, my wolf told me as they braced themselves.

Shift, I told T.

"She's coming."

Teárlach joined me in the nest in his owl form. With his alpha senses and elf magic, he took as much of the pain away as he could.

Hours passed that way. Him taking the pain and me trying to get our daughter out of my body.

I was getting so tired. Sips of water and snacks were fine, but I hadn't had a proper rest since I'd shifted.

"Teárlach, you need to let Axel take some of that pain." Michaela looked sympathetic, yet firm.

My mate stubbornly held onto his magic while projecting thoughts at my twin.

“He’s asking why,” Chase said.

“Axel needs to turn the pain outwards, use it as fuel to push the baby out. He’s getting too tired, and no one wants to have to go the surgical route,” the midwife explained.

“He doesn’t think he can.” Chase spoke for T again since Michaela wasn’t on the pack link. Something we needed to fix for her.

“Maybe I can help?” Blake came forward, already taking his shirt off. “Teárlach won’t be able to override his alpha instincts to protect his mate, but as his Alpha, as Axel’s Alpha, I can overpower both.”

“Yes, do that. Quickly, please.” Aldrin frowned. “The baby is in distress. Likely picking up on how tired her papa is, and worried her daddy is.”

Blake shifted into his wolf form, and the room filled with his alpha power. It was staggering. It overwhelmed all of my senses. Everyone in the room bent to his will, aside from Kade and Michaela.

I crouched low and just pushed, compelled to turn all my effort inside. My wolf let out a howl as we bore down.

The pain was excruciating, but exactly what I needed. I used it, and with a few pushes; she was free.

All of our focus turned to the little wolf pup. We got her clean of her sac and just examined her. She smelled of rain and jasmine. An alpha pup like her cousin.

Her eyes were the same as Teárlach's and mine. A turquoise eye that was so beautiful to me and my own silver-blue. The pelt of her wolf was stunning. She had white, gray, and black fur over her body.

"Oh, my! She's beautiful!" Michaela gushed over the little pup.

"I can't wait to check her over!" James exclaimed. "I've never seen heterochromia in shifters."

You did so well, dear one. Welcome little Rieka. He said the last part to the pack link.

"That's a pretty name." At Michaela's stare, Kade elaborated. "Rieka, is her name."

"It's beautiful."

Our daughter shifted then, stunning the room into silence. The heterochromia carried into her human form. She also had dual toned hair. White blond on half, the underside of her hair, and black, similar to mine, on the top.

She got even prettier. I love how unusual her coloring is. T remarked.

You do?

Don't you? I heard his concern.

I... worried about how people will react to her. Already I was protective of her. I didn't want unkind words or actions to hurt her feelings.

They won't be able to look away. She's fierce looking. Teárlach was filled with pride.

She's perfect. My heart filled with love, extinguishing all my doubt.

I shifted and scooped her into my arms. “Welcome, little Rieka. We love you so much.”

T joined me, his warm arms surrounding us both. “I love you both.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

In the hours that followed Rieka's birth, I watched her get checked over, fussed over, and then wrapped up for snuggles with her daddy.

They helped me feed her for the first time. The feeling was strange. Michaella gave me a potion to start my milk and my nipples got really sensitive before they began to leak the colostrum that was the first and most important milk for Rieka to get.

When Rieka started crying, signaling she was hungry, I put her to my chest. She rooted around, looking for a nipple to grip onto. The feeling when she latched on was weird. Part of me wasn't sure I liked it, but I wanted to at least try. If I couldn't get used to it, or it became too painful, I'd stop. Feeding her like this was wonderful for our bond, but being fed with a bottle was a great substitute if I couldn't bring myself to like feeding that way.

Either way, I knew Teárlach would be supportive of my decision. Like he said, as long as she was fed, it didn't matter how that happened.

While she ate, I stroked her hair. For a newborn, she had quite a lot of it. The coloring was so unusual. I just couldn't keep my eyes off her.

Fed, I put her on my shoulder to burp her. Michaella took me through some other ways, like placing my hand under her chin, or using massage, when she struggled to burp.

Teárlach watched us with clear pride and love on his face. He even took some notes, which was so sweet. I would have teased him about it, but I was just too overwhelmed and tired to even think of words.

Then it was my turn to get a checkup. Shifter healing was great, but I still required some care, especially after how long the last part had taken. Teárlach had already done some basic healing magic on me, so Aldrin finished the job. It was as if the last five months of my pregnancy had never happened.

