



Pregnant by the Alpha Wolf

(Rocky Mountains Alphas #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The dark, mysterious Alpha wolf is obsessed with me and forces me into marriage.

I'm an independent woman, a scientist, and the object of his obsessive behavior.

He knows I wouldn't willingly join his pack, but he wants me anyway.

So he comes up with a plan to trick me into becoming his mate and get me pregnant.

My lab is filled with evidence and theories, but no theory could have prepared me for him.

His intense eyes follow me everywhere I go. His proximity makes me uneasy.

He builds a state-of-the-art lab that the packs need to get ahead of the hunters.

Then he states his condition: I can only use it if I marry him.

I must do this for the pack. I have no choice.

I try to keep things professional, but the tension between us gnaws at my focus.

My focus moves to his dominant touch, exposing my vulnerable body.

My focus moves to his intense gaze on my curves, on my pregnant belly.

Could the dark, obsessed Alpha wolf be my fated mate?

The Rocky Mountains Alphas are the alphas you've been warned for. They take what they want, do as they please, and claim their mates without apology. Because what an Alpha wants, an Alpha gets...always.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

If I could hunt the Order of Reclamation down with nothing but fury and stubbornness, I would have done it by now. But science is my only weapon, and every night I spend in this cold, damp lab only serves to remind me that answers can't come fast enough to stop the hunters from regrouping and striking again. They appear to be relentless.

The lab feels noticeably colder tonight, or maybe it's just the thoughts I can't shake that are making the world feel colder. I trace my fingertip along the edge of a microscope, trying to lose myself in the familiar details of my work even though my frustrations often threatened to overwhelm me.

Every now and then, my tired eyes drift up to the wall littered with printouts of research—an endless stream of new data about shifters and their half-human counterparts, the Volva, like me. The hunters always appear to be one step ahead. They seem to know us better than we know ourselves, but apparently not enough to stem their hatred. For all of our research, I can't really explain why we're being hunted.

The same picture always draws my attention: a faded Polaroid of my parents taken before the tragedy that had changed everything. My parents at a picnic, smiling brightly under a tree. My strong and kind-hearted dad grilling burgers on the barbecue while my mom watches with love in her eyes. They looked so carefree and happy together—two halves of a whole torn apart by hate. I can't help but look at the fifteen-year-old version of myself, smiling back from the picture, so naive of what was about to happen. The pain of their loss still feels so fresh, despite the years that have passed since that fateful night when hunters finally caught up with them, and my world changed forever.

My phone buzzed suddenly, jolting me back to reality. Glancing down at the screen, a text from Kenzie reminded me I'd promised to think about joining her, Senna, and Kit for a drink tonight. It was hard enough getting them all in one place with them being from different packs, and it was supposed to be tonight. Is it really Saturday already? I haven't even noticed time slipping by as I lost myself in thoughts of the newly discovered Volva connections and the ongoing threat from the Order. The idea of stepping away from my work for even an hour feels impossible, but I know that's exactly why Kenzie is pestering me to do it.

The truth is, I don't even want to stop. The lab's resources are so limited that every new study is time-consuming, and with barely any tangible help, reworking their previous knowledge around shifters and humans is taking longer than anyone anticipated. Each pack's DNA seemed to throw up more questions than answers. When I stopped to consider how many centuries had passed with shifters who were unable to shift or presented differently and had been shunned by their packs instead of appreciated as a vital part of their future, it broke my heart. Part human had once been considered a slur, and packs kept themselves insulated to prevent their blood from being diluted. Turning that mindset around is a daunting task, but slowly, it's taking root.

I know my research is central to helping all shifters; the illness cutting shifters down long before their peak with strange fevers, low birth rates, and the loss of wolves in previously dominant shifters, among other issues, had affected not only our pack but, no doubt, many others. Knowing the hunters were part of an ancient order that has been trying to kill shifters for over a thousand years was as startling as it was humbling.

I'm scratching at the surface with so much still to discover. The Alpha Council wants and needs answers, but progress is agonizingly slow.

As if sensing my hesitation, my phone buzzes again, this time with a voice note from

Senna. Not really needing to press play to know what the luna will say, I steel myself before putting the message on the speaker:

“Hey girl, we know how busy you are , and everyone appreciates it so much, but you need a break! We really hope you can make it—everyone’s meeting at the Roadhouse. In the spirit of interpack relations, the guys are babysitting, and we’re drinking margaritas—well, those of us who aren’t pregnant, of course! But seriously, you can’t keep working like this. You need a distraction... and I think we can find something for you at the Roadhouse!”

Despite the urge to groan, I can’t help but smirk. I know exactly what Senna is implying; it’s nothing I haven’t heard from Kenzie and Kit, too. They are all loved up with their mates and think everyone else should find happiness, too. It’s a nice sentiment, but I’m far too busy to bother looking for a man. And happiness? That seems even more elusive. After losing my family and all the violence and revelations of the past few years, finding a mate is the last thing on my mind.

The truth was, no man has ever interested me that way. Growing up, I felt like an outsider, which probably made me wary of connecting with anyone. Many of the Volva have mentioned feeling the same. I bizarrely consider myself fortunate because my scientific intellect has obviously made me more useful, so I’ve often been spared the worst consequences and discrimination, but I’ve still felt it. Through my research, I’ve recently spent more time with other Volva and shifters and heard their stories. Clearly, there are still a lot of misunderstandings and wronged Volva within their packs, and there is still a lot more work to do.

My new friendships with the lunas give me some hope, though. Times are certainly changing. That doesn’t mean I want Senna, Kenzie, and Kit to start setting me up with random shifters at the Roadhouse on the off chance one of them might be my mate.

I grab my phone and send a quick photo of my lab with papers scattered everywhere and my microscope:

Sorry! I've started some new slides, and they'll be ruined if I stop now. I will definitely come next time.

Not entirely a lie. The slides would be ruined if I left them out.

A flurry of texts come back from the women, all expressing how sorry they are that I can't make it. I read each one and feel a warmth deep inside. I know I can come across as abrupt, even a little cold at times. I'm not even sure people like me, but these new friendships are helping me open up a bit more. It's been getting easier, and deep down, I do feel happier for gradually letting more people in.

I reply again to say I won't miss the next time. And I mean it...as long as I actually do make some progress here first. It feels like an uphill battle, though, when I don't always know what I'm looking for; all the previous research is half complete or missing vital data. Our historical pack records and books fill in some gaps, but we know far too little about ourselves.

Returning my attention to the slides, I flick through the labels on the latest batch. Only one pack—the Nicholson pack—had failed to submit blood samples on time.

I sigh, trying to calm my racing brain.

Their alpha, Rowan, had been evasive when I called him about their lack of samples. He'd given one excuse after another before ensnaring me in one of the best conversations I've had about my research since starting—he was asking genuinely amazing questions. By the time I hung up, I felt reenergized...right up until I realized he hadn't told me anything about the missing samples. He did that to me every time we spoke, which admittedly hasn't been very many. But he can wrap me up in some

kind of intense, irresistible redirection and then disappear. It's infuriating. And intoxicating.

The Nicholson pack is one of the oldest packs in existence, and they have a reputation for being secretive and aloof. I can't help but wonder if that also extends to me researching their bloodlines.

Everything about the alpha bewilders me. His long black hair and iridescent pale skin are enough to make any shifter stop and stare, yet there's something...different about him. Something that goes beyond his looks. He moves with almost predatory grace, like he knows things no one else does, or maybe he just exudes that kind of confidence that comes from knowing you're better than everyone else.

My alpha, Kaiden, mentioned that all the other alphas agree Rowan is different somehow. He always seems to be two steps ahead. The situation with the Order seems to frustrate him on an intellectual level more than any of the other alphas. This makes his apparent reluctance to share their DNA even stranger because I know the more DNA we study, the more answers we'll find to help in the fight. Whatever his deal was, he manages to send shivers down my spine whenever I think about him. Which is often.

He looks at me like he knows me better than anyone in the world, which is ridiculous because I've only met him a few times, and deep down, I know the look in his eyes should actually scare me. Instead, it draws me closer. And every time I see him, I can't help but think about his magnetic personality and the way he makes me feel when he speaks. I barely know him, but I already find myself thinking about him more than I should. It was as if he had somehow wormed his way into my mind; not only is he dominating my thoughts, but he is also messing with my research by not providing the samples he's promised. I try to force my thoughts back to the slides in front of me, but it's useless.

Annoyed with myself, I push my chair back and head for the small kitchenette. The lab itself isn't in great condition. Many of the machines are outdated, useless for this kind of work, or simply broken. The kitchenette is actually just an old table pushed against the wall in a side room with a stove and a small refrigerator. Skipping the selection of herbal teas Kenzie dropped off a couple of weeks ago, which Forrest loves, I go straight for the hot chocolate. I hesitate briefly before scooping out the dark velvet powder.

"Now is no time to worry about my diet," I mutter to myself as I wait for the water to heat, and then slowly mix the two until I can smell the familiar, warm, comforting aroma.

I know I'm curvier than the average shifter, and being so short, it seems even more emphasized. I wear my lab coat like armor at times; I think people find it harder to judge with my clinical exterior, and by choosing an oversized fit, I can cover my admittedly impressive cleavage completely. It probably makes me look even shorter, but I don't care; the lab is my world, and I can dress however I want here. And enjoy my hot chocolate in peace.

In a world that has rejected me for both being a shifter and not having a wolf, leaning into the reasoned world of science and facts is a relief. I feel valued here, not as though I don't live up to some invisible standard in the shifter community—one that values the wolf, strength, and beauty above all. Unable to live in the human world after what happened to my mother, it sometimes feels like I inhabit a half-world. Meeting Kenzie, Kit, and Senna has helped me feel more accepted, but I do wonder if I'll ever find true peace the way they seem to have done.

I am pulled from my thoughts by the hot cup in my hand. Just as I'm about to take my first sip, I hear the front door alarm beep quietly from the other room. It's late—too late for any of the other temp workers or Forrest to come back in. Hardly anyone knows I'd even be here. Given the events of the past couple years, my anxiety is

through the roof. My heart rate spikes alarmingly until my senses pick up the scent. It's my alpha, Kaiden. Now, my heart is racing for a different reason.

I like Kaiden. He's Kit's mate and a wonderful leader. But alphas still make me nervous, full stop—especially when I don't have any more breakthroughs to deliver yet.

"Willow?" Kaiden calls out as he entered the main lab. I take a deep breath, abandoning my hot chocolate on the side table, and walk toward my station. Kaiden is already there, staring at my wall of research, a quizzical expression on his face.

"Impressive," he says, motioning to the data. "It's quite remarkable how much you've achieved here."

I can feel the heat creeping into my cheeks under the praise and silently try to shake it off, especially as it's nowhere near enough. "Um, thanks. There's still so much to do, though."

And that's the truth. There is so much to do, and my progress doesn't feel impressive at all. It feels stunted and frustrating.

Kaiden looks thoughtful for a moment, and I can't help but wonder why he's here. Sure, he has visited the lab many times as an alpha, but isn't he supposed to babysit tonight so the lunas can meet at the bar? We stand there awkwardly for a moment before he clears his throat.

"There is a lot to do, but I know you're doing your best with what you have," he says, and I feel the blush creeping in again. "That's why I'm here. The Nicholson pack approached me privately. They have some sort of plan to speed up our research. I'm meeting their alpha Rowan tomorrow night with the Alpha Council to discuss the details, but I understand it might involve you traveling to their territory to work in the

new lab. I wanted to run it by you first and give you some time to think about it.”

Rowan.

His handsome face flashing in front of my eyes solidifies the crimson in my cheeks, and I struggle to maintain my professional exterior, nodding and trying to make it appear as though I’m simply mulling over the information.

“Mmm,” I nod, leaning against the bench in an attempt to look unruffled by the thought of the Nicholson alpha, the intrigue of their proposal, and the thought of having to navigate visiting a different pack. “I have been meaning to chase their samples. They’re the only pack we’ve asked who hasn’t delivered them. I’ll do anything at this point to get the answers we need. Is there any more news on the Order yet?”

Kaiden shook his head before sighing, “Not yet, but that’s not a bad thing. We have a strong network developing between the Rocky Mountains packs, keeping a lookout for any 'so-called rogue wolves. It’s giving us the time we need to learn more about the Volva magic, our strengths, and any potential weaknesses. We will prevail, especially with people like you in our corner.”

I want to scoff at the compliment, but I know he doesn’t give them out unless he means them. This feeling of being valued and appreciated by an alpha is still new to me.

“Well, uh, thank you. Let me know what the Nicholson alpha says about their plans?” I reply, my voice steady and business-like.

Kaiden nods before turning to leave. “Think carefully about your feelings on the other pack, and I’ll have more information for you soon,” he says, pausing before he walks away. “And, uh, don’t work too hard; I hear you’re doing too much of that.”

Kit has clearly been talking to him, which annoys me for the briefest second before that warm feeling returns, the knowledge that people really care about me. I watch as Kaiden leaves the lab and then return to my work, with thoughts of Rowan flickering in and out of my mind as I try to concentrate on the data in front of me. In reality, there's only one thought dominating my mind.

What is your plan, Rowan?

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I am not prone to nerves. I'm too old; though thankfully, I don't look my age, and dare I say too confident in my decisions to ever waste time second-guessing myself.

This is what I remind myself of, on repeat, as I walk through the forest toward the assigned meeting point. I may be a few minutes late, judging by how high the moon is now, but the other alphas are traveling further, so I'm sure I won't be the only one.

These days, I rarely walk alone in the forest, and I find myself not rushing, allowing the evening calm to wash over me. As an alpha, my pack constantly dominates my thoughts—more so than ever with the threat of the Order and attacks by the hunters hanging over our heads.

Given our safe haven and previous isolation, the pack is not used to being under threat, and my job has been increasingly tense. Our previously insulated way of life is changing. New information has made it clear that rather than keeping us safe, isolating ourselves was actually making us weaker. And as with hearing all hard truths, not everyone is receptive to listening—even me.

My beasts' senses dance amongst the trees, and the forest itself responds with an ancient melody. Unsure where my vampire blood and wolf meet, I allow both the reins equally as I walk, keenly aware of the rustle of the breeze at the top of the canopy, the tiniest animal scuttling over the ridge, and the sound of Cade from the Wilder pack approaching some three kilometers from the west. He's going to be later than I am unless he picks up the pace, as I sense the other alphas are already gathered and have a fire going. I only hope Kaiden remembered the beers; I want everyone in a receptive mood for my announcement.

I know my plan is not without risk, but I don't care. I value the tentative but growing allegiance with the other packs; I even find myself enjoying the company of my fellow alphas—something I couldn't have imagined until quite recently. And I know our mutual cooperation is needed to defeat the Order; at least, that's the outward premise for my generous offer of help I'll be making this evening. And that should be enough. But frankly, it all pales in comparison to the real reason.

Her. Willow.

The thought alone stops me in my tracks. The forest itself bristles as my body vibrates with purpose—neither a shifter's urge to find its mate nor a vampire's unyielding determination are for the faint-hearted. Not for the first time, I chuckle mirthlessly.

Almost a thousand years, across all continents, so many lifetimes, and I find my mate tucked away in these forested mountains. A tiny, almost fragile-looking thing, but with curves I've waited an eternity for. To have found her in the midst of this crisis with the Order is remarkably bad timing, and that she belongs to another pack when my own swore not to allow outsiders in centuries ago is another issue. But I will not be deterred.

All roads lead to Willow.

Hell, at this point, all thoughts lead to Willow.

Not far from the meeting point now, I try to clear my mind of her beautiful face, concentrating on the meeting ahead, but it's useless. I remind myself that I can't be one hundred percent sure she's my mate. Not yet. That's why this next step is crucial.

I had assumed my lineage meant I didn't have a specific mate. It can't be said I didn't look for one, as immortal beings often do. But I never had the urge to claim anyone,

to spend forever with one. Even during the height of my powers when I was a kingmaker, stealing the hearts of queens and watching empires fall across the old and new worlds, no one woman ever held my interest. And eventually, none did.

My beta, Griffen, would often dismiss this as me simply running out of women, but I knew it was deeper than that. My soul had given up on finding a mate, and the mindless pursuit of women became stale. The thought makes me cringe; anyone who knows me would never describe me as stale.

The isolation of our pack never bothered me. I thought I'd seen enough of the world and grown tired of all the wars. This isn't my first pack; being a shifter meant I always craved connection, and my alpha tendencies meant that others naturally looked to me for leadership. Rejected and hunted by my father's pack, I often lived as a lone wolf until banding together with like-minded souls. Some of my old packs have gone on to become the biggest in the Old World, but me? When my vampire lineage was inevitably eventually discovered, they all reacted the same way—violence and rejection. That is why the Nicholson pack has been so successful; instead of keeping our vampire heritage a secret, Griffen and I actively sort out those in need of protection too, and created a safe haven in these mountains. I thought our isolation here was a gift. My mission was to keep my pack safe and build a community where they could flourish.

How wrong I was. And I'm not used to being wrong.

Willow's research and the discovery of the Volva and their magic changed everything. So, my mate is not only beautiful and brave, but she is also fiercely intelligent.

If she's my mate, the voice of doubt cautions. That small part of me refuses to believe it's true and that after all this time, I have found her. My claws involuntarily stretch at the mere thought, anticipation coursing through my veins. Watching her,

observing her from afar, the snippets of conversation are not enough anymore. It's time to make my move.

I pride myself on seeing the full board when playing chess, and if all the pieces align, I can take Willow, destroy the Order, and secure alliances with the other packs all in one move. Checkmate.

I wonder if Willow also senses I am her mate. I have looked for signs of recognition, but she's bashful, remarkably committed to her research, and...if I'm correct, half-human. Perhaps she does not recognize the mate bond herself. What I do see reflected, though, is desire, even if she doesn't realize it herself. Her body responds to mine. It calls to me. I have no doubt she will yield to me when the time comes. So, why do I feel so out of sorts?

I try to push away the unusual sensation of nerves and push on toward the campfire I see in the distance. The alpha's voices ring out through the forest. Alder's laughter, in particular, breaks through; he still retains his Scottish twang, and it never fails to stir old memories of the clans I knew in the Old World. They all had the same rambunctious laughter and a gleam in their eye that Alder hasn't lost. Of all the alphas, he's the one I suspect knows the most about my heritage. I knew his particular clan many years ago, and they were well-traveled; I even passed through their territory at one point. Their legends were certainly aware of my kind, though perhaps Alder is young enough to consider them fairytales.

They all suspect, naturally. It's not lost on me that my differences are quite obvious. I downplay my enhanced senses, and when I shift, I'm more beast than wolf. I can't hide my luminescent skin, and my aversion to bright sunlight is obvious to anyone paying attention, though it is winter more often than not in these mountains. Those who have met others from my pack will see that they also display some of these traits, though they present more strongly in me. Few are as pure a mix of vampire and shifter as I am—after all, vampires don't exist. Not anymore.

The thought dampens my mood slightly. I still have so much to learn about this new world and how the changes will affect my pack. But for now, I focus on the task at hand.

As I grow closer, the men's voices hush, and heads turn toward me. Kaiden is the first to speak up from his spot next to Grayson. "About fucking time," he drawls, his mouth twisted in a smirk. Brooks snorts beside him, and Cade, who has only arrived minutes before me anyway, scowls but doesn't comment.

As I approach, they hand me a beer, their faces lit by the warm fire. The alcohol is strong but doesn't burn my throat like it should. It's been so long since I've tasted it. Alcohol doesn't affect shifters as it does humans, and only the strongest spirits have ever given me a buzz. Still, sharing a beer with friends feels oddly nice. My lips curl into a smile as I take a swig, letting the cool liquid slide down my throat. It's surprisingly refreshing after my walk through the forest and the thoughts that haunted my steps.

"What kept you?" Kaiden teases, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "You live like five minutes away." He gestures toward my territory over the ridge. "We were starting to think you didn't want to join us."

I chuckle, shrugging nonchalantly and rolling my eyes. "I had some pack business to attend to," I lie smoothly, taking another sip of my beer before setting it aside on the ground beside me. Alder leans forward, his eyes glinting in the firelight as he takes a drink before speaking in that thick Scottish drawl.

"So," he says slowly, "Are we doing this, then? Kaiden here doesn't have all night; he's got a bairn at home."