The only thing they couldn't take away was my exhaustion. Michaella, though goddesses love her, had a few energy boosting potions to get me through the next part of our day: presenting her to the queen.

Once everyone, aside from Chase, who had vanished for a nap, had left the house, we got ready for the call.

Teárlach got our princess dressed in a light pink romper with a cartoon wolf on it. Telling him she wouldn't be in it for long was pointless. Shifter babies did not stay in clothes for any length of time. Keeping a diaper on her would be a challenge in itself.

We sat in the living room since it had the best lighting. The lamps were on, giving everything a soft glow. Besides, our bedroom was our space. The parliament wasn't welcome to see it.

"Did you tell her we were calling?" I asked.

"An hour ago, to give her time to assemble some of the cabinet, if she so wishes."

The call connected, and we waited while an elf did a complicated spell so all who were gathered could see and hear us.

"Congratulations, Prince Teárlach and Axel, on the birth of your daughter." All the voices in the room melded into one melodic sound.

Drawn by the sounds, Rieka turned her head to see the screen.

There were gasps as they caught a look at her pointed ears and different colored eyes. I smoothed her unusual hair away from her pretty face. She grasped my finger with reflexes quicker than I could have imagined.

“She looks like you both. A very beautiful princess,” Queen Alyalsha said with clear pride.

“So, you mean to claim her for the royal line?” Ellgar demanded. His tone was barely polite.

“I do. My granddaughter will succeed me once she is of age to take the throne, if necessary. If I should fall before she is of the appropriate age, her father, Prince Teárlach, will act as regent until she is ready.”

“And if she is not deemed to be of royal blood?” Ellgar was really pushing for time in prison.

“She clearly is. My granddaughter is an elf. She looks like both of her fathers.”

“I want a paternity test!” he yelled, making Rieka start and shift into her wolf form.

The pup scrambled up onto her father’s shoulder, half hiding in his hair.

“Ellgar, I would ask you to hold your tongue lest I cut it out when I visit Abrocaelum. Rieka—“ Teárlach began, cold fury on his stunning face. My mate was hot when he was angry!

“What a charming name!” His mother beamed, momentarily distracted, like the proud grandmother she was. “I adore it. As for a paternity test, that is not necessary.”

“I must insist there is a need for one.” Ellgar’s face was very red. I feared for his

blood pressure, if that was something elves suffered from.

“You will desist before—“ Queen Alyalsha roared in a rare display of anger. She was cut off when The Luna took her over.

“You have more secrets to hide than all of those assembled. Axel has been true to his mate and the child, Rieka, is blessed by me, your goddess. She will rule when it is time.”

“Secrets, I have no secrets!” Ellgar stuttered.

“You are the reason Prince Teárlach has no father. The reason all the other matches failed to provide a sibling. You are a traitor to the crown and to all elves.”

The Luna left the queen in a rush. I was grateful she was sitting on her throne, otherwise I think she would have collapsed.

“Take him into custody!” an elf cried while the queen wept silent tears. The rest of the court and some of parliament all stood still, shocked at what had been revealed.

“Mother, will you be alright? Do you need us to come?” Teárlach looked ready to shift and fly directly there.

“No!” She looked alarmed. She straightened and spoke with authority. “Do not bring her here right now. We will arrange something proper for her naming day, but you must not come here without the proper security needed for my precious heir. I fear for her safety. Please, I beg you.”

Teárlach looked torn. He really loved his mother and this was a dangerous situation for her.

“I am worried for you, Mother.”

“Me too.” I cradled Rieka in my arms to soothe us both.

“You are precious, all of you.” She smiled gratefully as Ellgar was led from the room in chains. The knight I’d noticed before took up his place at her shoulder.

“My safety is of no concern.” T scoffed and she gave a tiny, muted laugh. “I have many more allies than Ellgar could have guessed. I would just prefer not to take a risk with my heir.” The queen sobered. “You do not mind she will rule over you?” she asked my mate.

“No,” he said honestly. “I would prefer it. Rieka marks the start of a new era for shifters and Abrocaelum and should lead them into that new chapter.”

“On this, we agree. I would love to spend more time with her, however, I must deal with this new crisis. May I visit in the next few days? We can discuss the naming ceremony.”