At that, the men all holler, and Kaiden and Grayson raise their bottles in the air. "A blessing and a miracle," he says to the cheers before laughing and adding, "But yes, I

will also be in a world of trouble if I'm not home to help."

Knowing his luna, we're in no doubt that's true. The celebrations are heartfelt, though, and why wouldn't they be? Centuries of falling birthrates only for us to discover that it was our own self-imposed isolation destroying pack fertility. The discovery that the Volva—shifters without wolves—are not a defect but, in fact, our saviors changed everything. Now, there are new babies to celebrate despite the threat from the hunters.

I sigh, my thoughts still firmly on Willow.

"Any news on the borders?" I ask casually, trying to steer the conversation. It's been a quiet few weeks since we last met, and I'm curious if that means the hunters have given up or if they're just biding their time. No one speaks for a moment before Brooks shakes his head.

"Nothing much," he says finally. "A possible few sightings here and there, but nothing worth worrying about."

Cade nods in agreement. "Same. Almost struggling to know what we're looking for, to be honest," he mutters, taking another swig of his beer.

Alder chimes in next, his eyes narrowed as he squints at the fire. "I've reached out to my old clan in Scotland," he begins slowly. "They're discussing the situation before getting back to me. Not sure what that means. They're cautious but friendly. I'll let ye know when I hear something concrete."

Everyone murmurs in response as Alder turns to me, "And what of you and the Old World? Any contacts further afield that might know anything?"

I feel as though ice has crept around the campfire as all eyes turn to me. I see it again,

the flicker of recognition in Alder's eyes and the sense that everyone gathered wants to hear the answer, some sort of confirmation of my heritage.

I take a long swig of my beer before replying, "I'm quite sure all my old friends are long since gone. I probably have no more ideas than the rest of you. We should keep our attention on the problem in front of us. We are the ones with the most to lose, after all, no?"

They know, and I know, that my accent is most likely European rather than American. I like each man gathered here, but liking and trusting are two very different things, and I've only lived to be as old as I am by never confusing the two. They can keep guessing, for all I care; I have no intention of revisiting my past for information on a current problem. As far as I'm concerned, the Old World barely even exists on the map. I have no reason to assume the packs I have known and left behind in the Old World have become enlightened over the years; I'm sure they would still rather kill me than help a halfling. And I have long since stopped caring about their acceptance.

The others murmur their agreement, and I can feel the camaraderie between us returning as more beers are opened and passed around. A few minutes later, Kaiden speaks again: "Rowan, I visited Willow the other night. " Everyone turns at that, knowing Willow is our best chance at uncovering more secrets about the Volva and their magic. "She's doing her best but making slow progress in that old lab. She mentioned your pack hadn't provided samples yet. I figured that has something to do with this idea you have to discuss?"

All eyes turn to me, but I don't care as long as they're not trying to snoop into my history. Despite my plan with the lab, I have given my pack assurances that our heritage will remain unknown as my own pack members can analyze our DNA before Willow or anyone sees it and bring anything troubling to me directly. I'm not stupid; I know there will be differences within our results, but many of the pack only have

minor vampire DNA now, and these differences can be explained by the fact we came from the Old World. Having Willow conduct her research there allows me to control the narrative even more and stop any concerns about our results being passed onto the other alphas. This is what I came here for tonight. Now, I just need to make it an offer no alpha can refuse.

“It’s good news,” I say, standing to address the group. “We are making slow progress, but that’s not our scientists’ fault; they don’t have the equipment. I have changed that. My pack has commissioned a state-of-the-art laboratory, and we have the best machines available. It is all ready. I think Willow would prefer to work from such a facility, no?”

I note a few of the alphas nodding in agreement, but my focus is on Kaiden. He’s Willow’s alpha, and she’s currently working in his territory. “You trying to steal my scientist, Rowan?”

I put my hands up and flash a smile with only a hint of fang. “As I told you a few days ago, Kaiden, my proposition is only to help. Help all of us.”

Kaiden nods, more knowingly than I’d like. “Your pack is too far for Willow to travel; do you suggest she commute or work part-time at your fancy new lab?”

“I’d say the Order is an emergency and should be treated as such. She can stay in one of the apartments at the lab.” I sense his doubts and continue, “Bring her to see; she can decide if she thinks the new lab full of new equipment will help her.”

Packs have not shared people or resources until now. Times are changing, and I feel that among this group of alphas. Can we work together while giving me everything I want? For the greater good, obviously.

Eventually, Kaiden nods. “I’ll bring her if I can drag her away from the lab for even a

day. If she thinks it will help us bring these hunters to justice, destroy the Order, or better understand the Volva magic, for the benefit of all of us, I'll allow it."

I raise my beer, and the overwhelming sense of satisfaction flows through my body.

Checkmate.

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I shift in my seat, my eyes fixed on the winter landscape flashing by the window of Kaiden's truck. I'm grateful to be in the back seat so that Kaiden and his betas can talk freely, and I can retreat into my own world. I wish Forrest had been able to come, but I understand he needs to be at the clinic; we can't both leave. Still, a friendly face would have been welcome.

Not that Kaiden and the others haven't been friendly. They insist I drive with them instead of in the other trucks with the technicians from other packs, all heading to work in the new Nicholson laboratory—if we want to. Kaiden keeps making it clear that we don't have to stay otherwise.

I have a feeling this situation is stretching everyone's newfound capacity for cooperation. Ending their isolation and working together to bring down the hunters, find mates, and end conflicts is one thing, but physically working together and mixing intel will be a new development. So far, there's been some resistance to my work—wolves worried about what my DNA research will uncover about their individual packs. I think they're concerned I'll find weaknesses that could be exploited rather than the strengths I'm looking to build upon.

I think some people are just scared of change, even when it's being used to help them. These are probably the same people who preferred to shun Volva because they were unable to shift rather than see their potential.

Rowan seems different, his pull stronger than anyone else's. I can almost taste him in the air; he is so vivid and alive that it takes my breath away. I wonder if he senses my arrival, too, but I doubt it. I doubt he thinks of me at all. He's an alpha, and otherworldly at that. There is no way he considers me beyond my usefulness.

However, my body and wolf don't seem to care, and the mere thought of him makes my heart race and my skin tingle with anticipation. I rub my hands together in an attempt to snap out of it and focus on the view outside.

Suddenly, we crest a hill, and I gasp as if struck by lightning—the landscape opens up into a breathtaking expanse of deep ravines and towering ridges covered in virgin forest as far as the eye can see. Even from this distance, I can smell the earthiness of the soil and taste the resinous tang in the air. This place feels deep and ancient, not like any forest I've visited before, its trees rising high into the sky like spires.

Standing in a large clearing below us, I can see the town, smoke coiling from chimneys into the icy air. It looks small but tidy and inviting. As we get closer, I can see the buildings are all well-kept and far more modern than I'd have expected, sitting in stark contrast to the ancient forest.

We descend into the town slowly, our trucks rumbling over the snow-covered streets. People stop what they're doing to watch us go by, some openly staring while others just nod in acknowledgment. I recognize a couple of the men on the sidewalk from interpack meetings, but I don't know their names. The town feels similar to our own in terms of it's the way it looks and the people, but there's something unique in the air.

From what I've gathered, the Nicholson pack has been the most isolated of all. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it's not this. They may be isolated, but they've clearly been doing okay for themselves too. They look strong and resilient as if they could survive anything, and the town feels prosperous.

The smell of freshly baked goods wafts from a nearby bakery as we briefly stop next to it at the crossroads—my mouth waters at the scent of warm cinnamon rolls mixed with freshly ground coffee beans.

“Damn, I’m going to need some food,” Tyson, one of Kaiden’s betas, groans as everyone joins in. It’s been a long drive, and the smell is enticing, but it will have to wait.

Further down the street, it opens up into a main square, and we pass a hardware store and a busy general store, each with fresh displays. This place feels like something out of a fairytale, nestled between mountains and trees as if time has forgotten it exists.

Finally, we pull up outside a large wooden building that must be the laboratory. It looks brand-new, but blends in seamlessly with its surroundings thanks to careful construction materials, clearly chosen by someone who understands the environment well enough not to disturb its natural beauty. As we step out into the cold air, I hear the soft crunch of snow underfoot and take a deep breath—this place is extraordinary.

Standing beside the truck, I see Rowan emerge from the building. His presence fills me with an inexplicable feeling of anticipation. As he approaches, my heart races, and I feel my face flush. Even though we've met before, it feels like the first time all over again. He greets Kaiden warmly before his eyes find mine, locking on me like a magnet. I can’t help but stare back at him. Not for the first time, I’m left wondering why those mismatched eyes are so hypnotizing. It's difficult to tear myself away when Kaiden nudges me gently.

"Come on," he says with a gentle smile. "Let's get inside."

The warmth of the building hits me immediately as we walk through large double doors into a brightly lit foyer area decorated with various animal skulls and antlers mounted on the walls. The scent of pine needles mingles with the sterile smell of cleaning products, and something else I can't quite place hangs in the air—it smells fresh but welcoming at the same time.

Rowan leads us inside, indicating that the building is split into two sides. One is a

dedicated laboratory, and the other houses the new pack medical clinic. He's talking to Kaiden, giving the other alpha the respect of a full tour, but his eyes linger on me every few minutes. We head down a long corridor and a few glass-walled offices filled with people working busily at computers or unboxing what looks like brand-new equipment. We pass several smaller rooms, which I presume are examination rooms or labs before I spot a large cafeteria—a big upgrade from my cupboard with a coffee pot and old fridge.

“And finally, here is somewhere our dedicated scientists can relax after a busy day,” I hear Rowan conclude his tour, clapping his hands together. “What do you think, Kaiden?”

“Very impressive, Rowan. Really, I mean that,” Kaiden replies, and I know he means it. How could he not? Feeling overwhelmed, I walk away from the group slightly and peer through one of the windows that looks down into the lab below. It's sleek and modern, almost too modern. I'm used to muddling through with barely working microscopes, broken refrigeration, a drafty lab, and limited needles for DNA collection. The range of equipment and space feels slightly intimidating.

I feel his presence suddenly behind me, even though I didn't hear his approach. He's not just behind me, he's incredibly close. If I leaned back, even just a fraction, I think I'd be met with a wall of muscle. I can barely breathe as my whole body freezes.

“And you, Willow, what do you think?” he asks, almost whispering into my hair and sending shivers racing across my skin. The way he says my name highlights that slight lilt to his accent, something buried deep in the inflection that reveals he hasn't always lived in this part of the world.

I dare not turn since he's crowding me, so I remain looking toward the lab below. “It's very impressive...I can see we can get a lot more done. These machines look very, um, new.”

I sound like an idiot as I ramble, and he chuckles, the sound surprisingly jovial. “Well, yes, they are new. Straight from the box, my dear.”

I stifle a groan as we look at the technicians below, literally unpacking them in front of us. Of course, they’re new. Why does he have this effect on me? It’s infuriating. He makes me feel like a fool, tripping up over my own words all the time. I scramble for something to say to recover my composure.

“At least you’ll have no excuse to provide your DNA sample now?” I attempt lightly.

“Mmm,” he smiles, “you really are quite desperate to look very closely at me, aren’t you?”

I scoff at the suggestion, incredulous, but the action causes me to stumble slightly, and his arms fly up to catch me. Suddenly, I’m pressed against his hard body. His height dwarfs me from a distance, but this close, I feel even smaller. Despite my curves, Rowan still manages to make me look petite.

“I...I—” My words fail me as I stammer, lost in his eyes. His hands once braced against the railing, now cradle my hips, drawing me closer still.

“Perhaps we should take this conversation”—he leans in, his lips an inch from mine—“somewhere more private.”

His growl sends a shiver down my spine and warmth between my thighs. I know I should say no and push him away, but his scent—that intoxicating cologne he wears—mixed with a hint of the rain outside clouds my judgment.

“Willow? A moment,” Kaiden calls from across the room, breaking the spell. What the hell am I doing? What must this look like? I spring back, practically sliding along the railing in my escape. I rush toward Kaiden and his betas, well aware that my face

must be bright red.

“Yes, um, I’m here,” I say, squeezing between the assembled men to where Kaiden is waiting. He’s staring across at Rowan, an unmistakable scowl on his face.

“Tour the lab with me, Willow; let me know what you think,” he says, leading me toward the door. Once clear, he adds, “Did Rowan upset you?”

I laugh, waving my hand as if to bat away the suggestion. Inside my body, my emotions are still in turmoil; it’s as if I can still feel his hands gripping my hips. “No. No, honestly. He’s just a bit intense, isn’t he? He’s an alpha, after all.”

Kaiden raises his brows at me, and I fall over my words, “Not that you’re all intense. Or strange. That’s not what I mean...”

Kaiden barks out a laugh that makes his whole face light up, “I’m sure Kit would agree wholeheartedly. We are intense, but I get the feeling Rowan is on a different level. All of this,” he says, gesturing to the lab, “is very impressive, but you’re my responsibility, and I won’t leave you here if you’re not happy to be left. If you don’t feel safe.”

My face is on fire under his scrutiny. I know he’s being a good alpha; he’s caring about my well-being. I just wish he wouldn’t look so intently because I’m not sure how to describe my feelings about the encounter with Rowan. It definitely wasn’t fear I was feeling.

The thought of being left here to work doesn’t scare me; what scares me is my own troubling feelings whenever I am near Rowan. He does something to me simply by his closeness, the way those enticing mismatched eyes seem to stare right into my soul, as though he sees something in me that no one else can—it’s ridiculous, of course. If anything, he’s simply toying with me, and I risk embarrassing myself.

Is that fear worth risking the progress we could make here? For the good of all our packs? Of course not.

“The lab is impressive, and this is important work. I’m not scared of Rowan, and I need to do this for all of us.” I say resolutely, and for a moment, I see a flicker of pure respect cross Kaiden’s expression, and I’m surer than ever that I can do this.

But can I cope with the way Rowan makes me feel things I have no right feeling? After what happened to my parents, I have no desire to risk my heart or life by falling for someone as dangerous as Rowan. The thought of being with someone as strong as an alpha when I don’t even have a wolf is unthinkable to me.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

“How did the tour go?” Griffen asks, strolling into my office and sitting by the fire. “Suitably impressed, I hope?”

I lean back in my chair, feeling calm and in control. My encounter with Willow is so fresh in my mind that my fingertips still tingle with her essence, as though I could just reach out and touch her again right now, right here. It is more than I could have imagined.

I clear my throat, leaning back into the high back of my chair. “It went well, of course. How could it not?”

“And they will agree? To share their best scientists? A lab is only as good as the people who work in it,” Griffen pushes.

“I have no doubts. They’re having lunch at the facility and supposedly talking it over, but I know the answer will be affirmative,” I say sincerely. I saw the looks they all gave each other, the nods of approval, and the lab clearly exceeded Kaiden’s expectations.

We all fear the Order of Reclamation knows far more about us than we do about them. If we want to beat the hunters next time they strike, which is only a matter of time, we need to catch up quickly. Willow’s research has been slow, but she could only work with what she had. With the lab’s resources, I have no doubt we will learn more about the Volva magic.

“Good. Good...” Griffen nods, but something in his tone catches my attention.

“You have doubts?” I ask, studying his expression. Griffen has been my beta here for over two centuries and my friend for even longer. There are few people I trust more on this earth.

“No,” he states firmly, “I do not need convincing. You know some of the pack are concerned; they have been throughout the building process. Seeing them all roll in today in trucks has caused some anxiety. It needs addressing.”

He’s not wrong. This isn’t new information. Noah, Michael, and a few of my other betas have either raised concerns of their own or relayed the concerns of others in the pack. While they all supported the building of the lab with their time and labor, questions were raised about who would be working in it. Who would be coming and going to the town? It appears isolation is a hard habit to break for some—even if our future depends on it.

It’s no wonder. I suspect our pack has the most to risk in this new world of collaboration. However, we are probably the most at risk, too.

Deep down, I have a feeling that Willow represents more than a fantasy to me personally. I think she’s crucial to the survival of my pack—and our best chance at retribution.

“I’ll talk to them. Again. Let’s just get today out of the way,” I sigh.

“It’ll have to be now, I’m afraid. They’re waiting in the hall. I’d make your case before our visitors finish at the lab,” Griffen cautions.

Part of me hates being blindsided, but deep down, I know he’s right. I also know the pack will fall in line. One thing has never been in doubt, and that is my leadership. I understand their fears, but I’m also old enough to know better. These hunters may have caught me off guard initially, but it’s not the first time I’ve been hunted.

I stand, straightening my jacket. “Thank you for the heads up. Let’s go handle this, shall we?”

I lead the way out of the room, my boots echoing on the wooden floor. The scent of freshly cut wood and sweat lingers in the air. It’s humid, which is unusual for our normally cool climate. A storm must be brewing, and it adds a certain tension to the fresh mountain air.

The hall is just off the town square, only steps from my new cabin. I designed it that way so that, as alpha, I’m always at the heart of town if needed. A few wolves are already assembled, their eyes on me as I approach. They shift nervously under my gaze, some looking away while others attempt to hold it. It’s clear they want answers. I can feel their anxiety rolling off them in waves.

“We appreciate you coming on short notice, Rowan.” Michael steps forward. He’s one of our most skilled fighters but also one of the most volatile when riled up. “You know we have some reservations about all this. There’s a lot of strange folks around town today. We’re not sure this is a good idea. You know what is at stake.”

I take a deep breath before answering him directly. “They are our visitors,” I begin calmly. “They are here to see our lab, and their visit has been well-contained.”

“But some of them are staying!” he exclaims more angrily. Others murmur in agreement around us, although not as loudly or aggressively. Some look around fearfully, clearly unsure what this means for them personally or collectively as a pack.

“I did tell you,” I remind them patiently, “this research needs to happen with or without our help. Personally, I would rather we lead the way, control the narrative, and ensure the hunters are stopped once and for all.”

Murmurs of acknowledgment and filter through the gathered wolves, but I still sense some reticence.

"I know what you're thinking; I have considered all the possibilities. What if they find out about our...differences?" The crowd falls silent as they listen with respect. "We've been here for centuries. Our kind has survived because we kept to ourselves and kept our secrets. But times are changing. Our pack is unique; we're not like any other shifter pack. We know this. But our principles are the same, and our enemy is the same. Our collaboration with the other packs has been fruitful. This lab will also be fruitful. Scientists are working on cures for ailments that affect all the packs; this is important work. Not just to stop the hunters, but also for the benefit of us all."

I feel the mood shifting. They're not all happy, but they're more appeased. I spot our medic, Sara, to one side. She was part of the tour this morning, and I know she was impressed with our guests.

"Sara," I continue, raising my hand in her direction, "is grateful for the new facilities as our medic, and will work closely with them during their stay. She's one of us. And Rian, one of my most trusted new betas, will be hands-on in the lab. He took over his position as beta from his father, but he has a strong scientific education; this is an opportunity for members of our pack, too. I know there is concern about the tests that will be conducted, but our pack will monitor those results. Nothing. I repeat, nothing that can cause us harm will ever see the light of day." I pause for effect.

There are nods all around now, understanding dawning on their faces. They may not like it, but they understand the necessity of the situation. We need answers, and we need to protect ourselves from those who would harm us for who we are. We need to undo decades of increasing ailments and diseases if we are to be strong enough to beat them.

"We've never let anyone in like this, Rowan," Noah says, stepping up, "That

scientist, Willow. She's been requesting our DNA. I know you say we can control what is discovered, but she's running the lab; how can you be sure she won't go running to her alpha with some information about us? She has no allegiance to us. She serves another alpha."

"You know how it has to be," Michael interjects. "We have rarely let anyone stay here, and the few newcomers we've had were all mates, loyalty bound to us. That is how it's always been. Is she unmated? One of the betas can step forward. That would reassure the pack and uphold our legacy."

I am rarely lost for words, but I am momentarily taken aback. It is true that our pack's only new members in many decades have joined via mating ceremonies. I didn't think that would apply to those coming to work at the lab. I certainly didn't think it would apply to Willow.

My pack assumes I have had no interest in taking a luna. Whatever I feel or suspect I may have found in Willow needs more time—time I may not have.

I'm pulled back from my thoughts as Griffen and Noah discuss who would be a suitable mate for Willow. "Enough, this is not the way forward."