“I’d like that,” I said, grateful to get off the call. Rieka was getting fussy, and I didn’t want to feed her while we were in front of the court.

We said our goodbyes after another round of congratulations from those who remained.

“Well, that was a shit show.”

“Should you really talk like that in front of our daughter?” T raised an eyebrow at me mockingly.

“She’s a newborn. We have time before I really have to worry about that.”

“Best break the habit soon. You will be a Prince Consort before long.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

T stole Rieka from my arms. “Darling Rieka, Papa does not want to marry me. Should we convince him?”

They made such a cute pair. She was back in her human form, completely naked. So, of course, that was when she chose to pee.

All down my mate.

Such princess-like behavior.

A clean up, feeding, burping... this baby stuff was never ending. I loved every moment of it. It was exactly what I’d wished for.

We discovered Rieka settled better in her wolf form the first night, so I shifted with her and we curled up for some much needed rest together for a brief nap.

Several times in the night she had wanted to feed, so I did that as soundlessly as possible to allow Teárlach some rest. I tried to express some milk to put in the fridge, but it was such early days, it was likely pointless.

She decided to be human for a while, so I laid her next to T in the special crib attached to the bed, only to wake to feed her with Rieka draped over his chest, both of them sleeping.

Her little wolf alter was the one who had alerted mine. The little voice coming through was so vivid. They didn’t have words as such, more impressions. Memories. My wolf was so proud of what we had created. They should have been. It was

unheard of for such a little one to use a family link.

Of course, I took plenty of pictures of the sleeping pair before I picked our baby up to feed her. I sent them to Teárlach's mother so she wasn't missing out.

I was so tired, yet also strangely energized. I wanted to watch her forever, though I probably needed a decent night's sleep.

Hopeful she would sleep for longer as her wolf again, I shifted, encouraging her to do the same.

Grateful she shifted, I curled up beside my mate and baby and slept.

"Shh, Papa needs his sleep, little princess."

"I'm awake," I muttered, without opening my eyes. Goddess, I was so tired. Kade had not lied when he said the first few days were hellish.

"Just sit up so she can latch, and as soon as she's done, I'll take her so you can have another nap."

"But—"

"No, dear one. You are exhausted. Giving birth and all the feeding is tiring. Don't pretend you didn't let me sleep far more than you did last night. I saw those photos." His chiding was gentle, full of the love he had for me.

The bond showed pictures of me and Rieka shifted and curled around each other, then of us in human form, Rieka in my arms.

Emotions so vast I couldn't quite grasp filled me. I stretched my arms out for her

wordlessly, unable to talk, I was so overcome.

“May I take a photo of you like this to send to my mother?”

Always so considerate. A perfect mate.

“Yeah. Then one of the three of us. Our little family.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Though she was now two weeks old, Rieka had never been to Abrocaelum, something we were about to rectify. Her grandmother had visited her a handful of times and called daily for updates or just to see her. They were cute together, and it cemented something in my relationship with my mother to see her being so maternal.

With her position and the loss of my father, something we now knew was orchestrated, there had always been a distance. Something I was glad had changed.

We might have missed out on that connection, but I would not deny either of them their own bond now. It was precious and I would protect it.

While Mother had been reluctant to allow me to come to the pack, she now saw the merit in it, if only because it secured my future happiness by giving me my mate and now my daughter.

I could not fathom what I had done in my long life to deserve such blessings. I was just grateful for them every day.

Though, at that moment, trying to wrangle twin brothers, their baby brother with his family, and our own tiny baby into their court appropriate outfits was perhaps my penance for sins committed when I was much younger.

Since I was the only one ready, I was responsible for helping the others dress. We made all the outfits to order, ensuring that each one fit the personalities of the people wearing them.

Kade, for instance, was in a bronze tunic, which made his red-brown curls gleam like

fire. His amber eyes were jewel-like. Little Felix was dressed in a manner similar to his papa.

Blake, Elliotte and Greyson were in a range of silver-colored outfits making their eyes glow bright.

All the Sweetwater siblings and the children, my new extended family, were wearing their wolves somewhere on their outfit. We had gone to the extra trouble of spelling the fabric so it would shift with the children and was somewhat stain resistant.

Chase was in a light blue, bringing out the blue of his eyes, a different shade than his brothers'. His hair, a lighter brown than Axel's, was around the same length as his twin's, now at their shoulders, and also full of braids.