"I humbly disagree, Rowan," Griffen approaches. "Give the pack the reassurance they need. At least broach it with Kaiden; as an alpha, he will understand. They're due here in a few minutes, anyway. Kaiden expressed he wishes to get back over the ridge before the storm comes in."

I nod, still consumed with how best to handle this development. "Understandable."

The hushed conversations continue around me, the cogs of my mind turning over several scenarios as I tune out the noise until I hear approaching footsteps. Rian opens the door and ushers our guests inside as they finish the lab tour and have eaten.

The biting cold from the open door confirms my suspicions about the speed of the incoming storm.

My eyes immediately go to Willow toward the back of the small group that has entered the hall. Some must have remained in the warmth of the lab. She's so small compared to the other wolves, but her stunning auburn hair is unmistakable even in a crowded room. I catch Kaiden's impressed expression as he takes in the meeting hall—I'm not surprised. It rivals any of the other packs' in terms of craftsmanship and facilities. I've found that I rather enjoy showing off our small but thriving town.

"Rowan," Kaiden approaches, grasping my hand in a greeting that would crush any human hand. Then, half-turning to the rest of my gathered pack, he adds, "We truly appreciate your pack's hospitality today. It's been a long time coming that we should meet in friendship and cooperation like this."

I nod in agreement. I genuinely like Kaiden and the other alphas I've come to know better these last few months. Now, I just need him not to stand in the way of my plans concerning Willow. I glance at her and catch her eye before she quickly looks away. I see you looking , too, my dear.

I did wonder if I pushed a little too far earlier. She's clearly a skittish thing, young and reeking of vulnerability. But something else, too—something steely that appeals.

"It has been our pleasure," I assure Kaiden, and then, gesturing to the hall, I add, "Isolation has served us well for many years but has not been at the expense of success, as you see."

"You have remarkable lands here, Rowan. And nothing quite as impressive as the lab," he adds.

"Thank you. I take it that means we are in agreement?" I steer the conversation. "We

will share resources, knowledge?”

Your scientist, Willow.

Kaiden gestures for Willow to step forward, and my eyes lock on her. I expect her to look away again, but she visibly appears to steel herself. She holds my gaze for a fraction of a second before succumbing to her urge to deflect from the intensity.

“Willow and I have spoken at length,” Kaiden begins, “and if I have your assurance, alpha to alpha, that she will be treated well and is free to come and go as she pleases, as well as share information as she deems fit, then I am happy for her to stay at the lab. If she is happy to do so.”

My wolf practically preens with satisfaction. It was by no means certain that Kaiden would agree; it’s well beyond the realms of what was considered possible between our packs until only very recently, after all.

“Willow, love?” I ask, stepping slightly closer. “Are you willing?”

The question feels loaded—more so than I was expecting myself. Her eyes reach mine again, and time itself feels suspended for a moment. Centuries of longing surge within me. The ancient primal urges that I rarely tap into anymore feel very much alive at this moment, and I have to wonder if she sees it in my eyes, because she pales slightly under my gaze.

“What of her allegiance?” Noah says, my eyes spinning to him with barely concealed rage at the interruption, and he wisely takes a step back.

“What allegiance?” Kaiden asks, doubt lacing his voice.

I sigh, knowing I’ll have to deal with Noah’s flagrant disregard for propriety later.

But right now, he has forced my hand.

“Our pack rules dictate that for anyone to stay here, they must be mated to an existing pack member.” Willow frantically looks to Kaiden, and I know I’m in danger of losing control of the situation. “As a mark of respect for your pack and to assure you of our goodwill, I offer myself. Willow will be my luna.”

Shock reverberates around the room at my statement, though it pales in comparison to the shock I feel as my wolf howls in celebration. No trace of trepidation, my beasts in full agreement that this is our mate. And she looks horrified.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

I'm quite sure my brain has short-circuited as I allow Kaiden to usher me like a zombie toward a side room. In the background, I can dimly hear wolves celebrating, as though there's about to be a huge party. They howl and cheer in the recesses of my mind, but it sounds a thousand miles away, the blood rushing and thumping in my ears drowning it out.

What the hell?

Before I can verbalize it myself, Kaiden does it for me. "What the hell, Rowan? What are you playing at?" I can hear the rage in my alpha's voice as the door closes behind us. "You seriously think we'll just go along with this?"

Rowan chuckles darkly, neither rising to the bait nor mirroring Kaiden's fighting posture. I'm not sure if that will disarm the situation or escalate it at this point. I'm too concerned with my own racing heart and spinning head.

I can't be Rowan's luna. I can't be anyone's luna. I'm half-human, I don't have a wolf, I'm a nobody.

"Kaiden, this is not the trap you think it is. Calm yourself," Rowan replies, leaning against a table under a tall window. "There were concerns, and the pack expressed a desire to follow protocol. That's all this is. Protocol."

His eyes immediately flicker to mine, and the intensity is almost too much. His words do not match the emotion reflected back at me. Not at all. He's lying about something, but why would he? What does he have to gain from any of this? Dimly, I consider what will be required of me as a luna. Will he expect me to sleep with him?

I immediately blush from head to toe. Will he expect that? I've never been with a man.

I listen to the alphas going back and forth as though I'm not even here. Through the fog, I hear my name once and then twice, forcing me back to reality.

"Willow...?" Kaiden urges. "This is...a lot. Do you want to step outside while I deal with it, or do you have anything to add?"

Rowan rolls his eyes, "I'm sure Willow is capable of talking for herself, Kaiden; she knows what is at stake here. The work that must be done. This is merely a formality."

"Is it?" Kaiden replies dryly.

Rowan gives him a look that would turn a lesser wolf to ice before turning to me. "Willow, love, your thoughts?"

Struggling to process a coherent thought, I stare at them both for a second. Kaiden looks pissed off, as to be expected. All alphas hate being blindsided, especially when alliances like theirs are so new and tentative. Which begs the question, why would Rowan risk it?

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage to address him properly. "Just a formality? And if I say no?" I attempt, wanting to gauge his reaction.

He laughs lightly and lifts his arms as if to dismiss the notion. "My pack has its unique laws; I'm sure yours does, too. They must be respected. It is a formality. If you don't want to hitch yourself to me, even temporarily, I will, of course, be desperately wounded." I would roll my eyes at anyone else, but his eyes are doing that mesmerizing thing again, and I can't even look away. "My healer, Sara, will take over the research, and you are free to go. We will keep you updated, though,

naturally.”

“No.” My reply is instant. I cannot and will not be cut out of this research. The satisfaction on Rowan’s face confirms that he already knew that. “I’ll do whatever is necessary to stop the Order and prevent the hunters from hurting anyone else.”

Kaiden sighs, his rage cooled by a fraction. “That is what we all want. But as your alpha, I won’t let you be forced into anything.”

“She’s not being forced into purgatory, Kaiden. I assure you. She will be a highly esteemed guest here.” Then, turning back to me, he adds, “My guest.”

Kaiden looks at me for final confirmation, which I give with a small nod. “Fine. I will go inform the others.”

“Of course, we will conduct the brief ceremony before you head out. The storm is almost here,” Rowan tells him as he walks away, leaving us alone.

I let out the last of many breaths I’ve been holding today, unsure where to place myself and suddenly very aware that Rowan and I are alone. His presence overloads my senses at the best of times; to think we’re going to go through a mating ceremony, even if it is fake, makes the tension even thicker.

“Don’t look so worried, love,” he smoothly reassures me. “Let’s get this formality concluded, and I can show you the house before the storm hits.”

“I thought I was staying at the lab?” I stumble over my words.

He chuckles again. “I think my pack would disapprove of my luna sleeping in the lab, even if she does like to work too hard.”

How does he know I work too hard?

Perhaps the question is written all over my face because he flashes the slightest bit of fang as he smiles, “So I hear.”

I laugh nervously, “So, um, which house am I staying in?” I suspect I already know the answer, and the smirk on his handsome face confirms it.

He steps forward, closer and closer. Everything around us seems to dip and tip on its axis, and I find myself unable to look away. “Mine, Willow. I think you’ll be very comfortable there, with me. Don’t look so petrified though, love; there are plenty of spare bedrooms.”

It’s like he can read my damn mind. I realize, too late, that I have been retreating as he approached, and now my back is against the wall. Standing so close, I can feel his masculinity rolling off him in waves, and it’s both petrifying and intoxicating. His expression remains amused, yet unreadable; I can’t shake the suspicion that he’s toying with me.

In an attempt to regain my usual composure, I laugh, but it comes out more high-pitched than I would have liked. “I...”

I’m saved by Kaiden reappearing. He glances between us, seemingly ready to say something again, but I smile reassuringly, and he nods. “Your beta says they are ready to conduct the ceremony now.” Then, looking at me, he asks, “If you are sure?”

I nod, attempting to sound confident and in control of the situation. “Yes, the lab is the most important thing.”

I let Kaiden lead the way back into the main hall and enter with my head held high. I can sense a shift in the pack as all eyes fall on me. They seem incredibly happy about

the ceremony; more have piled into the hall, filling it. I can feel my cheeks burning as I'm led to the front of the hall. People smile as I pass, and I must admit, they seem friendly enough. I feel Rowan's presence close behind me, and the pack cheers as we reach the small stage area.

It's just a formality. Just a formality, I remind myself on repeat as an older man I don't recognize begins to speak about unity and allegiance. I nod and say yes when prompted, the words all blurring into one until there's a conclusion in the speech, and the crowd cheers. I nervously plaster a smile on my face and look up at Rowan. His eyes are fixed on mine, and I'm suddenly aware that he's leaning toward me.

"Sealed with a kiss, love," he says milliseconds before he brushes my cheek with a kiss. We both seem to freeze in the moment. Just as before, the world around us feels distant.

I still think he's toying with me, and I shouldn't care because my focus is the lab and my research. But just for a moment, I find myself wishing this was real. That I was his luna and this was a fairytale. Before I can even shake the thought away, the world around us swings back into focus, and the moment is lost.

The hall is jovial, and I suspect many would welcome a proper celebration of sorts, but the storm is picking up outside, and the rain lashing the windows serves as a reminder that it's best not to linger.

Kaiden steps forward, his brow furrowed. "I'm not looking forward to explaining this to my mate. Make sure you call her."

I laugh. "I think she'll understand. It is just a formality, and this research is incredibly important to her, too. To all of us."

He nods solemnly. "Yes, of course. Keep me informed at all times."

I nod as he walks away, but it occurs to me that I have pledged allegiance to the Nicholson pack, yet am still loyal to Kaiden as my alpha. Do I have two alphas now? That's not technically possible. Lost in thought, I watch everyone start to leave.

I suddenly feel Rowan's warmth next to me, and his hand slips into my mind as though it belongs. "Come, love, let us retreat to the warmth of our home. I'll have someone retrieve your bags."

Our home.

I frown, not wanting to consider the implications. But I can't help but ask anyway. "Rowan..." I begin, looking up at him, my heart hammering in my chest.

He looks down at me with a disarmingly soft smile, his eyes glowing as he gently tugs me toward the exit. "Don't overthink it, love. The storm is here, and we have a long night ahead of us and plenty of time for questions."

I want to believe him, but I can't help but feel like this is all a dream that will shatter at any moment. As we step outside, the rain is nearly horizontal, the wind nearly gale force. It feels like we're being pushed by it. The walk to his cabin is thankfully short, as it is just across from the hall, but it feels long as my mind races. Is he really just waiting for me to come around? Or does he expect more?

The cabin sits nestled against the forest, its glass walls blending in with the trees that surround it. It's impressive yet warm and inviting. Rowan leads me inside, and a few lights come on automatically, revealing a modern interior with steel beams and glass doors. There are wooden floors and furniture, and a large fireplace crackling in the corner that was clearly lit earlier in the day still warms the room with a strong smell of woodsmoke. It's cozy despite the storm raging outside.

He turns to me and flashes his trademark fanged grin again. "What do you think?"

His voice is smooth and inviting as he almost circles me, watching me take in my new surroundings.

I walk around slowly, taking in every detail of this place that seems so contradictory yet somehow harmonious. Artifacts from ages past litter the home, some even older than this country itself. They seem out of place among the modern furnishings but don't feel out of place around Rowan.

I can feel his power here. It's palpable.

Suddenly, a knock on the door breaks my train of thought. Rowan walks over and opens the door to reveal Rian, one of his betas who will be working at the lab, holding my bags. He nods his thanks and closes the door before turning back to me. "Now," he says, gently taking my hand, "let me show you to your room."

He leads me up the beautifully carved staircase and into a spacious bedroom with a king-sized bed draped in red velvet, which looks soft and inviting after the long day. Large windows along one wall look out over the forest beyond, but they're frosted with condensation from the storm outside. The room is warm and homely, with soft lighting casting shadows across the walls covered in paintings of wolves in various stages of life—family, perhaps?

"This will be your room," he says softly, releasing my hand as he turns to face me fully. "Feel free to make yourself at home." He lingers for a moment, almost as if he intends to say more, but then changes his mind, and with a nod, he's gone, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again.

I walk over to the window and press my palm against it, feeling the cold glass against my skin as I watch the storm rage on outside. It's mesmerizing, terrifying, and beautiful all at once. What am I getting myself into?

After finding all the drawers and wardrobes empty, I get to work putting the few things I brought with me away. The last item I unpack is the small picture of my parents I kept in the lab to remind me why this matters so much—not just my family, but everyone's, and the packs themselves. I was going to put the picture up in the new lab, but somehow, having them here with me feels better. Perhaps I need the comfort more than I thought.

Wearily, I try to sleep that night, but sleep doesn't come easily between the storm and my racing mind. Usually, I'm kept awake by ideas for more research, but tonight, all I can think about is Rowan. Will he come back into my room? Do I want him to?

I finally feel myself drifting into a deep slumber. My dream is strangely realistic, and I'm back at the window, looking out at the storm. Rowan appears behind me, and I reach out to him, longing for his touch. He steps closer until there's barely any space between us. Our breathing becomes ragged as he leans down and whispers against my ear, "You're safe with me."

He kisses my neck softly before trailing his lips down towards my collarbone. The sensation sends shivers down my spine, making me gasp softly. His hand finds its way to mine and intertwines our fingers as he guides it up under his shirt, over his warm skin...

Suddenly, I jolt awake with a gasp, tears streaming down my face from the intensity of the dream. My heart is pounding so hard it feels like it might burst out of my chest. With trembling fingers, I reach between my legs only to find myself already wet with desire—a new experience for me. I bite back a moan as I start to touch myself, trying desperately to relieve some of this ache inside me.

Rowan's voice echoes in my mind: "You're safe with me."

It feels so real, like he's here, but I'm completely alone.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

It feels like the day after the night before, but without the fun, I think to myself as I flip another crepe. I haven't made these in years or even decades, but something about this morning called for crepes.

Perhaps it's my complete lack of sleep. Entirely my own fault, of course. I live with two beasts inside my soul, one admittedly much quieter than the other. But when he wants something, he's very persistent. Considering my wolf was very much in agreement over wanting to take my mate properly, I did the only thing that wouldn't blow this situation up and left the girl alone.

However, the darker part of my vampiric nature couldn't resist having a small taste. Able to tap into a person's subconscious mind easily if there's a connection, I allowed myself to take a quick peek. That's all it was supposed to be. But Willow's all but welcomed me in and rolled out the red carpet. I was able to manifest within her sleep state, touch her soft skin...I was just warming up when she'd flung me out, regaining her consciousness.

If that wasn't bad enough, due to my acute hearing, I was then forced to listen as she pleased herself down the hall. At one point, I had stormed to the door, ready to go take her myself, but having tasted her mind, I'd also tasted her innocence. If I had taken her last night, it would have been vicious. My beasts are not gentle, and she isn't ready for what that means. I can't lose her on day one. Not for my own sake, our pack alliance, or the research.

So, I did the only thing I could and took a cold shower. Which didn't work to calm my urges as I imagined her curvy body sinking to the floor in front of me, her large breasts within my reach, her eyes dark with desire. My vampiric and shifter beasts

desperate to lay their claim to her, I found some release, but it was hollow, as I suspect it will be until I can sink into her delicious body for the first time.

And now I'm making crepes. Proper ones. The sort I enjoyed in the streets of Paris many years ago—I pause, my hand on the spatula, mentally counting the years—perhaps a century ago.

I have always had a sweet tooth but haven't indulged in proper crepes since my last visit to the Old World. I wonder why I haven't indulged in many of my old pursuits in a very long time; perhaps that's why my beasts are so restless with Willow so close. On that front, crepes will have to suffice today.

Just as I'm beginning to think I might have to wake my young bride, I hear footsteps in the hall upstairs, and then the sound of her soft steps down the stairs. As she walks in, I add the final crepe to the stack and place them on the kitchen island. I see her eyes dart between me and the food almost suspiciously, as though crepes were the last thing she expected to see this morning. I can't help but chuckle at the scene.

"I know shifters are more inclined to a heartier breakfast, but I have rather a sweet tooth."

She freezes for a moment, her auburn hair falling in freshly washed waves over her shoulders and her pale skin contrasting beautifully against the black turtleneck she's wearing. My eyes are drawn to her ample breasts straining against the fabric, and an image from my vision last night appears unbidden in my mind. When my gaze flickers back to her face, her cheeks are burning again. I find that I like her even more flushed.

She approaches the island cautiously, and I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes. She has no idea how much restraint I've shown already.

“Wow,” she breathes. She picks up a crepe and takes a tentative bite, her eyes closing in pure bliss. “Mmm,” she moans around the mouthful of food, and I can’t help but smile as I watch her. “This is...” she trails off and finishes the bite before continuing, “this is incredible.”

We eat in an almost companionable silence for a few moments until she clears her throat. “I think you mentioned you spent time in the Old World? Is that where you learned to make these so well?” She says, gesturing to the crepes.

I nod, watching as she devours the second crepe and consider my next move. “Oui. I was actually born in France.”

She looks momentarily surprised at my confession and seems to consider her response thoughtfully as she chews. “That’s where Monet was from, too. That explains the picture, perhaps?” she says, pointing at a painting on the wall behind me. It’s one of his famous waterlily paintings, and I’m glad she obviously likes it, too.

I turn to face it with a small smile. “Ah yes, he’s one of my favorites from that era.” I wander over to the painting, taking in the vibrant colors and the soft brushstrokes. “This one is actually quite old, from his late career.”

She joins me, leaning in to get a better look at it. “Wow,” she breathes again, this time sounding genuinely impressed. “I can’t believe something like this is just hanging on your wall. These are usually in galleries. How old is it?”

Her question catches me off guard slightly. She seems so young—she couldn’t possibly be that interested in art history. But her earnestness disarms me, so I decide to play along. “It was painted around 1916 or so,” I tell her.

“That’s amazing!” She exclaims, looking at me with wide eyes. “And how old...are you?”

The sneaky question hangs in the air between us for a moment, and I see amusement and intrigue dancing in her eyes. I know what she's asking; she can't help herself. She is a scientist, after all. But I do not intend to reveal all my secrets so readily. So instead, I divert her attention back to herself. "You haven't told me much about your parents or your journey here," I say casually as I pour us both some fresh orange juice from a pitcher on the countertop.

She sighs deeply before answering, clearly not wanting to dwell on her past, either. "They were killed by hunters when I was young," she begins reluctantly before taking a sip of juice and looking away.

"There is too much tragedy in this world," I say, and she looks back at me, almost trying to gauge my sincerity. "I can understand why our research into stopping the hunters means so much to you. Speaking of which, we should get you to your lab."

She immediately looks grateful for the change in conversation, her eyes lighting up at the mention of the new lab. And for that, I'm glad Willow's research here is vital to bringing down the Order, understanding the Volva magic, and stopping the hunters before they strike again.

"Erm, before we go," she begins wearily, and I wait for her to continue. "No one is going to think of me as their luna are they? I have friends who are lunas and they have a very different, erm, role. It's not like this. It's not a...formality, as you said."

Silence falls for a moment as I consider my response. A wash of disappointment threatens as she clearly shies from the title of being my luna. As a half-human, perhaps she doesn't feel the mate bond. "I'm sure your new colleagues at the lab will be more interested in your mind, love." I say lightly, adding, "I would never kiss and tell anyway, even if you did want to thank me for such a continental treat for breakfast."

I can't help but step closer, enjoying how her eyes widen and her heart beats out of control. She appears reluctant to be my luna, but her physical response remains the same as that of our dreamscape. She wants me, and that, I can work with. For now, anyway. Suddenly, her eyes clear, and she slips to the side, collecting the breakfast plates.