Each of the Sweetwater brothers had earned braids over their time in the pack. Even Kade had earned one in the defense of his daughter. They all wore them with pride.

Axel was the last to get dressed. Kade wrestled Rieka into her gold and green dress while I went to support my mate. I knew nerves were getting the better of him.

I found him in our bedroom, staring at the cream, gold and green outfit, the exact same as mine, on the hanger.

"Why did you tell me? Couldn't you have pretended it was just a naming day?" Axel's face was fixed in a frown. I knew this mood was purely down to nerves. He had every right to be anxious.

"Would you really have dressed so for 'just a naming day' or would you have felt overdressed and asked to return home?"

"No. Why do we have to have this big wedding?" He pouted. I knew his heart. He

was glad to be marrying me. It was just he did not like the fuss associated with it.

“Unfortunately, The Luna made your mate the prince of the elves of Abrocaelum. Royalty means regalia. However, Mother took your upbringing and dislike of... all the trappings of your new status, and has given us a simpler event by pairing it with a naming day for Rieka.”

Axel sighed. “You’re right. She’s really done a lot to make me feel more comfortable.”

“You are part of her family now. Of course she wants that for you.”

“I’ll get over it in a minute. Just needed a moment.”

“There’s nothing to get over, dear one. Your feelings are valid.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Jasper.”

“His therapist is very wise.”

“She’s not his therapist anymore.”

“Have you thought—?” I did not wish to upset him, especially on such an important day, but this felt important. I needed to suggest it.

“We all need some therapy. I know Georgia is working on getting licensed so she can work with the omega females who have deep trauma, but maybe we need more.” He finished fixing his outfit.

“Some alphas have been conditioned from a young age to act a particular way. Blake... I don’t even know how he’s so level headed, kind, and so damn fair.”

“He got that from you and Chase. Deke too. Your mother did her best to instill in him all he would need to be the alpha who guided this pack to a better future.”

“If only she could see us now.”

“After seeing Janet at her own funeral, I believe your mother is there with you, guiding you.”

He was thoughtful for a moment, then he picked up the outfit. “I think I’d like to marry you today.”

The procession to the castle was long. So many of the pack were traveling with us to see me and Axel marry and Rieka be formally presented as the heir of Abrocaelum’s elves.

Not only did we have the brothers and their cousin, but Kade’s family, Dakota, Jasper, and Kade’s siblings, as well as his grandparents, Aldrin and James.

Georgia, the omega who ran most of the omega compound until Axel’s transition, also came. Axel explained she was like a surrogate mother to them all, so she was there as family.

Roan with his mate, Tate, Asher, the children and Xavier were there. Larken joined them alongside the elf, Ingall, his replacement in their home. With them sat Dalton and Winter.

Representing the elves, ívarr, Teagan, and Hakeem were following us. Michaella rode with ívarr on her motorcycle again.

Poppy, her wife Zinna, and their daughter, Sage, were there for the witches. They had spent a lot of time in Abrocaelum and called it their second home. Many elves on the

way greeted them with familiarity as the procession wound its way into the castle's keep.

Even the demon, Toth, had been invited with his mate, Cody, to attend. It was a promising turn of events, as a demon had never ventured into Abrocaelum, or one of us to their realm. This could be a signal of a new relationship with demon kind.

Cody's father had offered us a few days in one of his luxury hotels as a honeymoon when we felt ready to have that time to ourselves. It was unlikely to be soon since Axel was still feeding Rieka himself. Perhaps once she was fully weaned.

The weather was mild enough to hold the event outside. Pale afternoon sun lit up the decorations and finery on the assembled court. Everything was perfect for a wedding.

Parliament showed restraint in their greeting. Ellgar was still imprisoned, awaiting trial, which would take many months, if not years, to come to its conclusion. There was too much to investigate, the charges having taken place over centuries.

It took some time to get everyone to their seats and for the ceremony to begin. Rieka needed to be fed. Axel's cheeks heated as he found the fastening which would allow him to feed discreetly. I aided him with a spell, hiding what he was doing to the casual observer.

"Thanks," he whispered as Mother took to the small stage.

"People of Abrocaelum, the Northarbor coven and our allies in the Sweetwater pack, thank you for being with us on this most auspicious day. This wedding marks a new era for elves and shifters alike, since we finally know the truth. We are you. You are us. One day, the elves here may have their animal soul. As I have."