"Obviously, thank you for breakfast," she stammers, "I just wanted to clear up any pack misunderstanding. I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"Oh, you could never." I chuckle.

Her presence in my home is turning out to be a torturous bonus for me. As I watch her clearing the plates, the sunlight dancing over her fiery hair, illuminating her beautiful skin, my thoughts return to the frustrations of last night, and I can't help wondering if her proximity is a bonus or a curse. I suspect if my beasts don't get their mate soon, it will become a curse.

Willow seems surprised that her team will be assembled at the lab when we arrive. I'm not, as I had instructed Rian to have the lab ready to go by this morning; the rest of the unpacking is complete, and the lab stands ready. Kaiden arranged for the rest of the samples to be brought with them yesterday, so Willow has everything she needs to get started properly today.

I stand back as the team introduces themselves and listen to Willow outline her research. If I wasn't impressed before, I am now. Her intelligence and poise in discussing the breadth of her knowledge is simply breathtaking.

Their interest in their new luna is clear, but she appears oblivious to the role's gravitas. After our slightly disappointing conversation this morning, it's clear she still thinks that aspect of our deal is just a formality.

Our medic, Sara, steps forward. “It is a pleasure to be working on such important research with our new luna,” she smiles.

I see Willow’s eyes flicker to me as if waiting for me to interject and play the situation down, but that’s the last thing I intend to do. “We are proud that our luna is playing such a crucial role in this fight against the Order and those who threaten our way of life. I know you will all welcome my mate and help her in any way you can.”

The small crowd claps and cheers as I wrap my arm around Willow’s shoulders, enjoying the way her small body feels against mine. As the group disperses, I follow Willow into her new office and close the door. I expect a little pushback, but when she turns to me, she looks genuinely angry.

“What was that? Your mate?” she glares. “Everyone knows it was just a formality for assurance, right? We don’t want everyone thinking we’re actually proper mates. Do you?”

My wolf bristles at her words, but I try to school my features as I see something reflected in her own eyes. A searching perhaps, “And why not, love? Do you find me so repulsive?” Her cheeks blush the most furious shade of red I’ve seen yet, and I chuckle, “No, I didn’t think so.”

I see a mixture of shock and mortification flit across her features as she tries to regain her composure. I shouldn’t enjoy teasing her so much, but I can’t seem to help myself; I simply love getting a reaction from her.

“You really are something else, aren’t you? You’re just playing with me. I’m here for the research. Your pack should know that.” Her words are icy, and I’d almost believe her if she didn’t bite down on her lip at the end. I’ll be damned if it isn’t the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I’m not sure why she thinks I’m playing with her though.

I clear my throat. "I have even arranged for the pack to start giving blood samples. I know you've been desperate to get your hands on my DNA, after all."

She relaxes slightly and gives me what appears to be a genuine smile, "That really is great news; the more data, the better the research."

"Fabulous," I tell her, taking off my jacket and starting to undo the buttons on my shirt, "You can do mine now; I know you're dying to look under the hood, so to speak."

"What are you doing? And why are you taking your shirt off?" she practically squeaks. "Rian's the technician. He can do it."

I pause for a moment, flashing her one of my best smiles before adding. "I'm not creasing this linen by scrunching it up. And I don't want Rian touching me. I have a luna now."

She rolls her eyes, but she doesn't look away as I shrug off my shirt. I'm not even sure she realizes she's doing it, but I feel her desire rolling off her in waves. It's intoxicating, and I find myself leaning in closer to her.

"Will you take my blood? Please," I ask softly, holding out my arm.

Her cheeks are flushed again as she looks at it, clearly struggling with her own intentions. But eventually, she takes a deep breath and nods. Her hands tremble slightly as they brush against my skin, tying the tourniquet and holding my arm firmly, and I can feel the heat radiating off her body. The scent of her arousal is overwhelming, making it difficult for me to think straight.

"Rowan," she whispers, her voice hoarse with desire as she uses the needle to expertly take a small vial of blood expertly from my vein.

The sensation is strangely euphoric for my vampiric beast, unlike anything I've ever experienced before. As she moves to put the vial away, I reach out and gently grasp her wrist, pulling her back toward me. Her heart races under my touch, and I can feel the softness of her breasts pressed against my chest as I lean down to whisper against her neck. "I admit," I murmur against her skin, "that was more enjoyable than I expected. I don't know why I resisted so long."

Just then, there's a knock on the door, and Rian pokes his head in. "Sorry to interrupt," he says sheepishly, "but the team is having a meeting about the samples."

Willow pulls away from me suddenly, blushing even more furiously than before. She clears her throat and addresses Rian, "Of course, I'm coming."

Rian clearly senses the charged atmosphere in the room and looks between us. Rian is one of the few members of the Nicholson pack whose vampire is also quite dominant, and the mix of blood and sensuality in the room will activate his senses. "Rian, walk with me for a moment," I tell him, pulling my shirt back on as Willow practically flees the room.

He follows me as I storm through the lab's entrance, allowing the bracing cool air to hit my body even as I finish buttoning my shirt. I turn slightly, and Rian is watching me with a smirk on his face.

"Did I interrupt?" he asks.

"What. Do. You. Think?" I snap, but even my anger doesn't wipe the satisfied smirk from his face. I step closer to him, and for the first time, doubt enters his eyes.

"I apologize, of course." He bows his head slightly but still chuckles. "I hope she's taking everyone's blood if this is the effect, though."

Seeing red, I punch him before I even know what I'm doing. My wolf surges into the fight before I can pull him back. Rian hits the ground and stays down, his hands raised in surrender. "You will treat your luna with respect. You will treat me with respect. Do not make me any enemy today."

Rian is the son of one of my oldest betas. A friend was killed by hunters, and Rian took his place. He has my automatic respect, but my wolf and vampire are steeling for a fight. Willow's proximity and the intimacy of the blood draw have created a perfect storm of possessiveness.

"I understand, Rowan," he replies, far more seriously than I ever known him to. "You have my word. I understand now."

I nod, and he backs away, returning to the lab.

He may understand now, but I'm not sure I do. I haven't fought over a girl in centuries, if, indeed, ever before.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

Setting up the new lab takes longer than I imagined. I thought once the boxes were unpacked and my files were in order, we'd be able to get started properly. But it turns out that too much of a good thing can actually slow progress. The new PCR machines that Rowan had installed are incredible, and the genetic sequencing will be a lot faster...once we know how the machines work. It's not like we can bring in outside help, so there has been a lot of trial and error and false starts over the last two weeks.

The technicians, including Rian, have been outstanding, though. Talking things through with Forrest on the phone has helped me troubleshoot. I've also had more time to research the Volva in Rowan's extensive library with help from his medic, Sara. It's hard when we don't always know what we're looking for, but already, I feel like we're making progress.

Sara is a lot like me. She seems to enjoy working with facts and takes comfort in finding order in chaos. Her bedside manner is probably a lot better than mine, though, and I can see how popular the pretty brunette doctor is in her pack. But, although she's been very keen to help, I don't miss the way she steers our conversations and research away from specifics about their pack. At first, I reasoned it was because we had so much to get through, but now I see it's a pattern.

I have also noticed that there is a delay between samples being processed and me receiving the data. At first, I thought people might not be recording the data properly, but then I realized only the initial Nicholson pack data had taken a while to upload. I still don't even have a clear picture of where the pack elders are even from or family structures. When I mentioned it to Rian, he looked decidedly sheepish and made several excuses that all rang false. I didn't call him out at the time because I didn't want it to appear as though I was looking to cause problems, but it's clear the pack is

either slow to trust me or deliberately trying to withhold information. Which only intrigues me more.

When I mentioned Sara's evasiveness and the data issue to Rowan over dinner, he dismissed it as the pack simply needing more time to trust me; that has been his answer to everything when I've raised questions, which I don't get much chance to do, as I hardly see him. That's not quite true—he's always near. I can feel it when he's near. I turn and find him watching me from the gallery in the lab or his shadow passing an open door. But the only time I'm with him is when we share dinner in the evening. He seems to guide the conversation, steering me through tales about the pack's history and his travels. A sprinkling of information keeps me intrigued, and they sometimes make me laugh but tell me nothing of substance. He continues to tease me, emotionally and intellectually—it's like a dance, and I don't know which way is up. Then, as soon as we're finished, he goes for a run in the forest for hours. I don't even know when he returns, and he's gone again by morning. There have been no more crepes.

That's also not quite true, though. It's not the only time I'm with him. I dream of him every night. I think I did before I even got here, but now it's getting out of hand. I've never been with a man before, yet the dreams are so realistic that I genuinely feel like I can touch him. I close my eyes and wait for him to appear. I know it's not real, and seeing him during the day makes me cringe and think of how my mind behaves at night.

If he only knew.

I can't even ask anyone if this is normal. I wouldn't even know where to begin. I've had dreams before, but these are different; they feel too tangible. I've even started researching whether a Volva's dreams mean anything. But so far, no leads. I feel a bit ridiculous, even considering that my horny dreams mean anything more than being infatuated with Rowan. It's even more ridiculous when he clearly doesn't feel the

same—he flirts, but I’m sure he’s simply teasing me. I’m small, I have no wolf, I’m curvy...and awkward at times, while he is a mountain of a man, formidable, exuding sex appeal that makes my lower stomach clench every time he turns his magnetic gaze directly toward me.

I am totally lost in thought when I hear the PCR machine begin uploading.

“Fingers crossed,” I mutter, hoping I’ve finally gotten the uploading sequence right after multiple attempts.

I spin my chair back to the screen and move one of the ancient texts off the keyboard, almost knocking my coffee all over my files. I steady it, rolling my eyes, knowing I’m only being clumsy because my sleep has been so interrupted, and my brain seems hardwired to only think about Rowan.

“Did it work?” Rian asks hopefully, breaking into my thoughts from the doorway. “I heard the PCR finish.”

As much as I miss working with Forrest, I know he’s needed back at the pack. Rian is slowly growing on me as a lab partner. “I’m just bringing up the results now; if this hasn’t worked, then I don’t know where we’re going wr...yes!”

The Nicholson pack raw DNA sequencing fills the screen. Once added to the other pack data, we’ll have the most complete overview of shifter and Volva DNA that has ever been studied.

“Amazing,” Rian marvels. “Once I go through this and organize it for you, we’ll really be getting somewhere; it’s fascinating, really. I’ve got to hand it to you. I thought this was going to take much longer. I’ll go get Rowan.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s busy. There’s no need to get him. I can tell him later.” I ramble,

looking around my messy office.

Rian's already half out the door but calls back, "He's already here."

Of course, he is. I groan slightly, lifting some of the books off the floor and trying to arrange them on the desk properly. I've only had the office for two weeks, and it already looks like a mess. That's just how I work, though. The clinic is immaculate, but my thinking space is a hot mess.

Rowan walks into my office, looking even more handsome than usual in his buttoned shirt with rolled up sleeves and dark jeans. His eyes briefly rove over me before settling on the screen.

"It worked?" he asks, clearly impressed.

"It did," I answer, trying to ignore the warmth spreading through my body at his praise. "It's a big step forward." I glance at him from the corner of my eye as he leans casually against the doorframe, and taking in the sight of him makes my breath catch. "How long have you been here?"

He shrugs nonchalantly, "An hour or so. Some of the men sustained injuries during our drills this morning, they're keeping Sara busy." His gaze lingers on me for a moment too long before moving back to the screen.

I try not to let his stare affect me too much; it only makes me more aware of how close he is as he steps further into the room. The air between us feels charged with something electric, like static before a storm. Despite my awareness of his proximity, I try to continue our conversation.

He listens with genuine interest on his face as I explain how we finally got the machine working. "It's fascinating," he says thoughtfully, running a hand through his

hair in frustration, as I've noticed he often does when deep in thought. "But there are still so many unanswered questions."

"I know," I agree softly, sitting down on my desk chair again and gesturing for him to take a seat if he wants. "That's why we need to cross reference this new information with the DNA we've already looked at. Also, these machines allow us to break down the previous data even more."

He looks thoughtful, almost concerned. "And what will that show us?"

"To humans, the DNA would simply look wrong. But already, we're isolating the shifter strands. As humans look for weaknesses in the DNA that indicate sickness, for example, and trial drugs, we're able to test protection spells and healing magic. Vital in any future battle against the Order."

Rowan smiles, and it lights up his whole damn face. He claps his hands together. "Fantastic work. I had no doubts, my dear."

I try to accept the compliment with grace, but I feel the room growing hotter as the moment lingers; his eyes remain fixed on me, and my cheeks involuntarily flush. I hear someone clear their throat and suddenly remember Rian is still here, making my face burn even brighter.

"Willow has been working incredibly hard on this. We simply wouldn't be where we are without her." he says sincerely. "I will be organizing all the data for her, so we'll know more soon."

Rowan nods at his beta. "I'm sure she will appreciate the help. I hear working too hard is a problem for Willow, no?" I begin to reply, but he raises his hand. "Meet me at the front in ten minutes. Dress warmly—we are expecting more snow tonight."

Ten minutes. “Oh no, thank you, but I really should wait for the rest of the sequencing to be done.”

“And how long will this take?” Rowan asks Rian, not me.

“For the rest of the night. I think the previous tests will load now,” he replies.

Rowan pauses at the door, “Rian will oversee the sequencing. You will meet me at the front.” With that, he’s gone.

I turn and glare at Rian. “You could have stood up for me; I need to be here for the PCR.”

He chuckles for a moment and holds up his hands, “No, you just want to be here for it. I will call if anything goes wrong. But if you think I’m going to go against my alpha to avoid you getting a break, you’re wrong.” He pauses and then adds, “You actually do work a bit too hard.”

He sounds like Kit and Forrest rolled into one. I mutter as I take off my lab coat and pull on my outdoor coat over my thin sweater. “Call me immediately if it starts making that weird noise again, okay?”

After he does a little mock salute, I roll my eyes at him and head toward the main doors. I can see Rowan standing outside, a very gentle snowfall fluttering around him, making his skin even more luminescent than usual against his dark features. Not sure he’s seen me yet, I watch him for a moment. He’s watching something seemingly high on the treeline, but even with my acute senses, I can’t tell what. After a moment, a bald eagle comes into view, gliding majestically across the valley.

How did you see that? I wonder. Sure, some shifters have slightly better vision than others. But he was tracking it with his eyes long before I saw it. I mentally add it to

the growing list of extra abilities Rowan seems to have. I turn my attention away from the eagle to find those eyes now staring at me. Blushing yet again, I realize it must appear I've been watching him. I take a deep breath and step out into the cold air.

"S-sorry, have you been waiting long?" I ask, not mentioning the eagle.

He surprises me by offering his arm, which I take slowly, instantly warmed by the heat radiating from his large frame.

"Not at all, love," he replies as we begin walking down the path at the side of the building, "Rian is not the first to agree you work too hard. I bet you haven't even seen our lake yet?"

I shake my head, looking around in wonder as the path immediately dips into the forest, and the lab fades from view. The snow settling on the trees and ground reminds me of something from a fairytale.

We continue in silence for a few minutes, the only sounds being our footsteps crunching softly on the snow and the occasional rustle of wildlife. I feel Rowan's arm tighten around me as we step out onto a clearing, and I gasp at the sight before me.

The lake is frozen but not white like everything else. It's a deep aqua-blue color, almost mirror-like, perfectly reflecting the stars that are just emerging above. Glancing over my shoulder, I can see the glow of the town square lights behind us, but here, we feel very much alone.

I shiver, and Rowan pulls me closer to him, brushing my hair from my cheek. His touch sends shivers down my spine despite the chill in the air.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" he whispers, looking down at me.

I find myself nodding, but something about his touch reminds me of one of my dreams. No, it's not one of my dreams; it's too real. This is different. This suddenly feels like drowning. I don't understand why, but I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins, my heart pounding in my chest.

But before I can fully process these feelings, Rowan leans down and presses his lips to mine. The world around me fades away as I'm lost in the taste of him and the way his body feels. His hands find their way into my hair, tangling gently in the long strands and pulling me closer still.

And suddenly, everything changes. The cold air disappears, replaced by a heat that seeps into my bones and makes me melt into him completely. The sounds of crunching snow and rustling leaves are replaced by nothing but our heavy breathing, and I swear I can hear the delicate snowflakes settling on our clothes.

It's as if we're the only two people in existence, trapped in our own perfect snow globe. His kiss deepens, his tongue teasing at my lips before slipping inside my mouth. This ignites a fire deep within me that I have never experienced before, and I cling to him desperately.

I feel lost to the sensations that seem to be overwhelming me. An alarm sounds from somewhere deep inside, my dream state mixing with reality, and I'm suddenly fighting to the surface.

Pushing him away, I seem to take him by surprise, and he steps back. His hair is ruffled, making him look devilishly handsome, and I realize my hands have explored as much as his. I didn't even realize.

"Don't toy with me," I say, turning away.

He goes to say something, and for the first time, I see an unmistakable glint of a fang.

Not a shifter's canine, I'm sure of it. My heart is pounding in my chest as I take a step back. He watches silently as I turn and rush back toward the lights of the town.

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I was a fucking idiot.

Left standing by the lake, panting after her like a horny teenager as she ran from me. I showed my hand and blew it.

I don't...didn't...believe my mate was out there. I've been alive far too long. I honestly believed I would have found her by now if that were in the cards for me. I was resigned. Bored from centuries of chasing meaningless encounters with women who meant nothing to my wolf, I had found a future here with my pack, protecting them and finding solace in watching them flourish.

Until they didn't. It is frustrating to discover that our problems were derived from our isolation, but it also doesn't negate the fact that we must still be more careful than other packs. Our lineage is unique, and although diluted through the centuries, most of the Nicholson pack still retains their shifter-vampire hybrid blood.

To say our ancient pairing is unique or was frowned upon is an understatement. To the best of my knowledge, pure vampires don't even exist anymore, hunted to extinction by those who were scared of their power. Ironical that being hunted is something I have in common with my ancestors.

The pack was built over centuries, some traveling with me from the Old World and others coming together while looking for refuge. I am the alpha who understands their unique gifts and strengths. All are descended from the shifter-vampire hybrids, but none are as purely as I am. My father was a shifter, my mother a vampire—so long ago, I can barely remember their faces. They committed the ultimate sin of falling in love and paid the ultimate price. All so long ago now.

If the Order is trying to destroy shifters, I can only imagine how they would feel about our vampire lineage. I understand my pack's reluctance to let outsiders in and to allow our DNA to be tested, though, as I have explained to them, Willow cannot identify vampire DNA when she doesn't know what that looks like. So, unless we want our secret to be known, she will assume that any anomalies are a variant of shifter DNA.

That being said, she is an astonishingly clever young woman, and although she may not want to believe what she sees, I know she saw my fangs last night. The mind protects itself from what it does not want to understand, but I sense that a scientist like Willow cannot help but dig a little deeper.

Which is why I'm avoiding her, giving her some time to rationalize what she saw. I even forced myself not to visit her in her dreams last night, which was more difficult than I could have imagined. I have become surprisingly used to our nightly interactions. I could even feel her subconscious mind searching for me. I've never known such personal restraint.

Our kiss and the way she unknowingly reaches through her dreams for me confirms my suspicions, though. She is my mate.

The way she kissed me back before physically fleeing from me tells me that she knows it, too, at least on some level.

A knock on my study door pulls me from my thoughts. My beta, Griffen, appears in the doorway. "Alone?" I ask, looking behind him for Rian.

Griffen laughs and sits down on the worn leather chair opposite my desk. "Yes, your little spy Rian has his hands full at the lab today. Apparently, your scientist is working them harder than usual."

I school my expression, but Griffen has clearly known me for too long; he doesn't miss a beat. "Any particular reason you wanted Rian's update early?"

Rian is a good lab technician, working his way up to beta after his father was fatally injured and wanted the role to pass to his son. So far, he has proven his worth, even if he did piss me off the other day. His job is to help Willow at the lab but also ensure any sensitive information or results are filtered through me if necessary. It shouldn't affect Willow's progress, but it does keep the pack elders satisfied.

I sigh, leaning back in my best display of nonchalance. "I know there has been much progress since yesterday. I wanted an update away from the lab."

Griffen looks thoughtful for a moment. "He says there's nothing more to say, not yet. The results all need to be analyzed first. Besides, he seemed a little reluctant to come. Why might that be?" Amusement flickers over Griffen's face, and I realize my old friend is merely fishing. "Nothing to do with you punching him outside the lab recently?"

I roll my eyes. "He's young and annoyed his alpha. I'm sure he's over it."

"He annoyed you about the scientist," Griffen continues pushing, laughing.

"If you already know so much of the story, why are you prying?" I snap.

Griffen stops laughing. "Because I'm trying to understand what is stopping my old friend from just taking what he wants. What you want is clear to anyone who knows you as well as I do."

I consider lying or telling him to get out, but those words die on my tongue. "It's not so simple, old friend. We are being hunted. Our pack is under threat. Possibly at even greater threat if our origins are discovered, yet we also need the help of our new

allies. I cannot turn away from the other alphas; they need us as much as we need them, but I cannot trust, either...”

Griffen puts his hands up to stop my growing list of reasons, “Enough, Rowan. All these things are true, but the heart wants what the heart wants, okay?”

I scoff, watching him stand. “And you would know all about it? What does your heart want, Griffen?”

I regret my words as soon as they’re out, knowing full well he’s picturing the witch he left on that Italian shoreline nearly three centuries ago. Griffen simply sighs, saying, “Only the thing I can’t have. Don’t be me, Rowan.”

We stare at each other for a moment before I nod once, and seemingly satisfied, he heads out. I open the pack accounts that require my attention but quickly turn away from them again, lost in thoughts of Griffen and his witch; he was so sure she was his mate but knew the pack wouldn’t accept her. How different would that situation be now, with all that we have learned?

I stare into the fire, musing on pack history and ancient battles for far too long. So long, that I’m surprised when I hear the sound of the door gently opening and closing. It’s her, my mate. I already know because my possessive beasts have stirred. Part of me doesn’t know why I don’t just tell her she’s genuinely my mate and take her. I’ve been alone so long; it feels almost other-worldly to consider letting someone in. The risk of her rejecting me—I’ve seen what that has done to Griffen. But ultimately, I’m not sure my beasts can be held back much longer.

Stepping into the hall, I see her taking her winter coat off. It’s been snowing again, and even on the short walk from the lab, snowflakes have settled in her beautiful auburn hair, looking like tiny jewels under the soft lights. Her shoulders look tense, and she whips around to face me, obviously sensing my presence, too.

“I, um, didn’t see you this morning,” she says tentatively.

I step forward and take the coat from her to hang with the others. “The pack keeps me busy,” I lie easily, not offering the truth that I couldn’t face her after she ran off.

“Well, at least let me make dinner,” she says, walking toward the kitchen. I follow and find her rummaging through the cupboards. She’s made dinner a few times for us and is slowly figuring out where everything is. I watch for a moment before pouring us both a glass of the Merlot she favors. She takes the glass from me, avoiding eye contact.

“And how was the lab today? Are there any developments?” I offer.

She pauses with her hand on one of the saucepans, “Um, Rian was helping with some of the preliminary results. There are some surprises, but Rian didn’t seem to be...as surprised.” I school my expression as she continues, “He mentioned that because many of your pack originate from the Old World, you must have differences. I wish we had data to confirm that, it’s almost frustrating that packs have never done this before or recorded anything if they have.”

“I suppose he might be right—makes sense,” I say slowly, setting some plates on the island. “And what do you think of these differences?”

I can see the conflict on her beautiful features before she speaks, the slight bite on her lip she does when she’s nervous. Why do I get such a thrill from making her nervous? I step closer so she’s forced to look up at me.

If I didn’t know before we kissed, I do now. Her innocence is palpable. And I must really be a monster because the knowledge that she is untouched only excites me.

“I see some. I suspect your sight is even greater than other shifters. You see things

dif-differently,” she stutters slightly under my gaze. “I think you feel different.”

“Mmm, do you think I feel different to everyone else, or just you?” I ask, resting my hand on the counter behind her so her back is forced against it. “How do I feel?”

Her pupils dilate as I hold her gaze, her heart beating a crazy rhythm against my chest. I know I’m testing her despite how badly it went last night, and I wonder how she will respond. Does she feel the mate bond at all?

“I feel you at night. You don’t toy with me then,” she whispers, and my beasts howl in delight. “But not last night. Where were you?”

“Ah, you missed me, love?” I hum in satisfaction, my other hand moving to her hip.

Her eyes flare at my semi-confession. Will she ask me about the dreams? Will she demand answers? Agonizing silence stretches, and my cock feels painfully hard as I try not to scare her away by pressing it against her.

Finally, she nods, and I can take no more waiting. I crash my lips against hers. If last night was gentle and testing, this is all fire.

My tongue sweeps into her mouth, tasting her deeply as I press her against the counter.

Her soft moans fill my ears like music, and I feel a purr rumble from my chest. Her taste is addictive, and I can’t get enough. She responds to my kiss with an equal fervor, her hands clutching my hair, pulling me closer. But there's still a part of me that needs to be careful. Gently, I break the kiss and step back, running my thumb over her lower lip.

“Are you ready for more?” I ask, my voice rough from our kisses. She nods, eyes

glassy with desire, and I can see she wants this as much as I do.

This time, I can't hold back.

I lift her effortlessly so she's sitting on the countertop, legs spread slightly and her dress bunched up. My eyes can't help but trace the line of her thighs to where she's already wet for me. I can feel my wolf smiling at this development. She grabs my shirt as I lean down and taste her neck, nipping softly before kissing a trail down to her collarbone. Her breath hitches, and I know she likes it.

Slowly, so slowly, I push aside her panties and take in a sharp breath at the sight of her. She's perfect. Bending down in front of her, I run my tongue around her entrance, tasting her for the first time and finding myself addicted to her flavor. Her hips jerk forward, seeking more contact, and I smile against her skin.

"Shh, love," I soothe. "I've got you."

Using one finger to stretch her slowly, I watch as she closes her eyes in blissful agony while another finger teases her entrance. She gasps when I finally breach her tightness with my tongue, licking and sucking until she cries out my name. I did this in our dreamscape, but nothing could have prepared me for reality.

Her walls clench around my fingers as she comes undone beneath me, legs shaking and a muffled cry escaping her lips. I look up at her, eyes closed in ecstasy, and know that this is it. This is what I've been waiting for. She's mine now, and I won't let go.

Pulling away, I give her time to recover while I position myself between her legs. I rub my cock over her wet entrance, ready to take her. I lift her chin and force her to look at me. "Are you sure, love? You have to tell me."

Her beautiful eyes flutter open, dark with desire. She nods, "Yes, Rowan. I need this.

Please...” She bites her bottom lip as I push inside, taking care not to hurt her but determined to claim every inch of her. She’s so much tighter than I expected, confirming my suspicions.

I rest my head against hers. “Love, have you been with a man before?” She shakes her head, gripping my shirt. I know I need to be careful, but damn, if the knowledge that I’m her first doesn’t fill me with anticipation. “I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

She gasps as I fill her completely, both of us adjusting to the sensation of being so joined. Her pain mixes with pleasure in her eyes, and I lean down to kiss the sting from them.

“You’re doing great,” I murmur against her lips before starting a slow, steady rhythm that has us both moaning in no time.

Her taste is on my tongue with each thrust, and the sounds of skin slapping against skin fill the room as her amazing breasts rest against my chest. Although tentative at first, she wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me closer as we move together like we were made for this moment. And maybe we were. The dreamscapes were like foreplay, and now the bond grows stronger with each agonizing thrust of pleasure.

The scent of sex fills the air around us, making my beasts howl in approval from deep within me. They want more, impossibly more. I lean back, admiring her body as I reach my hand between us to rub circles around her hard clit. She bucks beneath me, and I feel her body rising to the precipice. Longing to join her there, I flick her clit until she screams, coming apart in my arms.

I swallow our screams with a kiss, using one hand to hold her in place as I pump my load deep into her body. I keep her soft body pressed firmly against mine as our breathing returns to normal. At once, I feel guilty. I took my virgin mate in the kitchen, half-clothed like a horny teenager.

“Apologies, love,” I whisper against her hair, smoothing it out of her face. “I intended for that to be more romantic. Are you okay?”

She nods into the palm of my hand as I cup her face. “W-why was that just like the dreams?” she whispers.

I sigh, knowing our shifter nature cannot explain our dreamscape. “The bond, love. It’s the bond,” I whisper as I hold her in the kitchen, reluctant to let her go but unwilling to let her in.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

The PCR machine whirs in the background as the final samples complete their rotation. I stare at the stack of files in front of me, occasionally willing my eyes to focus on the data, but my mind is hopelessly elsewhere.

His strong hands gripping my thighs...the water cascading over his muscles this morning as he pinned me to the shower wall...

Jesus. My cheeks burn, and I jump as the file I'm holding slides out of my hands and flutters to the floor. I'm so embarrassed, even though I look around the room and see I'm alone.

How do people get anything done with all this...in their heads, I lament as I force myself to read through the latest Nicholson data, trying again to make sense of what I'm seeing and trying not to think about Rowan and the things he's been doing to me every chance we get for the last week.

Any lingering thought that he was just teasing me has long since vanished—his emotions are still unreadable, but physically, I'm in no doubt about what he wants. Ever since he took my virginity that night, our lovemaking has been insatiable. I thought the dreams would stop, and to a degree, they have, because I'm with him every night, but now he comes to me during the day.

He says it's the bond. I don't want to be naive, and of course, I know about the bond between shifters, but I didn't realize it could be so vivid. So real.

I'm not sure where this leaves us in terms of the future, though, he talks about the bond, but he hasn't declared his feelings for me. He hasn't said we're true mates, but

that is what comes with the bond; this doesn't feel like anything my friends have described. It feels so much more.

He promised not to do it when I'm working in the lab, but it appears my imagination can cause enough problems on its own. I'm clearly just as insatiable as he is. I blush even more thinking about Rowan and his wicked tongue...

"You have a minute?" A voice from the door has me spinning around in my chair, hoping my thoughts are not displayed on my face.

I look at Rian and cringe, praying I'm not as bright red as I fear. "Um, yes, of course," I say, lifting a stack of printouts from the PCR machine off the spare chair.

Rian sits down, and I don't think I've ever seen him look so awkward; he's normally full of confidence—too confident. "I just wondered if you've had a chance to go over the pack data yet? Anything interesting?"

"I have," I say hesitantly. "I don't know if interesting is the right word. Different, certainly"

He pales slightly, and I instantly regret my choice of words. "I don't mean bad differently," I ramble. "Good, perhaps. I'm seeing markers that could mean enhanced healing and even strength. I'm just trying to determine what some of the others mean."

"Mmm," he sighs thoughtfully. "Do the ancient texts give you any clues?"

I nod and gesture to my notebook, "I've been making some notes, and my colleague Forrest has been doing some research in our old library. Do you have any thoughts, Rian?"

I don't miss how shifty he looks, but it's quickly replaced by one of his easy-going smiles. "I don't see why our pack would be any different, but I guess with some of our elders coming from the Old World so long ago, there's bound to be differences. Nothing major, though, right?"

"No, of course not," I reply easily, not entirely sure of his intentions. Shifting the subject slightly, I ask, "Have the four Volva women been notified?"

"Yes, of course. They're meeting with Sara later today," he confirms. "Being without a wolf, we suspected two of them, but the others were a surprise."

"Historically, being without a wolf has not been easy," I tell him. "Hopefully, that's changing because of our research and the ability to understand how important the Volva are for the future of our packs."

Seeming satisfied, Rian says goodbye and goes back across the hall toward his workstation. I watch him walk away and release a breath. He's been nothing but helpful, but I can't shake the feeling he's monitoring me—watching me. Which is strange, because we're on the same side, looking for the same answers. Aren't we? The data did arrive, but only after a delay, and I had to chase it. Looking at the timestamp, it was printed hours before I received it. I know I'm not being paranoid, but I can't help but think it had already been looked over. But why? I've already made a mental note to get ahead of the next set of data printouts rather than waiting for a technician to bring them to me.

Standing, I shut my office door. It's made from reinforced materials that block shifter hearing to a degree so that any in-person studies can be afforded some privacy. I find my phone on the desk buried under the paperwork and see the two missed calls from Kaiden earlier, hitting the call button.

I haven't been avoiding him, per se, but I am a bit conflicted about who my alpha is

now. My shifter instincts are one hundred percent on board with being Rowan's luna, but then, my hormones have been going crazy ever since I got here. Perhaps even before, where he's concerned. But this was only supposed to be a sham mating, a formality so the pack would accept my presence. What happens when my research is completed? Does Kaiden become my alpha again? What is this thing with Rowan? It feels so powerful, but deep down, I know he's keeping secrets. My allegiance still feels torn. After everything that happened to my parents and the hunters, the one thing I crave is safety, and I just don't know if I'm safe with Rowan. Especially where my heart is concerned.

The phone rings and then connects. "Thanks for calling me back, Willow. Busy?" Kaiden asks.

"Yes, very busy, actually," I reply. Busy thinking about Rowan, more like.

"Are you able to share an update?" Kaiden asks carefully. "I'm meeting with Rowan later this week, but I'd like your take on things, too."

I start by explaining the results of the interpack DNA sequencing, trying to explain as simply as I can. I update him on the number of new Volva cases and explain how the database of new abilities is being built. It's slow work, as we don't always know what we're looking for, but, most importantly perhaps, the fertility markers in all the Volva cases are high. "We're also seeing impressive supernatural abilities across the Volva community, stretching back several generations on the maternal side."

"Kit met with the other lunas yesterday, and they are compiling more information from pack texts for you. I'll have her send it over when they've finished," Kaiden says.

"Yes, she mentioned they've made some progress." I pause before adding, "The Nicholson pack data is interesting. There are differences, more than I would expect.

It's not the entire pack, but there are some. You've spent time with Rowan, have you noticed anything?"

Kaiden is quiet for a moment. "You'll have to be more specific, Willow."

I take a deep breath, suddenly feeling as though I don't want to verbalize the full extent of what I'm thinking. "The DNA markers are off the charts in some areas, and there are things I don't recognize at all."

"I have fought side by side with Rowan, and his wolf is strong. He's fearless and an excellent alpha," Kaiden says firmly. "He also has an uncanny way of seeing things differently, wiser than I think he lets on, and I'm almost certain he'd be one of the deadliest fighters. But I've seen nothing that concerns me. Yet."

I may be torn on who my alpha is these days, but Kaiden's endorsement soothes my nerves over the Nicholson data. "You're right. There are always anomalies in data. They're open about having origins in the Old World; I just need to focus my research there to get to the bottom of it. It might be useful, actually."

"Do you want me to tell Kit to look into it?" Kaiden asks.

I shake my head. "No, I'm going to call her later, anyway," I tell him.

"But everything is okay with you? Rowan treating you well?" he asks, the concern in his voice genuine.

I feel warmth spread through me as I consider the texts from Kit, the other women I have allowed to get closer, Forrest, and now Kaiden. Despite the walls I built, it feels good to let people care.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to tell Kaiden the whole truth. "He's been absolutely

fine. He's committed to this project," I say in my most professional voice.

"I bet he is. Good to hear," Kaiden replies with a chuckle. I'm glad he can't see me as my infuriating blush returns, and I can't help but wonder if he suspects something between Rowan and me.

Thankfully, he signs off before it gets any more awkward, and I toss the phone back onto the desk, groaning.

Grabbing my empty cup, I open the office door and head toward the cafeteria. As I pass, I clock Rian back at his workstation, my eyes on his screen, which holds the latest pack data. He turns, seemingly sensing my presence, making me freeze slightly before I continue, doing my best to pretend I wasn't looking over his shoulder. I don't know why he's setting me on edge today. His questions weren't that suspicious. In truth, he probably just made me think about my own concerns. About the data and Rowan. Things I don't want to face up to.

I hole myself up in my office for the rest of the afternoon, completing some data profiles for the Volva that we know about so far. As usual, I avoid completing my own. Beyond my enhanced fertility markers, I don't appear to have any special gifts—a fact that annoys me immensely, even though I know it shouldn't. I'm a scientist; I live and breathe facts, and I know our research into the Volva is in its infancy. But still, having always felt like an outsider without my wolf, I can't shake the desire to fit in with other shifters, to be useful, and to be able to protect myself and others.

Even though I'm lost in my work, Rowan's arrival hits me like a tidal wave long before he reaches my office. This strange bond between us snakes like tendrils, bridging the gap between us. It's almost sensual in its intensity; the urge to see him is palpable. He doesn't knock, which ought to piss me off, but his knowing smirk as he enters instantly throws me off balance. The door clicks behind him, and immediately,

the room feels too small.

“Come here,” he beckons, and I’m already moving. I’m swept into his arms as his lips crash down on mine. “God, I’ve missed you.”

Despite myself, I laugh. “You’ve only been on patrol.”

“And I shouldn’t miss you, love? It’s cold out there, and so very hot in here.” He nibbles my neck as he presses his hardness into my flesh.

I roll my eyes, pulling myself away despite the enigmatic draw to be closer. “We can’t, not here. What will everyone think?”

“You’re their luna. They’ll think I can’t keep my hands off you. Which I can’t,” he chuckles but takes a step back and picks up my coat. “But I can wait. At least until I get you into the house.”

Keeping a respectable distance, we walk through the lab together. I feel his fingers dance against mine as I say goodnight to my new colleagues. Rowan nods at Rian, but they don’t speak; Rian is incredibly astute, though, and I see his eyes focus on the way Rowan’s arm slips around me as we go through the main doors. I wonder if people believe the mate's ceremony was merely a formality or if they sense the strange bond that has developed between us. Do they pick up on the way his scent now clings to my body?

As we cross the town square, his hand slips easily into mine, and he asks me about my work. I tell him about our progress, the pack DNA results, and the Volva data profiles.

“Have you always known you were Volva?” He asks, turning to me and brushing my hair from my face.

“I knew that I didn’t have my wolf. My mother wasn’t surprised, with my father not being a shifter. But she was disappointed, I think, for me,” I reply honestly, taken slightly aback by my own candor.

Rowan looks thoughtful for a moment. “Not many female shifters mate with humans. Is that how you came to Kaiden’s pack later? Were they not accepted?”

I wonder how much of my truth I want to share, but as I look at him, the bond warming my soul, I find myself telling him a partially redacted version of what happened. I leave out the part where my father was a hunter and explain they were killed because of their union. Genuine sorrow flickers across his features, and he takes my hands in his.

“I am sorry for your loss, and I’m glad you found solace in Kaiden’s pack. And now here.” He pauses, looking toward the frozen lake for a moment before sighing, “My own parents died because of their love.”

I gasp as the strength of his unspoken emotion rolls off him, and I grip the sleeves of his coat to steady myself. His eyes flash from blue to silver. He feels it, too.

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammer.

His lips quirk in a small smile that suddenly makes him look much younger. “It was so long ago. Strange, though, that we find ourselves here together. No?”

All I can do is nod as we continue toward the house, the golden thread of our bond burning brighter as the wave of emotions flows between us. I make a mental note to ask Senna and Kit about the bond and whether this is normal when I speak to them later.

However, as we cross the threshold and he pulls me toward him, all other thoughts

fall to the floor.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

The large, vaulted window in my office affords me a commanding view of the town square, and from my desk, I watch Willow walk toward the lab. She's wrapped in one of her large warm coats since there has been fresh snowfall, but I can still make out the gentle sway of her hips that drives me crazy.

Everything about her drives me crazy: her impossibly soft auburn hair, how her pale skin marks so easily under my touch, and the way her tight body welcomes me in...it took everything in me not to stop her from walking away this morning, I would rather have dragged her back to bed.

I lean against the glass, amused at my own lack of self-control. In truth, I haven't felt like this in a very long time. It's not that I hadn't enjoyed women all my life—especially when I was younger, and the world was full of new challenges, battles that raged for centuries, and the riotous celebrations that followed. I never thought I'd tire of the chase and conquest of my younger years. And I certainly never thought I'd find my mate.

And yet, tire I did, until I met her.

It is quite remarkable how all the women I have known, all the writhing bodies and endless pleasures I have tasted, all paled to insignificance the moment I first held her.

After, rather unceremoniously, taking her virginity in the kitchen like a madman, our bond has only deepened, and so has my desire. This would all be rather perfect if it weren't for the nagging sense of self-awareness that lingers at the back of my mind, whispering, She will run if she knows the truth. The pack alliances will fall. The pack will become a target. This is what always happens.