With those words, Mother let her pale green robe fall, showing a cream slip

underneath for just a second as she shifted into a snowy owl before our eyes.

“Holy fuck!” Chase exclaimed.

“Fuck!” Felix repeated.

Kade glared at his brother-in-law for teaching his omega son foul language as Greyson, Elliotte and his Kade’s brother, Hayden, all repeated, “fuck!”

“Indeed,” I said, hiding my laugh.

It took some time to get the crowd to calm down after my mother’s shift. She looked glorious as she flew above me.

Flying is so freeing!

Isn’t it?

Oh, you can hear me? Mother’s voice was slightly breathless. She was not used to the exertion of flying.

We will have a family link. If you think a thought to Axel, he should be able to hear it as my mate.

Dear Axel, I hope you do not mind me shifting on your special day. I just knew I could finally do it after wanting it since Teárlach gained his owl.

Hopefully Mother had not suffered for long with the changing sickness, as some had come to refer to my brief illness. Changing form for the first time came with a cost as our bodies adjusted to the weight of an animal soul.

I don't mind at all. Everyone is going to talk about this for years. They might even forget there is a wedding and leave so we can get married in peace.

Axel's wish would not make it so.

Unlikely, I remarked dryly.

Unfortunately, Teárlach is correct. I shall shift back and join you on the stage.

I got to my feet, holding out a hand for my mate. He had finished seeing to Rieka, who was now dozing in her uncle Chase's arms. He followed us up onto the dais.

Once the crowd was quiet, Mother began the ceremony.

"As Queen of the elves of Abrocaelum, I am blessed with the powers to tie these two souls in matrimony. As they have a shifter mate bond, we will forgo the formal vows. My sons, please state your pledges before these witnesses."

I gestured for Axel to go first, earning myself a grimace.

"Teárlach, you came into my life when my hope was at an all-time low. You returned my faith to me and taught me that love is its own reward. I was ready to give up on my dream to keep you by my side, but you told me, proved to me, I could have everything I ever wanted with my true love by my side. I promise to always travel the path alongside you. To love you until the last of my days and honor you as the alpha of my heart."

My eyes had filled with tears. I hastily brushed them away before I spoke. I clasped Axel's hands in mine.

"Dear one, I came to Sweetwater to find hope for my people and found you, the

person who makes me feel complete. You have taught me to fight for love, for our dreams, because they are worth it. You have made me more patient, hopefully wiser,” someone chuckled. “With you, I have learned to truly love. I promise to always guide you on the path, to be your safe space and to love you until the stars all burn out.”

Axel was openly crying while Chase hid his tears in Rieka’s hair.

Mother wrapped our hands in red ribbon. “As your queen and the representative of The Luna, it is my honor to bless this union. You are now husbands in Abrocaelum. Elves of this land, raise your voices for Prince Teárlach and Prince Consort Axel.”

The cheering was surprisingly loud and unrestrained, helped along by our friends and family.

We kissed as they made more noise for us until Mother cleared her throat.

“My last act for today is to announce the birth of Princess Rieka, Heir of Abrocaelum, to all gathered here today. Rieka is a powerful name for our new princess. It means the power of the wolf, fitting as she is a wolf shifter.”

Many of the elves gathered would not have known this, as we had asked Rieka not to shift yet. She was much too comfortable with her uncle to let her pup out.

“My granddaughter is healthy and strong thanks to the will of the goddess. We would like to thank you for your generous gifts and well wishes. Please, come celebrate with us!”

Fireworks blasted into the sky, startling our daughter awake and into wolf form. The elves gasped and cooed over her.

Parliament may not have been happy about a wolf prince consort and now a wolf

princess, but our people were the heart of Abrocaelum, and they were ready to accept the fresh start Rieka represented.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:19 am

Returning to Sweetwater was almost a relief after all the attention we received in Abrocaelum. Our wedding, and Rieka's naming day, were perfect because they were brief affairs. The reception was a different matter altogether. It seemed to stretch on forever as we accepted gifts for our daughter and well wishes for our union.

Rieka at least got to nap. Poppy ended up sneaking us new parents, and of course Kade, Blake, Jasper and Dakota, some energy boosting potions to help us through the long day.

The children all appeared to enjoy being the center of attention. Their parents, for the most part, could enjoy themselves, safe in the knowledge the children were well looked after. We got to eat the spectacular food, including a stunning eight tier cake, and dance to a mixture of human and elven music.