This is what always happens.

I am old, too old. Far too old for her, even though I look damn good for it. I'm also old enough to remember a time before vampires were extinct. They were hunted, of course; shifters hunted in packs, and humans were more vulnerable, but numbers still counted. There were so few vampires, often living solitary lives. They were fierce in their own right but vulnerable to those filled with hate.

Were the vampires evil? No more than the bloodthirsty shifters, calculating witches, or the warmongering humans, I guess.

The war between shifters and vampires intensified in my second century when a shifter pack fell to a half-vampire alpha who became obsessed with the power that halflings possess and tried to force mating to create an army of powerful beasts. Vampires had so few children that their numbers were dramatically smaller than shifters. The shifters revolted at the notion that their bloodlines would be forever altered and turned on the few halflings that had been accepted. The rest, as they say, is history. Wars fought by people who could barely remember how it all started, hatred passed down through generations.

Was my mother evil? Her last act was to sacrifice herself to save me, leaving me at the orphanage and leading the hunters away. My father was already dead, her heart broken. No, she wasn't evil.

Once the vampires appeared to be extinct, the elimination of the halflings was an ongoing horror. I've seen enough death and destruction for all ten lifetimes and dished out enough of my own as I grew stronger. But after centuries of bloodshed, one thing became undeniably clear—you cannot stop hate. My pack is formed of those halflings and their descendants who wanted to find some peace. That has been my goal.

The hunters and the Order, and by extension, the other shifter packs I've come to know, all threaten that peace. Even Willow threatens it, even though she doesn't know what she's looking for when she pores over our DNA, puzzled as to why it's different from our fellow shifters.

This was always the danger, but the Volva magic, the alliance, and any new information to destroy the Order had to be worth the risk. My pack's vampire DNA is no doubt diluted through centuries of new matings, meaning the risk of detection is reduced. Only my own DNA will raise questions, being the purest hybrid—my beta Griffen follows by the smallest margin, as his mother was a pure hybrid.

However, despite the diminishing risks of detection, my pack has every right to be cautious. History bears witness to what happens when vampire hybrids have been discovered. Our alliance with the shifter packs is strong, but new. I've come to care for my fellow alphas and their packs, but can I trust them not to turn on us?

Can I trust Willow not to reject me?

An alert on my cabin security announces Griffen's arrival, and I see him give a brief wave on the screen as I let him in. Willow has long since entered the lab, and I turn away from the window, stoking the fire as my beta walks in and shakes the fallen snow from his coat onto the floor.

I roll my eyes. "Really, Grif?" I scold lightly.

He flashes me one of his annoyingly charming smiles that ceased to work on me over five hundred years ago and flops into one of my worn leather chairs.

"It's snowing," he replies with the slightest shrug of his enormous shoulders.

I sigh, resigned to my old friend's ways. Although I haven't known him all my life,

it's been long enough. Griffen and I met when we were barely ninety, both on the run. Both outcasts. He understands what is at stake more than anyone else here; he lived it, too, and I haven't forgotten his sacrifices.

"So," he says, stretching like a cat in front of the fire and shrugging off his coat, a smirk teasing his lips. "How goes things with your little mate? Worth waiting for?"

He won't be expecting a direct response; he just likes to push my buttons, so his face is a picture of surprise when I say, "Yes, it is. She's more than I ever expected."

Although startled for the briefest of moments, he quickly recovers and barks with laughter. "Wow, she must be something special to capture your attention. I never thought one woman could hold your eye."

My wolf feels restless and bristles at his tone, but I temper my emotions, as I usually do where Griffen is concerned. "She is special. And you will talk about her as such," I growl.

Griffen chuckles, looking into the fire. "Fair enough, alpha," he nods. "And the research? She's not just a pretty face."

I shoot him a warning look but ignore his teasing. "If you're asking whether she's making progress, she is. You've met with Sara about the Volva in our pack. More than we assumed?"

"Yes, some families went to great lengths to hide females that didn't have their wolves. You'd think that our pack would understand differences more, yet it appears we were not immune from discriminating," Griffen replies thoughtfully.

"Was it not more pity they feared?" I reply, knowing how much pride shifters take in their connection to their wolves. I am no different myself.

“And who wants to be pitied in our world?” he mutters, not taking his eyes off the fire. I wince slightly as I consider how much I do pity my old friend. His mate is lost to time, and I never realized the depth of that sacrifice until I found my own.

I roll my shoulders, not wanting to open that can of worms. “Questions have been raised about some of the DNA results, but it’s nothing we weren’t expecting. Most of the pack have majority shifter DNA, so I don’t think it will be an issue. Rian did his job ensuring he reviewed the data first so there were no unexpected surprises.”

Griffen silently listens, but I can feel his mood shift. I pause and wait for him to speak his mind. Glancing up, he sighs. “Don’t you think that’s a little optimistic?”

The slightest lilt to his accent betrays his origins and mine, reminding me that he knows me all too well.

“I will make it so,” I say firmly, “She cannot identify vampire DNA because she has no reference point. We are, ironically, safe because of our very extinction. I will control the narrative, and Willow will find the other answers she seeks. The alliance will stand, and the hunters will be destroyed.”

“And if the Order already knows about us?” Griffen asks, and not for the first time. With so little known about the Order, one has to consider how much more they know about us.

“The Order will be destroyed for many reasons. If they know about us, that will simply be one more reason,” I say in an attempt to brush off his concerns.

Griffen nods, “You know that I am with you, Rowan. Always have been. But there is real fear here, and I’d be lying if I said everyone in the pack is comfortable with how closely Willow studies us. Rian is quick to tell people how meticulous she is about our data.”

“She’s studying all the packs, Grif. She’s not focused on us, and the whole point of building the lab here was so we could have some control over the situation. Rian knows that,” I say, though I already have my own concerns about how much young Rian is on board with the plan. He became beta as a favor to his father, who died fighting the hunters. He comes from a long line of good shifter hybrids, but is young, reckless, and outspoken. He’s also educated and the perfect fit for the lab. I greatly respected his father, and I’m willing to extend that to his son. For now.

“Aye,” Griffen laughs, bringing me back to the moment. “Some control over the situation in your bed.”

Suddenly seeing red, I fling my glass at him. It narrowly misses and smashes against the wall. He holds his hands up in mock surrender. “At ease,” he laughs. I’ll only say it in these four walls. And I know your mind is on what’s best for the pack, too.”

“It is what’s best for the pack.” I snarl. “The alpha alliance is strong, and this is not the Old World. Times have changed.”

Griffen grows serious once more. “And you would put that theory to the test? You’d trust our new friends with the truth? I’m not sure the pack would be with you on that, and god knows they love you, Rowan.”

“It won’t come to that,” I assure him.

Pulling his coat back on, he stands to leave. “Aye, let’s hope not. We have enough on fighting rogues and hunters. I’d rather not add to the list.”

“Not like you to broker peace, Grif.” I chuckle.

He scoffs as he walks away, but I hear him mutter, “I must be getting old,” before he closes the door.

Stepping into the lab later that afternoon, I greet a few pack members on my way toward Willow's office. The lab is a hive of activity now, and the large glass doors connecting to the medical center allow me to see a few wolves waiting to see Sara. I know our medic is thrilled with her new clinic—another reminder that this entire project has been worthwhile. If it frustrates me that some pack members may doubt my decisions, I cannot show it. I've learned a good leader must acknowledge their followers' concerns; being stubborn only leads to unnecessary friction.

However, as I see Willow leaning over a microscope, I admire the subtle curve of her body and the way her soft lips purse in concentration, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I would destroy anyone who came between us.

The thought pulls me up short, and I stop in my tracks. I pride myself on my ability to manage my dual nature—after all, that wasn't always the case. But deep down, my beasts only grow in their determination to have their mate. And, more importantly, keep their mate.

And suddenly, I understand why wars have been waged over women, I muse as I walk toward her.

As if sensing my presence, she looks up, recognition and desire alight in her eyes. I don't even think she realizes she's doing it, but she looks at me like no one ever has before. As though she really sees me. I hope that the parts she does see are enough, because I cannot afford to get swept up in these new emotions and risk not only myself but the entire pack.

I may be a fool for her, but I have to keep my head where my pack is concerned.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

“So...” Kenzie’s voice comes over the speaker, “How is your dark and mysterious mate?”

I hear Kit and Senna shushing her in the background, and I roll my eyes, blushing deep red.

“You don’t have to tell us!” Senna shouts over the noise.

“Don’t act like you don’t want to know, too,” Kenzie mutters.

I steel myself to reply. A few months ago, I would have brushed them off or bristled at the thought that they were teasing me or trying to set me up. Now I know they’re just being my friends. I’ve seen how they are with each other and how they have bonded as lunas, especially in our quest to defend our packs and defeat the Order. We also have a unique bond as Volva. I suppose we have a bond as lunas, too, but I’m not really a luna...am I?

“Well, obviously, the ceremony was just a formality, and if anything, he just seemed to like teasing me,” I begin, and they all groan, but before they can interrupt, I continue, “but we do seem to have, um, a bond.”

“Oh, moon goddess,” Kit exclaims, “why didn’t you mention this the other day? He must have known, did he trick you? Are you happy about it? Did you know before you went?”

She continues rattling off questions as the other lunas howl with delight. I wait for them to calm down. “I nearly mentioned it. I thought there was something, but he’s

just so...different...and I wasn't sure if he felt it. I'm just trying to figure out what it means...and there's so much research to do, I—"

"Oh, Willow, the research is important, but so is finding your mate," Kit says. "Is he treating you well? All the alphas seem to respect him, but how is he?"

"He seems kinda mysterious?" Kenzie's voice filters back through. "Grayson said he's a good alpha, respected, and a strong ally. But he's different..."

I find myself nodding thoughtfully, listening to them all talk over each other.

Different.

The conversation flows around me, and I almost forget we're supposed to be discussing the Volva research and their studies of the various ancient texts held by their packs. This sharing of knowledge has become invaluable, but the women are all so busy with their mates and babies that it's slow progress. We're just thankful the rogues and hunters have been quiet.

Before we say goodbye, a thought occurs to me. "With the bond...without going too much into detail," I cringe but continue. "How strong should a mate...presence be...through the bond, I mean?"

"Oh, I feel Kaiden with me all the time," Kit replies, and I can almost picture her smile. "It gives me a great sense of peace."

The other women all concur, and I try to think of another way to phrase it. "What about the dreams? They're so real? Like he's literally in my head."

They fall silent for a moment before Kit speaks up again. "You're going to have to describe what you mean, because that sounds like more than the bond. It could be a

Volva thing?”

I try my best to describe the realism and intensity of my dreamscapes, minus the sex. After a back and forth, they confirm what I suspected; my dreamscapes are not a normal part of the shifter bond. But is it Rowan who is different? Or is it my Volva magic?

“I actually saw a whole passage on telepathy in one of the texts.” Kenzie offers. “I don’t think it said much, but with your experience, I’ll give it another look.”

“Thanks, Kenzie, I appreciate it,” I reply sincerely.

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up, more grateful than ever for their friendship. After losing so much and insulating myself from the world, I never imagined I’d have the support I have now.

It’s getting late, and I wander through the lab, heading to the PCR room for the latest batch of cross-referenced results to collect them before anyone else. I don’t want it to appear as though I’m focusing too heavily on the Nicholson data, but there do appear to be some mutations that could be significant. Perhaps it’s connected to their previously more extreme isolation, or links to the Old World have created differences in their genetic makeup, but some of them have cells that regenerate even faster than normal. Other mutations appear linked to eyesight and speed, which reminds me of the day I realized Rowan was watching the eagle long before I could see it.

I expected the file to be left on the tray as usual, but I’m surprised to find it empty. There’s no way someone picked it up before me, I made sure to time it perfectly. Perhaps they forgot to print it out, I consider as I load the data on the workstation so I can take it back to the cabin with me. I am hoping I can discuss the results with Rowan, and he may finally open up more. I suspect he has more to say about some of my findings, yet he simply listens rather than talks. His thoughts are always insightful

but never specific.

The data file is empty. Assuming I've made a mistake, I close the file and reload. I know it should be here, because I set it to run this morning, and even checked its progress a few hours ago. I wait a moment for confirmation that it is definitely not there.

Confused, I head back to the machine to reset the samples so they can run again. But what I find makes me freeze. The samples are gone. On the floor, I notice a broken slide. These have been deliberately removed.

The question is, were the samples completed before the slides were taken? What were the results? And who would do this?

I suddenly regret staying late as I glance around the lab and feel my senses bristle. Hardly anyone is left in the lab, but I can hear the occasional footstep and machines either working or being closed down. I know the medical clinic has already closed because Sara came over to say goodbye earlier. The darkness of the clinic suddenly feels ominous.

I try to shake my rising fear, straightening my back and attempting not to look as ruffled as I feel in case whoever did it is watching somehow. I write a note and leave it at the workstation, asking whoever is in first to look for the samples. I don't think they'll find them, though; this was deliberate.

I head back to my office and casually pack my bag, adding a few extra files I suddenly don't want to leave lying around, even with my office door locked. When I step back out into the hallway, I feel the unmistakable sensation of being watched. Although I have no wolf, I still have enhanced senses, and every single one of them is screaming to be on high alert.

Have I let my guard down too much here? Am I too blinded by Rowan and my research? I fumble for my phone, bring up Rowan's number, and press call.

The line connects instantly, and I hear his deep, concerned voice. "What's wrong? I can feel your stress." I hear the sound of his footsteps. "I'm coming now."

Not wanting to alert anyone who might be listening or watching, I try to force some lightness into my tone, "Oh, I'm just leaving now. Are you home?"

Not buying it for a second, Rowan replies, "I'm nearly with you, love. Just keep walking."

I look up as I approach the door and see him striding toward it, his jaw set in determination as we reach the entrance at the same time. He pulls me into an embrace. Only once I'm safe in his arms do I realize how much my heart is pounding in my chest. Immediately, I feel his warmth seep into my bones, his heart regulating mine, his breath against my hair soothing my racing mind.

"Love, what's wrong?" he asks, pulling away slightly and sweeping his gaze over me to see that I'm okay.

I shake my head and move down the steps with him close to my side. "N-not here. Let's go home, okay?"

He studies me for a second, and then, understanding, he nods and takes my heavy bag from me. Wordlessly, we walk across the square to his cabin. Once inside, I finally feel like I can breathe.

Pouring me a hot drink, he guides me to the kitchen island and brushes the hair from my face. "Now, tell me who has upset you so I can kill them."

I almost want to laugh, but as I look up, I see his expression is like stone, and he is deadly serious. I reach out, taken aback at how tense his body is, his wolf burning brightly in his eyes. “I-I don’t even know.”

“But I could sense the threat,” he says, cupping my cheek. “I was already on my way when you called. I could feel you needed me.”

We stare at each other for a moment. “The bond?” I ask.

He doesn’t reply; he doesn’t have to. We both know it’s true.

“But it didn’t tell me why you were scared, love,” he eventually says, his tone a little lighter.

I take a breath and begin to explain the data files being empty, the samples missing, and the slide being broken. “I’m not crazy, Rowan. That data has been taken, and I felt watched, as though someone was waiting to see what I would do once I realized.”

Rowan looks thoughtful, “I don’t think you’re crazy. Tell me, though, if anything else has happened. No matter how small.”

I think back, and only one incident stands out. “One of the first batches of data went missing. Well, not like this, just the printouts. It was strange, but we made another copy. The original never did turn up.”

Something dark crosses Rowan’s features. I’ve always known he is a strong leader, a respected alpha, ferocious in battle with the hunters, and physically intimidating. Still, the darkness I see reflected back at me causes my mouth to dry up and my hands to tremble. He seems to notice, blinking to clear the wolf from his eyes and taking both my hands in his. “I have perhaps lowered my guard too much where the lab is concerned—where you are concerned, love. I will make changes tomorrow, and you

will always have Griffen or me nearby.”

I nod. “You’ve known Griffen a long time,” I state, considering something that has been on my mind, “You know, his DNA is the most similar to your own. I don’t mean you’re related, I just mean the markers. Have you always been in the same pack?”

“We met as wolves, not from the same pack,” he says, rubbing my trembling hands. “Perhaps it’s because we’re from the same area. Perhaps all shifters have different markers around the world, no?”

I want to say no, I don’t think that’s it. The DNA markers aren’t just different. They seem mixed, like interconnecting spirals locked together. But I don’t; I just nod as he continues, “Let’s concentrate on this security breach. I will make some food while you make notes about who had access to the samples. We will review the security footage, and I will brief Griffen. I will not see my luna scared. Your work is too important. The alpha alliance has a meeting soon, and I will not have anyone stand in the way of our progress.”

I find myself calmed by his decisiveness. As an alpha, he exudes control, and although I used to find alphas intimidating, Rowan makes me feel safe. He seems to know what I’m thinking as a satisfied smile appears on his lips; he releases my hands and cups my cheek again, pulling me against his hard body.

“I will protect you, love.” His voice teases my hair, sending shivers racing down my spine.

“I-I know you will,” my reply slips out, hands gripping his shirt.

I honestly can’t explain why I trust him so much, alone in his territory, when I know he’s keeping secrets. The truth nags at the corners of my mind, desperate to be heard.

I live in a world of facts, and I try to balance those with ancient wisdom, but there appear to be some realities I don't even want to consider. Almost too ridiculous to be brought out into the light.

I don't know why I trust him so much, but I do. I'm simply lost to Rowan. And it's terrifying.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

“I don’t understand,” I growl, slamming my hand down on the oak desk, the ancient wood developing another crack under my fist. “What is the point of having a security system if it can be turned off at will?”

Griffen doesn’t even flinch at my outburst. Instead, his eyes are set hard as he glares at the screen. “It can’t. Not easily, anyway,” he mutters. “Willow was right. That file was deliberately taken. The security feed shows the machine was still on in the top right of the screen at 5:08 p.m., but when it comes back on at seven, the lab is pretty much empty, and the machine is off; the slide can just be seen on the floor.”

“I see that,” I snap. “But that doesn’t tell us who took it. What about the outside security cameras? Do we see anyone leaving?”

Griffen sighs, “We see everyone coming and going, but no one’s sticking two fingers up at us and waving secret documents around.” I roll my eyes at his attempt to lighten my mood. “At least it’s not the hunters. We’d have spotted a stranger.”

“Not the win it seems,” I mutter, turning to look out over the town square toward the lab. “It’s one of our own. Are they working alone or with the hunters? It wouldn’t be the first time a pack has been infiltrated. Did Rian find anything concerning and destroy it before Willow could see it?”

Griffen scoffs. “Not our pack, though; we have been committed to securing the safety of this pack for nearly two centuries in these mountains. No way would anyone here turn. For hunters? Rian is as confused as we are; he said that slide wasn’t particularly relevant anyway.” he spits out.

“History has taught us that betrayal can come from any angle, Grif. I’m sure my fellow alphas would have thought their packs were immune to corruption, too,” I say, turning back to face my old friend, who shakes his head.

“I know what you’re saying, but I still won’t have it. Not hunters. They’re quiet, anyway. More likely to be someone not happy about the research into our bloodlines. Someone in the lab?”

I take a seat, smoothing my hand over the latest fracture in the desk. “Grayson thinks they’ve had hunter activity on their northern border, but it is not confirmed. They may not be as quiet as we think,” I inform him. “But yes, it could be linked to the research. Which is why each person in that lab was handpicked. They wanted the research to happen.”

“Doesn’t mean they didn’t get cold feet,” Griffen replies. “After all, most of our younger members are far removed from their origins. They know the history and their family’s stories but don’t know the extent of hybrid power or the perils of embracing it. Hell, most of them only hear their wolves these days.”

“Just because their vampire beast isn’t as strong as the elders’ doesn’t mean they’re not as loyal. Everyone here knows the score,” I reassure him. I have never had reason to doubt my pack. But even as I speak the words, a kernel of doubt takes root. I study the footage again, which repeats in a loop. I see Willow after she’s discovered the missing files, trying to act normal as she gathers her things and calls me, but her fear feels palpable through the screen.

I hear a crunch and look down. I’ve gripped the desk so hard that the wood has given way along the edge, and as I release my grip, splinters fall to the ground.

Griffen chuckles, “Never thought I’d see the day.”