Our daughter was too new to be passed around to all the dignitaries, courtiers, gentry, and distant relatives who crawled out of wherever they had been hiding. We kept her close to us, only allowing Axel's brothers to hold her, or Aldrin and James, when the brothers had their hands full with the lively triplets.

Jasper and Dakota had their son and daughter to watch, an arduous task with how friendly Angelica was. My people doted on all the children, though I noticed a few had taken a particular shine to Kade's sister.

Her parents had finally revealed Angelica would be an alpha when she was ready to make that transition. They wanted her to wait, to see how many other alpha females would be born or choose to change in the interim. As wise parents, they knew the battles which lay ahead. Though some attitudes were changing, we were not out of

danger quite yet.

This was something we were painfully aware of as we traded off baby duties throughout the day. I found quiet corners so Axel could nurse and not feel like a display at the zoo. It was lovely to have the moment of peace in what was otherwise a hectic day with our little star.

My only wish for Rieka was for her to grow as fierce as her cousin Elliotte. That little girl knew her power already and exerted it positively. She was a born leader. I saw more than one guard soften their stance after a smile from her. She was already winning hearts.

We partied into the night, stealing kisses in between dances and bites of food. Saying goodnight took so long with many words of thanks to give. Long enough, I feared Mother might ask us to stay the night and carry the party into the morning. Managing the security of so many of us would have been a nightmare.

Instead, we ended the party with both of us, my mother and I, flying in the sky together as those who could shift did. The shifters ran around the castle with elves chasing them playfully while we watched them from above. The cries of joy, the laughter, and smiles were a tonic, healing the hurt of our infertile years.

Children would return to Abrocaelum.

Before we left the castle, there was another surprise for us.

ívarr and Michaella announced their engagement and wish to marry before their own little one was born. ívarr, though he had already asked, again requested my mother's official blessing.

My face had hurt from how wide my smile had been. I could not have been happier for my friends.

Michaela was in the very early stages of the pregnancy, but expected to carry to full term. She was in perfect health. Her magic, along with Ívarr's, would be strong enough to sustain the pregnancy. Even if she did not, as unfortunate as that would be, she still was able to become pregnant. It was a step forward. A miracle after so long. I firmly believed the goddess was with them and would bless their marriage with a healthy baby.

It was a relief to finally get home and into our bed. I knew we were both beyond exhausted. Rieka slept in her special crib, close to Axel, so he could feed her if needed. I would let him feed her, then see to the rest. He deserved the sleep.

In my life as a soldier, as a prince, I had seen many things, but nothing came close to touching my heart until I met him.

Axel was everything I could have wanted in a partner. He was protective of those he loved, fair, and kind. He held a nurturing soul which had been guarded until he could live as his true self. Axel was beautiful to me, inside and out.

I felt honored to be his mate.

"The pack deserves a party, too," Kade insisted. "Don't deny them a chance to celebrate how far we've come!"

Ugh, I knew I was going to give in. He had a point. We were walking along the path from our houses towards the mansion, letting Rieka get some fresh air with our guards in tow. I would visit with Dalton, let him have his baby cuddles, and convince Winter to make me something tasty to eat. T was off doing a wing guard shift and I found cooking with Rieka in her baby sling awkward.

She loved to be held and I didn't have the heart to put her down. My princess would only be small for a short time, so the sling was the perfect compromise.

“Fine!” I sighed.

“Fantastic.” Kade paused, looking sheepish. “Well you’ll be glad to know it’s already started, and I was just the distraction. ‘Kay?” He grinned. “Enjoy the party!” Kade rushed away from me and Rieka to likely join his kids and their nanny.

The sounds of the party reached me first. Then I rounded the corner to the backyard, all decked out with decorations. As usual, there were tables filled with food, a bonfire magically warded from the kids, and shifters everywhere.

Cryabell was shifting between her little owl, a species called the Owl of Athena, and her elf form. She had magically altered her robe to shift with her. Impressive magic which suggested she had talents far beyond the skill of child care. It was likely why Blake hired her over the long list of applicants.

Now that the queen had revealed her form, other elves were rushing to follow suit. The success of her queen’s platonic bond with Rieka had boosted Cryabell to attempt her own platonic bond with Kade and the kids. It worked within a couple of days of our wedding. Now others wanted to try it.

Rieka made a fussing noise. Not hungry, just... there. She caught the scent of her daddy and shared mental pictures of him, informing me of her desires.

This little girl was almost as obsessed with my husband and mate as I was. She shifted and barked, catching his attention.

“There are my loves! Come, I was making a plate for you. There’s a chair here with your name on it.”

My man was too kind for words. He had made each day in the month since Rieka’s birth so much easier with his care and attention. Teárlach frequently took her so I could get rest, easier now that I could express milk and he could bottle feed her.

I greeted him with a kiss, thankful to the goddess for giving me my perfect life. If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up. I had it all, a daughter I loved beyond measure, a mate who completed me, and the chance at more. More love, laughter, children, new dreams.

“Missed you,” I whispered, still shy of admitting such things, especially when people could hear. Under the emotion was a longing for more of my mate. I arched into his touch. Time alone was something we’d had little of since Rieka was born.

“Hmm,” he nuzzled my neck over the mating bite. “How about we ask Uncle Chase to take care of the night feeds and just enjoy a little time to ourselves? A few orgasms and some solid sleep sound good?”

“Goddess, yes!” I was practically ready to ditch my poor child for the sleep alone! Loved her, she was the light of my life, etc, but sleep... I needed it.

“Just an hour or two and we can go. I have already arranged things with Chase. He will stay with Kade and Blake tonight.”

I had too many emotions to process. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“Of course, dear one. It’s my job as your alpha, is it not?”

Blake made a motion for the crowd to calm down so he could speak. Teagan amplified his voice.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate with us. Axel and Teárlach’s mating and marriage has sealed a bond between the Sweetwater pack and Abrocaelum’s elves. I, for one, can’t wait to see more of the elves shift and find love. Actually, I have had one more couple come to me with good news.”

Blake waved Candace, one of our omegas and a single mother, forward. On her

shoulder was an eagle owl. It took flight only to shift into Hakeem. Blake held out a blanket for him to cover himself.

Hakeem took Candace's hand. The pair shared a grin. "Candace and I would like to announce that we are pregnant."

Gasps and cheers broke out. I heard many shout their congratulations.

I looked at Teárlach and saw tears welling in his eyes. "We have done it! More are sure to follow now."

Blake stepped forward again, letting the happy couple gather up Candace's son, Riff, and sink into the crowd. "Thank you, Hakeem and Candace. We are so happy for you both, and of course Riff, too. You're going to be such a happy family. Our blessing to you."

My brother waited for the cheers to calm down. "I have more news. Since the testing restarted, we have successfully helped a few betas transition into omegas." I heard Dalton's name being called playfully. "We have a throuple still in their early days, so I won't call them up." More hoots, this time for Grady and Trey and their shared alpha.

"Thanks to the goddess, we were given the key to unlocking alphas and already mated pairs." Blake paused while cheers went up, then continued. "We have successfully trialed the alpha bond potion and now have a former beta pair! Congratulations Jake and Sebastian. We hope you are blessed with little chicks soon!"

"The Luna has truly blessed us. I cannot fathom all this in one place." Teárlach watched the pack celebrate with joy all over his handsome face.

In the distance, something caught my eye. It was faint at first, until I focused on it. I

gasped when I realized what it was.

“I can, look!” I pointed to the trees where I could just pick out three figures, The Luna, Janet, and my mom.

Mom.

Tears filled my eyes. How many more gifts was the goddess going to give us? This was not only for me, but my entire family. They needed to see her.

Chase, Blake, look. I reached for our link, desperate for them to notice her.

I see her, they both said, voices full of wonder, of emotion.

Teárlach gently took Rieka out of the sling and turned her. “Let grandma see you, little wolf.”

My brothers picked up the triplets, and even at this distance, I swear I could see my mother smile with pride. I knew she was happy for us all, though it felt like she saved that bit more for me, because, like Chase, she had always known my impossible dream, and she had seen it become reality.

The figures soon vanished from sight, but the warmth in my heart would take a long time to fade.

“Let’s go home,” T suggested. He helped me get Rieka settled back into her sling. “We can say our goodbyes to your family first.”

“What about your plan?” I asked, confused.

“Plans can wait. Tonight is for family.”

My elf mate, my prince, the alpha of my heart, knew my heart better than I did.

“Let’s go home then.”

The end.

The Sweetwater Pack will return in Dalton’s book, His Temporary Alpha Mate.