I shoot him a glare, but I don't deny it. "I've never felt both beasts as strongly as I do around her. You know how it is," I continue. "Our vampire nature is tamed somewhat. Controlled. But not around her."

Griffen levels me with a stare. "Does she know?"

"No," I say firmly. "She attributes the dreamscapes to our bond. It was foolish, but it is an unstoppable force. She's...naive. She thinks it is a normal bond."

His mask slips for a moment, his face cracking into amusement. "And you think that will hold? Gods, man. You think women don't talk?" Laughing at my expense and despite the seriousness of the situation, he continues, "She will go to those Luna friends and ask if their mates can fuck them in their subconsciousness, and they will tell her it's not normal."

"I couldn't bloody stop it. He was out of control with her under my roof," I groan, knowing Griffen is right. "Wait. How did you know I was fucking her?"

"Well, she's not dead. Our vampire beasts tend only to want one of two things," he says bluntly.

My wolf paces, angry and concerned at the conversation involving his mate. "I have to keep her," I confess, "but I don't know how to do that without compromising our pact to never to reveal the duality of our beasts."

"No one would ask you to surrender your mate," Griffen replies, "but if you're asking me for advice...well, I'm the last person to give it. But tread lightly. The pack feels threatened, and Willow's loyalties surely still remain at least partly with Kaiden's pack. Now may not be the time. But what do I know of these things?"

There's a bitterness in his tone that hits differently now that I have experienced the

strength of the bond myself. If anything, having watched my friend navigate his own grief, the thought of losing Willow is only amplified.

“Did you ever try reaching Loretta?” I ask, knowing I should have asked long ago.

The look on Griffen’s face is murderous. I know it’s not aimed at me, but anyone else would have run for their lives or readied to fight. I simply wait for his answer. He stands, shoving the chair backward. “This isn’t about me. My mate is no threat to this pack. She’s probably not even alive. But no, she severed the bond. She rejected me and everything we are.”

The pain in his voice is barely masked by his rage. He doesn’t wait for an answer. He simply storms out. I turn back to the window and watch my old friend trudge through the snow toward the lab, knowing he’s going to watch over Willow. Not for the first time in my long life, I thank the goddess I have him.

But his words linger—she rejected him.

Loretta was a powerful witch. An outcast herself and hunted by the same groups, one might have imagined she’d be an ally, but she feared the vampires, too. She said we were inherently violent and could never be trusted. She did forsake him, but at the last minute, she was also the one who saved them, creating a powerful storm that allowed them to escape almost certain death. The knowledge that Griffen still grieves to the extent he does hundreds of years later is sobering. I can’t lose Willow the way he lost his witch. I can’t have her turn on me.

Suddenly filled with raging frustration and unanswered questions, I move quickly through the house, out into the backyard that borders the forest, and shift. My beast feels strong as my wolf runs through the undergrowth, sending animals fleeing in my wake. I head for the ridge, pushing myself faster and faster along those well-trodden trails, trying to burn off this unyielding rage.

Just as I crest the ridge, an unexpected scent causes me to stop abruptly. Human, and something else. I think it's a shifter, and it smells familiar but somehow different, as though it's masked or confused somehow. But there have definitely been humans and at least one shifter here recently. How is that possible, so close to the town?

They're long gone now, and I turn back, looking down the trail, my eyes falling on the lab—more questions than answers, but more than anything, the dawning realization that we have a traitor. I take in the shifter scent again. It's so familiar, but it's like my senses are scrambled, and I can't identify who it is.

Staring at the lab, my mind reaches out to Willow. The tendrils of my vampiric beast drift down the mountain trail, searching for his mate. Let me in. Calm sweeps over me as I wrap myself around her body, my soul seeping into hers. There's no resistance now. She is mine, and I am hers. She's in the lab, looking through a microscope; I lean down and trail kisses along her ear. She gasps and shudders, glancing around, not sure if anyone can see how affected she is.

It's not enough. It never is. Feeling enraged by the threat around my mate, around my pack, I set off back down the trail, heading straight for the lab, only stopping to collect my discarded clothes.

I storm through the front doors, causing several wolves to look up in alarm. I know my face must be thunderous as they back away.

The only one not cowed is Sara, our medic. She was just about to enter the clinic but turns as I walk by.

"Everything okay, Rowan?" she asks warily.

"Where is Griffen?" I reply, trying to temper my tone. Sara is one of our most dedicated pack members, and also an incredibly powerful she-wolf. She doesn't tend

to put up with bad manners, and I'm in no mood to get into it with her.

She puts her hands on her hips and looks ready to say something, but the look in my eyes must stop her, and she bows her head. "Conference room."

I nod and flash her the tiniest smile to appease her before continuing through the building. No one else dares get in my way. I find Griffen in the conference room reading a book with his feet on the table. I storm in and slam the soundproof door behind me.

He puts the book down and raises his brows at me. "Why do you look even more pissed off than the last time I saw you?"

"I went for a run out to the ridge for patrol," I say. "There's hunter activity. As if that wasn't bad enough, I picked up on some kind of masked shifter scent."

Griffen takes his feet from the table, his expression serious. "If it's masked, how do you know if it's shifter?"

I run a hand through my hair in frustration. "It's worse, I know the scent. I know who it is. I just can't identify them. It's masked somehow. Humans out here must be hunters. I'll alert the other alphas." I pause. "That trail is the closest to the lab; if I were going to meet with hunters, that's the one I'd take."

"That would be a hell of a risk, though," Griffen exclaims. "We have patrols; we'd know if they were here."

"But they were here, Grif. If they can conceal a shifter's scent, who knows what else they can conceal? I think we have a traitor," I tell him.

Griffen's expression grows dark. "I'm going to say this only once, so don't bite my

head off, okay?” I turn, waiting for him to finish. “If this gets out, who will the pack suspect first? They’re going to suspect the newcomer with access to all this research.”

I growl, fighting my instinct to drive my fist into his face at the mere suggestion. “That is not an option.”

“I know,” he says, his hands up to calm me like few can. “I will gather a small circle. We will handle this.”

I nod, calming my raging beasts. “Call a meeting. I’m going to check on my mate.”

He nods, and I don’t miss the subtle smile on his lips as I realize I’ve just called her my mate. I growl again, fling open the door, and head toward her office.

Her back is to me, still working on the microscope. I lock the door, and she turns slightly, a smile on her lips, and her cheeks flushed. Recalling our subconscious encounter, I approach wordlessly and gently trail kisses along her ear.

“Mmm,” she gasps, my hand falling to her hip to pull her flush against me. The desire to take her is immediate. To claim her. My fangs descend slightly and scrape deliciously against her tender flesh.

“You missed me, love?” I whisper.

She giggles. “How could I, when you’re always here?” she replies, tapping her head.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I chuckle, distracting her by lifting my hand to cup her full breasts. She tips her head back, and I can’t resist; my mouth moves to her neck, sucking and kissing, my hardness pressed heavily against her back.

“Is it normal? To feel you this way?” she asks, and I still recall my earlier

conversation with Griffen.

My beasts are already on the edge; I cannot have this conversation now. I need to calm their bloodlust. I don't answer immediately, my hand drifting to the hem of her dress, bunching the fabric until it's around her waist. "I want you to feel me at all times, Willow," I whisper against her hair as she gasps and becomes pliant in my hands.

"We can't, Rowan, not here. I—" She gasps as my fingers glide through her wetness.

I chuckle as she arches her back against me, her protests dying on her tongue as I rub circles on her clit. "The heart wants what the heart wants. Let us have this, love."

She turns her head, and I see desire and amusement dancing in her eyes. Her cheeks flush as she nods. Suddenly, the anger at my discovery at the ridge, my concern over the missing data, my fears for Willow, and the looming threat of the hunters all fade away, and there is nothing but this moment and the woman in my arms.

My mate. And as I take her, I'm left with no doubt that nothing will ever keep her from me. Not members of my own pack, the hunters, the Order, or even my own secrets.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

I hear the beep of the main alarm as Rowan leaves to join the morning patrol. I breathe a sigh of relief when I can stop pretending to be asleep, shoot from the bed, run for the bathroom, and heave—barely making it to the bowl.

I sway slightly as I stand, washing my face but unable to look in the mirror—my heart races. Thank the goddess Rowan has been out early the last three days on these new small patrols, but I know he'll catch me being sick eventually.

It started as a strange bout of nausea at the lab, but I put it down to rushing out too early and the stress of wanting to run the data before anyone else was there—the stress of wondering who the traitor is. But then I woke yesterday with the now-familiar churn in my stomach and felt sick long after managing a tiny breakfast. As I stand in the bathroom, waiting to see if the second wave of nausea will pass, I'm forced to consider the possibility.

Am I pregnant?

A year ago, that would have seemed almost fanciful. Declining birthrates among the packs meant pregnancies had become almost non-existent. But now, we know the Volva have heightened fertility...so why hadn't I even considered this as a possibility?

I take a few steadying breaths, waiting for the roll of sickness to settle. I can't tell Rowan. Not now. Not yet. My mind races as I mentally tally up the supplies we have left in the lab and how I can run the tests in private.

My mind made up, I dress quickly, forgoing my usual coffee for some plain crackers

to try and keep the sickness at bay. I check my makeup in the mirror before I leave the house, adding some color to my cheeks so I don't look as deathly as I feel. Realistically, very few conditions make shifters feel sick like this. Being half-human, I'm perhaps more susceptible, but I have always displayed healthy shifter traits, healing quickly and strength. Walking to the lab, I'm already in full research mode—it feels like a comfort blanket to focus on the science rather than the emotional fallout.

Does Rowan even want pups? I suddenly think, my feet almost slowing to a stop on the sidewalk. Do I? I never thought it was an option.

“Are you coming in?” Griffen calls from the laboratory's main door.

I look up, my face burning as I realize I've just been standing out here, lost in my own world. “Coming,” I reply, trying to mask my emotions.

Griffen grunts and holds the door for me. I slip past him into the warmth of the reception area. At first, I thought Griffen was intimidating. He's hard and brash and has a way of staring straight through people. You never know what he's thinking, but you can only assume that it's not good—that was, until I got to know him. He's still strangely silent most of the time and undeniably intimidating in his size, but underneath it all, he has a dry sense of humor that I appreciate. Plus, the way he stands with Rowan makes me see what a good man he is.

Which is why I hate lying to him.

“So, where are we setting up today?” he asks as we walk toward my office.

After the missing data and Rowan's discovery up on the ridge, Griffen has formed an elite unit of their most trusted warriors to run covert patrols in addition to the main pack patrols. Either he or Rowan is with me at the lab at all times.

Trying to act normally while everyone else is under suspicion has been challenging, and while I prefer the days Rowan watches over me, I have come to appreciate Griffen's company. But right now, I need him gone.

I take a breath and turn to him with a smile. "I've got a very boring day of categorizing a load of files by hand. To be honest, I think the best way for me to get through it is to blast some music and just plow through."

Griffen usually reads while I work, and I know for a fact he hates loud music. He studies me for a moment, and I know he'd rather be out on patrol than babysitting me, especially if I'm going to annoy him with my music.

"You know, Sara was asking yesterday if anyone was free to help unload that big delivery of new equipment for the clinic, if you're looking for something to do while I start here?"

Relief flashes over his features, and I know I've hit my mark; he'd prefer to be useful. "I'll go see if she needs a hand, but I'm only through the clinic doors." Turning back down the corridor, he says, "I'll be back for our coffee break."

I wave him off, aware that I don't have much time. I head down to the supply closet and grab the items I need for the tests, waving to a few colleagues on the way and trying to appear as natural as possible. Thankfully, my office has most of the lab's equipment, so once I'm inside, I lock the door and turn some music on.

Although taking my own blood samples is awkward, and my hands shake with trepidation, I waste no time setting up the tests. The first to confirm the pregnancy will only take seconds, but I set the longer DNA tests to run anyway—a sure sign that I instinctively already know what the first result will be.

If I'm honest, there were signs last week. My breasts have been sore, my sense of

smell heightened, and although I didn't understand why at the time, my desire for Rowan is off the charts. Although I don't have a wolf in the traditional sense, I do still sense her, and our need to be with our mate has been insatiable—all signs the other Volva lunas have shared. Being a virgin, I didn't fully understand what they meant about the need to mate. But now I do.

Boy, do I now. I roll my eyes as I wait for the result. Seconds seem to take hours as I watch the spinning icon on my screen.

Positive.

I expected to feel shock, but there's none. I knew. I already knew.

I lean back in my chair for a moment and steady my breathing. How have I ended up here—pregnant, luna of a pack with secrets, and mate to an alpha with more? I can't help but think of my parents and how I was born into a world of shadows and secrets.

And look how well that turned out.

The PCR machine behind me whirs reassuringly as it separates my DNA, producing a raft of data sequencing I can compare to my previous results. Kenzie mentioned being able to actually hear her baby's spirit; I try to tune into my body, trying to feel something.

There's nothing but silence and the frantic drum of my own heartbeat. I focus a little harder and try to imagine what Rowan will say. Will he be happy? Angry? He's evasive about his age, but the strange differences in his DNA make me think he's potentially much older than he lets on—a very long life to have never had children. Perhaps he doesn't want them.

Gradually, my mind does begin to connect, not with my baby but with Rowan. He's

out on patrol, but he's still reaching for me. I've realized I can choose whether to let him in, which I always do. A warmth wraps around me, his hands on my shoulders. It feels like heaven, and I lean into him.

Suddenly a knock at the door and the sound of the machine beeping pulls me abruptly away from the dreamscape. I turn the monitor off and pull my sleeve down to hide the Band-Aid. Unlocking the door, I find Griffen standing with two cups of hot chocolate.

"Good thinking, locking the door," he says gruffly, squeezing past me. "How did you get on with your files?"

I turn the music down and gratefully accept the hot chocolate. "Oh, fine. It didn't take as long as I thought," I lie." I've just started another round of tests on some samples. When they're done, I might take them back to the house to read through them."

Griffen nods in approval. "Smart. Best to keep anything new under wraps."

I feel bad lying to him, but he can't know before Rowan, and Rowan can't know until I see these results for myself. But what am I expecting to see? Why do I feel a knot in my stomach? Rowan has secrets; he's very good at distracting me, but he's a fool if he thinks I don't see what he's doing.

For the next couple of hours, I try to bury myself in other research, but it's hard to stay focused. Occasionally, I check the PCR data, but unusually, it seems to be having trouble completing the profile. Data points keep changing, and it appears to be creating a longer profile than I was expecting. Eventually, it beeps, and I'm relieved it's over. Looking down at the page I was working on, I see I've barely made any progress all day.

Groaning, I print off the files, determined not to look at them here. I bundle them in

with some of the others and grab my bag. Griffen has set himself up in the conference room just opposite my office, where he has a view of the whole lab. He nods when he sees me coming out.

“You heading out?” he asks, falling into step with me as I head for the exit. I nod. “I’ll walk you out.”

I’ve come to recognize that Griffen has an old-style chivalry that’s quite nice, along with unwavering loyalty to Rowan.

As we approach the doors, Rian calls out, “Are you leaving? I wanted to go over those new data points with you,” he says. “One of the researchers found something relevant in the ancient texts.”

I’m torn. Any new discoveries are vitally important, but I also really want to read my new profile. Griffen has paused and Rian is waiting for my answer. I start to feel flustered, “I—um, I’m not actually feeling great, Rian. Can you email them over, or I’ll catch you first thing tomorrow?”

Rian looks genuinely surprised, and I don’t even look at Griffen because I can feel his questioning stare.

“Yeah, sure. You okay?” Rian asks. “Sara could take a look at you?”

“No. No, I’m fine,” I say, desperately not wanting to have this conversation, especially with Rian. “I’m fine, I’ll be in tomorrow.”

With that, I turn and walk quickly out the door. The cool air hits my face, and I feel my racing heart trying to calm itself.

“Hey,” Griffen calls out, catching up with me in only a couple of strides. “What was

that about? Are you really okay?"

"I'm fine. Honestly, I just wouldn't have been able to get away, and I really need to look through these files at home," I assure him.

He looks thoughtful for a moment before he asks, "Do you not want to share those files with Rian? Do you have concerns?"

I know everyone at the lab is under suspicion, but I'm still surprised Griffen would openly ask my thoughts on another beta. I understand Rian only recently took the position as a dying favor to his late father; he works hard in the lab, but he's also the only one there who makes me feel watched.

I shake my head, knowing I have to be careful and not wanting to cause any friction. "I really do just feel a bit tired," I lie. "I'll have a sit down with Rian first thing tomorrow to talk through the texts."

Seemingly satisfied, Griffen nods and turns back to the lab. I feel his eyes on me until I cross the square. Walking toward the house, I look up and see Rowan watching my approach from his office. The fire is lit behind him, and I can feel the intensity of his gaze.

I fight the urge to touch my stomach; the knowledge that our baby is growing and the weight of information I know is contained in the file I'm holding suddenly feels immense. And love; I suddenly feel the immensity of love growing within me.

It's everything I didn't even know I wanted, but there's also so much fear.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

We cut through the forest in silence, only our heavy tread in the fresh snow alerting anyone to our presence.

“This would be much more effective in our wolf form,” Griffen mutters as the terrain gets steeper.

I roll my eyes at his complaining. “But the alpha meeting will be best conducted as humans, and I don’t fancy sitting around in the snow naked.”

He continues to grumble but doesn’t deny my logic. We split off from the patrol group an hour ago, headed over the ridge and along our border to pick up the truck.

“At least you didn’t make us walk all the way there,” he says, climbing in and putting the heating on.

“You are getting old, my friend,” I chuckle. “How can you complain when we would have thought nothing of it centuries ago? And now you wanted heated seats.”

“I have evolved. You should try it,” he laughs.

With my hands on the heated steering wheel, it is hard to disagree. “I admit, I do prefer this horsepower. At least it’s not trying to throw me off.”

Griffen barks out a laugh next to me, and I know he remembers my less than stellar luck with horses over the centuries. “Well, shifters riding horses has always had its challenges. It takes a strong beast not to bolt. Aye, I remember all my favorites.”

So do I. Hundreds of years riding the infernal things, and only a handful ever made it easy for me. I can't help the smile that forms on my lips as memories of trying and failing to tame obtuse horses wash over me. I really do prefer my truck.

"Well, at least laughing at my expense has cheered you up," I remark.

"That's rich coming from you," Griffen replies. "You've been biting people's heads off all week. Our patrol may understand a little better than most, but they need you to keep your cool."

The truck falls silent as I steady my breathing and try not to tear into my friend when I know he's right. I am pissed off. The patrols have picked up on the masked shifter's scent again this week and more human activity at various points around our territory. Although we do get humans venturing into the mountains occasionally, they're usually just passing through, not lingering and returning to the same points.

I have no doubt it's the hunters. I just don't know what they and the masked shifter are going to do next. And it's driving me crazy.

"I know," I say through gritted teeth. "I'm just..."

I trail off, and Griffen cuts in, "I know, you just have more to lose now."

"Will you stop with that? There has always been much to lose: an entire pack. Those wolves depend on me." I snap.

"Of course they do. You're the alpha." Griffen replies evenly. "But you're allowed something for yourself, too, you know."

I grip the wheel a little tighter. "And I have that. I made her my luna; she has the lab, and we are together in every sense."

We go over a particularly large bump in the road, making the truck veer slightly, and Griffen mutters something indefinable that I suspect has nothing to do with the road. “You had the single most unromantic mate ceremony I’ve ever had the misfortune to attend. I’m not sure that and fucking her means you are together in every sense.”

I see red. I slam the brakes on and turn to him, my vision clouded by my beasts. “Get out of the fucking truck,” I snarl.

He opens his door and steps out, hands held up defensively. “Okay, okay,” he says, taking a step back. “Let’s not do this.”

I get out of the truck, too, my heart pounding in my chest. “Stop telling me what to do,” I growl at him but don’t circle him like I want to. He deserves more than that.

“Rowan,” he says softly, his voice almost soothing, something I would never expect from him. “Remember who you are.”

We stand there face to face, and neither moves for a long moment. Then I punch him. Hard. It feels good to get it off my chest, but I know it’s not enough. He doesn’t move an inch from the blow.

“You done?” He asks, “You feel better?”

We stare at each other for a moment in silence before I shake my head, “No, as a matter of fact. I don’t.”

He finally rubs his jaw. “Well, neither does my face.”

“You shouldn’t piss me off about her then,” I snap. “Besides, it’s not the first time I’ve punched you.”

Some of the tension dissipates as we stand there, and I can't help chuckling darkly at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"Not even the first time you've punched me over a girl," he reminds me.

"She's not just a girl, though, Grif," I say, leaning against the truck.

He sighs. "Yeah, I know."

There's a long pause between us as we both consider what that means. "Seems like things are going well, though. She's bonny and smart enough to keep you interested."

I smile at his choice of words, a throwback to his Old World heritage that no matter how many years pass living here, he never loses.

"No, they are." I think. Willow has been quieter the last couple of days, and I think the thought that someone at the lab is betraying us is weighing heavily on her. Or does she suspect I'm not being fully honest with her? "Does it matter how good things are between us if the truth could ruin everything? What is the point of finding my mate if I lose her?"

He stares at me for a moment, contemplating my words. We both know that is exactly what happened to him. Griffen lets out a breath, rubbing his jaw. "You gonna tell her?"

"Not until I can trust the outcome," I reply. "I have to think of the pack, too."

Griffen shakes his head and chuckles, "Sure, it's all about the pack."

Fighting the urge to punch him again, I walk around the truck and open the door. "We're late for the meeting, let's go."

I've already started the engine before he climbs in. We drive in silence for a moment, but I can feel his brain whirring next to me. "Look, we don't have to talk about it, and I'm in no mood to get hit again because you're in a bad mood." I grip the steering wheel but don't tell him to shut up. "If the bond is strong, if she loves you, she will hear you out. Times have changed."

"And how did that go with your witch?" I ask, feeling a wash of emotion I'm not familiar with and don't like.

I almost don't hear his reply as he stares out the window. "Well, I guess she didn't love me. And that's that."

Suddenly regretting this entire conversation, I look at him. "She's a fool, old friend."

"That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Griffen laughs, and I feel some of the tension in the truck dissipate. He's not wrong. I just don't want to take the risk.

We reach the clearing and spot the other alphas, along with a couple of their betas. Alder and Cade are standing near their trucks as we park.

"How are you always late, Rowan?" Alder laughs.

I greet them both, Cade simply nodding. "We're here now. Better late than never, right?" I say, slapping Alder on the shoulder.

Brooks, Kayden, Jet, and Grayson are standing by the fire. The alphas all nod in greeting as we walk toward them.

"I know, I know. We're late," I say, accepting a beer from Grayson.

Kayden shrugs, “You’re always late; I’m thinking of telling you these meetings start an hour earlier.”

Jet retrieves some food from the truck and offers the wrapped sandwiches around. “Senna sent me with these; if you’re late again, we’ll just eat them before you get here.”

“And I thought we were all friends now,” I say with mock offense.

The jovial mood quickly fades as we settle into the meeting and begin to give individual pack updates. Grayson confirms hunter activity; Alder’s pack killed two hunters who attacked two she-wolves out running, and Jet shows us footage from several of the new security cameras that shows humans moving in groups around the pack border.

“They’re not attacking as before, though,” I ponder, watching the screen. “What are they doing?”

“Gathering intel and regrouping,” Cade replies in his matter-of-fact tone.

I update them on the lab breach. It pains me to do so, because when I offered the use of the lab, it was because I could offer something better than we had, not so that our research would become vulnerable.

“I can sense your frustration, Rowan,” Jet says. “But these hunters and The Order behind them have had a head start. We’re organized now, and we’ve already shown them we won’t be beaten.”

Kaiden nods. “It’s not the first time a pack has been infiltrated. Anything you need to find the traitor, just ask.”

I look around at the other alphas and feel a welcome sense of connection. Griffen stands to the side and gives me a nod, showing he feels it, too. I have previously only known this kind of acceptance from within our insulated pack. Before then, life was spent as distant from others as possible, never really trusting anyone.

I think of Willow, my wolf instantly pulling on the bond, wanting to reinforce his need for his mate. But much like my relationship with Willow, my alliance with these alphas, and the burgeoning closeness between the packs, it is built on secrecy and the necessity to hide my true self. Having done that all my long life, it seems strange that it bothers me so much now.

But can I really trust any of them?

The conversation flows around me, and I invite Griffen to update everyone on the theories around how the traitor has masked their shifter identity. Willow sent a list of possible chemical compounds that she's been testing in the lab, but none mask the scent as effectively.

"Many of the ancient texts refer to compounds that allowed shifters to mingle with a population undetected, but we don't have a clear picture yet. Or, more importantly, a way to override it." Griffen concludes.

"And how is Willow?" Kaiden asks, turning to me.

"She's fine. Happy," I reply lightly.

Kaiden seems to accept my answer, smiling. "So I hear," he shrugs, "You know how women talk. Seems like it was a good idea to take her as your mate. Really worked out."

The other alphas look genuinely surprised and start hollering and talking at once.

“Yes,” I groan. “I took Willow as my mate, and it appears there is a bond.”

The cheers only increase, and I hear Griffen laugh, clearly enjoying my discomfort about the topic. I can’t say he doesn’t deserve a little amusement at my expense after our fight earlier.

“Well, don’t say you weren’t warned,” Kaiden laughs. “you’ll be as bad as us soon if she gets pregnant.”

Jet and Grayson both cheer in agreement, and my world tilts slightly. Why didn’t I think about that? Willow is Volva, which means she has enhanced fertility. The birthrate has fallen so dramatically amongst the shifters that getting someone pregnant has barely been a consideration. But as the other alphas discovered, a Volva mate changes that.

“I didn’t think it possible for you to go any paler, Rowan,” Alder laughs.

Despite the seriousness of the meeting, the news of my bond with Willow seems to offer some light relief, and they’re still teasing me as we split and head back to our trucks. Jet and Kaiden catch us up as we approach the truck.

Kaiden slaps me on the shoulder. “We’ll be with you in a couple of days to set those hidden cameras on the trail. They’re top-of-the-range and completely undetectable, so if your traitor heads back that way, we’ll ID them.”

“I appreciate it,” I tell them, meaning every word.

Griffen and I begin the drive back, the sun having long since set.

“The first patrols will be back now. We can park at the old station and walk back in. The guys in the main patrol...” Griffen pauses, and I feel him stare at me. “Are you

even listening?"

"Yes," I sigh, "I was listening and thinking."

"Mmm," Griffen replies knowingly. "Anything to do with what they guys were saying? About Willow and pups?"

"It just hadn't occurred to me. I knew she was Volva...I just didn't think," I say thoughtfully.

Griffen whistles. "And would it be a bad thing? I could see you with some little Rowans running around. Maybe not four hundred years ago, but you've settled down more these past few."

I grip the steering wheel, my fingers digging into the hard material. The thought of children was never something I'd entertained. I would never have brought more life into the world to suffer as I had. Was the world really different now? I have lived long enough to know that it's not always the strongest who thrive. Otherwise, we wouldn't even be dealing with these hunters at all. Could I protect my family better than my parents did?

And what would Willow think if she found out our pups were part vampire?

"There's enough to think about," I tell him. "We have a traitor, hunters on the border, and the Order to think about. I'll worry about pups some other time."

He doesn't say any more, and the truck falls silent, but as I look out at the mountain track, I can't help but picture a little girl with blue eyes and auburn hair.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

The letters on the page began to blur slightly, and I rub my eyes. The tiny ancient text is hard enough to read at the best of times. Running on so little sleep, and with my hormones going wild, I know I can't keep going tonight.

My stomach rolls and I realize I haven't eaten all afternoon. Grabbing my empty mug, I walk down to the cafeteria. The lab is half shrouded in darkness as people trickle out into the evening, and I try not to let the shadows disturb me too much. Truth be told, I prefer it when Rowan or Griffen is around, but I know they needed to help get the new security cameras in place quickly. There's no point if the traitor knows they're doing it.

The lab has been relatively quiet since the data and slides were stolen. I've done my best to track the data personally and move everything to hard copies where possible. That hasn't gone down well with everyone. Rian, in particular, has complained about the extra paperwork and security issues. He seems to take issue with Griffen's presence, saying that he's a beta, too, and should be enough.

I suspect there are bigger issues there, but Griffen says Rian is just trying to assert his position, having inherited it. He's a strong young wolf who just wants to prove himself.

As I pass, I look toward his station and note the monitor is still on, but he's not at his desk. Some of the newer technicians are heading for the door and calling out to say goodbye. I wave and carry on down the corridor. Despite my concerns over the missing data, the lab itself is thriving. Our close links with Sara and the clinic have already proved fruitful, with one of our research projects yielding a new possible treatment for the sudden onset of weakness in some of the elders, which looks

promising.

And I like the people here. I still miss Forrest and the lunas, who have gone out of their way to build friendships with me, but this place is starting to feel like...home. I touch my stomach gently, imagining what home might look like.

I have come close to telling Rowan my secret a couple of times, but something always stops me. I was determined to tell him after he got back from the alphas' meeting, but he seemed so preoccupied. Deep down, I know I'm just being a coward, afraid of what he'll say. We haven't spoken about the future; he talks about the bond, and I feel his desire, but we haven't talked about our feelings or what the future would look like. We certainly haven't talked about children.

I sigh as I wait for the water to boil, adding extra chocolate to my cup. As I pour the water in, the sweet smell and warmth soothes my soul and settles my nerves. I know I can't keep this secret much longer. Looking down, I can see my breasts have already filled out considerably. I'm naturally curvy, and I'm sure it won't be long before the changes to my body become undeniable—especially to Rowan, I think, blushing.

I walk back to my office, take a sip of the hot chocolate, and let out a contented moan. It's rich and smooth, just how I like it. I settle on the couch with my laptop and take out my latest results from the clinic. Comparing them to Kenzie's recent pregnancy makes me feel better, knowing that she was okay, too. But looking at my own results, there are some startling differences appearing—mutations in my DNA that weren't there before. Mutations that look a lot like Rowan's, which is not surprising, but I don't know what they mean yet.

Suddenly aware of the silence all around me, I check my phone. Rowan and the others should be finished soon, and he's going to pick me up. With all the additional security here, it really is the safest place in town, but I can't shake the uneasy feeling that's starting to build.

I hear footsteps coming from the hallway, but the light sensors don't come on, which is strange. I put my laptop down and move to the corridor. Rian is back at his workstation, his face illuminated by the screen. I look around and realize we must be the only people here until another man steps into view. I try to pick up on his scent, and it appears he's human; bizarrely, though, I can't scent Rian even though he's right there. It's like he doesn't exist.

His scent is masked. It was Rian on the trail.

I look at my phone again and notice there's no signal—none. Rian and the man appear to be arguing. My shifter hearing is enhanced, but I can only make out a few words.

"I'm not ready yet," comes Rian's voice.

"You'll have to be," the other man says. "If you want this, it's now, or we'll take you all out."

What have you done, Rian?

Why would they be here now? Even if Rian is mixed up with the hunters, bringing them here to the lab is crazy. They'll get caught. I just need to keep my head down and wait for Rowan and the others. There are only two of them, and surely Rian won't fight against his pack? This has to be some kind of mistake.

I can hear my heart racing as I listen to them move around the lab. They seem to be collecting the boxes of paperwork. I glance at my phone again; there is still no signal. They must be jamming the network. I hear a door opening in the distance and then the scent of more humans; I can't see how many, but this can't be good.

I look at my laptop on the couch, full of data about my pregnancy—and all the Volva

pregnancies. I can't let anyone see it. Moving quickly, I crawl to it along the floor, staying low to avoid the window. I quickly connect the USB stick on my keychain and start a transfer, deleting files as soon as they've uploaded. I feel sick as I listen to the men moving around outside, praying they don't come in here, but I know it's only a matter of time, surely.

The transfer is almost complete; I try to steady my breathing. I know I need to get out of here, but the closest exit is through the main lab, which would mean risking getting seen.

I don't even have time to think, because the door suddenly flies open, and I'm face-to-face with one of the hunters. He's dressed in the same tactical gear I've seen them wear before, his eyes reflecting the same menacing glare filled with hate as he raises a gun in my direction.

I don't have time to react.

But then, Rian bursts in, pushing the hunter aside. "Don't shoot her," he shouts, his voice a growl. "She's half-human." He looks at me, his eyes scanning me up and down. "She can help us."

"What the hell are you t-talking about, Rian?" I stammer, my heart racing. The gun is still pointed straight at me, but the hunter hesitates for a moment before lowering it slightly.

Rian ignores my question and takes a step forward. He's dressed similarly to the others. "She's not one of them," he says. "Not really. She has no wolf at all. And we'll need more like her if I'm going to rebuild the pack." His voice is low and intense, as if trying to convince himself more than anyone else in the room.

"Rebuild?" I say, not hiding the shock in my voice. "What have you done? Where's

Rowan?"

Rian glares down at me, "Don't, Willow. Just shut the fuck up." Then, turning to the hunter, he adds, "She's the top scientist here; she'll be useful."

The blood rushes in my ears. Not for the first time, I wish I could shift and fight properly. Not that I could anyway, with the pregnancy...

The thought of my baby and the reality of what Rian's betrayal means slams into me. What it means for Rowan. I can't let this happen.

"He's my mate, Rian. You can't think I'd betray him, that I'd help you," I say.

The hunter's eyes shoot back to me, and he growls at Rian, "She's the halfling alpha's mate?" He raises the gun again. "I don't care if she's useful or half-human; she's been fucking a monster."

I don't understand what he's saying, but I know I have to do something. I realize I'm still holding my laptop; jumping to my feet, I move at an unnatural speed and slam it into the hunter's face. The crack of his nose splintering under the impact echoes through the room as he stumbles back.

Rian's eyes widen, and he snarls, "You stupid bitch."

I don't have time to respond as the hunter roars and charges at me. We hit the ground, rolling around on the cold tile floor. His hands are everywhere, trying to pin me down. I slam my knee into his groin, feeling a satisfying crunch. He howls in pain and rolls off me, clutching himself. I push him into Rian, and as they both fall, I run for it.

I can hear the shouts behind me as I flat-out sprint for the exit. Suddenly, I hear a

growl right behind me. It's Rian. Without thinking, I turn around to face him, ready to fight. But one look at his eyes tells me he's completely lost control; they're red and feral. His mouth opens in a snarl as he bares his teeth at me, revealing long canines. Then, he lunges forward.

I try to dodge him but am not fast enough; pain explodes in my ribcage as he tackles me to the ground. His weight pins me down, making it hard to breathe, his hot breath on my neck sending shivers down my spine. My heart races as I feel his hand clench around my throat, squeezing tighter and tighter.

All I can think about is my baby and Rowan. I can't let Rian do this. I frantically reach for anything that can help, my fingers touching something in the mess on the ground that feels metallic and long. I smash it over Rian's head, and he falls to the side. I'm barely on my knees before he rounds and kicks me hard in the side. I vomit with the impact, instinctively trying to shield my stomach from the second blow. The whole world starts to go dark, and I hear someone calling for Rian in the background. A third blow doesn't come, but I can't move.

Rowan?

I'm screaming for him in my mind. I've never been able to establish a connection with him. It has always been the other way around. But it feels different now. I feel my mind desperately reaching for him, the tendrils of our bond drifting through the night air, searching for him.

Rowan — our baby.

The pain in my side is unbearable as I curl into a ball, fighting the urge to vomit again. I can hear the hunters moving around in the distance, but the searing pain clouds my vision.

Rowan.

I don't know whether I'm delirious or the bond is working, but suddenly, it feels like I'm in one of the dreamscapes. Rowan runs to me and picks me up, holding me close. He soothes the pain in my stomach, and it feels like everything is going to be ok. I feel his voice, calm and determined.

I'm coming, love. Hold on.

I feel as though I'm smiling as I roll onto my other side. I open one eye and see the hunters have gathered along the hall. There are more of them than I thought, and they're centered around Rian, who's talking anxiously to what appears to be their leader.

"He'll be here soon. You can take out three alphas," Rian says, pacing. "And then you'll go, right?"

The hunter looks disinterested as he turns to Rian. "If you can rid this pack of the halflings and monsters, you can run things quietly. With our say-so."

Rian nods, "I've got all the names here," he says, pointing to the data. "As you can see, there's hardly any vampire DNA; it's all in the elders. Once they're gone..."

Vampire DNA...

I must be delirious, I think. I must be. My mind tries to override the pain shooting through my body as I attempt to understand what I'm hearing: the DNA, the strange mutations, my baby.

I can barely focus as I hear a huge crash near the front entrance, and the hunters begin to shout. I can make out the sound of claws scraping against the floor, and an

inhuman growl sends chills down my spine as I feel my mate's presence.

I see the hunters draw their weapons, but it's too late. Before they can react properly, Rowan and Griffen burst into the room, shifting into wolves as they charge them. Their fur is glistening, almost silver in the dim light, and their eyes are fierce with rage.

Jet and Kaiden follow suit, changing shape just as swiftly. It's like watching a dance as they leap and twist around each other in perfect synchronicity as the hunters scramble.

I try to move, wanting to let Rowan know where I am, but the pain makes my stomach roll again, so I push myself against one of the desks and stay low. From where I am, I see the hunters at the back holding some kind of pointed lamp.

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come out. Suddenly, the whole room lights up as if from the most brilliant daylight. It feels uncomfortably bright, but as my eyes adjust, I see Rowan and Griffen's wolves on the ground, howling in pain.

I feel Rowan's pain through the bond, and it's too much; my vision fades to black.

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I knew Willow was in trouble the moment I felt her reaching out through the bond. Her skills had always been dormant; the fact that she was able to reach me was surprising, to say the least. But, overwhelmingly, my main emotion was pure fear.

Her terror radiated through the bond—physical pain seared along the tendrils of our connection.

Baby? No.

We were already halfway back down the trail, the lab within sight. Turning back to the other alphas, I simply said, “Hunters.” And we ran toward the lab.

The fear and confusion gnawing at my insides feel unbearable as we round the building and see a couple of our vehicles, which are usually kept at the outer checkpoints, parked alongside the entrance. Are they using our own trucks?

I have a sinking feeling that we’re about to discover who the traitor is, the only one who’d be able to give the hunters our trucks and get them into the center of town like this. Someone who knew when the patrols were happening...

“Element of surprise?” Jet says as we reach the bottom of the steps.

“Aye, but I doubt they’ve turned up not expecting a fight,” Griffen mutters as I barrel past him and kick the main doors off their hinges.

“And they’re about to get one,” Kaiden says, appearing at my side.

Without another word, we shift and launch into the fray. Immediately, my eyes fall on the traitor. Rian.

Fuck, I hear Griffen snarl at my side.

I don't want to believe it, but as I watch his face contort from surprise, to fear, and then into hate, I know it's true. I'll have plenty of questions for him later if he survives. I can't see Willow, but I know she's here, and for Rian's sake, she'd better not be hurt.

I lunge for the hunter closest to me and relish his screams as he fails to reach his weapon in time, my jaws clamping down on his arm, snapping as I fling him into the nearest wall.

Looking around as chaos ensues, I still can't see Willow. I throw off another hunter as I head straight for Rian, surprised to see he has remained in his human form. I inwardly shrug. He'll be easier to take down. Or, perhaps he's too much of a coward to fight at all.

Before I can reach him, I see one of the hunters holding something. I turn to Jet to warn him, but before I can speak, I'm blinded by a devastatingly bright light. The pain is instant, a familiar burn I've only felt a few times in my life when groups attacking us harnessed the sunlight, magnifying it to attack our vampire sensitivities.

I feel my skin sizzle and blister under the rays.

I hear Jet growl and see his shadow on the wall as he leaps toward me, knocking me to the ground and shielding me from the painful light. "What the fuck is that?" he says, staring at me in horror.

I look around and see Kaiden has pushed Griffen behind an upturned desk to protect

him; his entire back looks blistered. Cold fury seeps into my veins as I look at Rian and see he's wearing protective glasses and realize what this means—not enough to betray his pack, he also betrays his heritage and the safety we built here.

Centuries of persecution and violence to build a sanctuary here in these mountains. I cannot understand why someone who benefits from the pack would want to destroy it. If Rian wanted to challenge my leadership, that would be one thing, but to expose our secret and use it against us is madness.

“Need. To. Get. Light. Off,” I grit out the words as my body continues to weaken. Jet nods and then shoves an upturned desk down on top of me. I hear the ensuing fight and the crash of men, furniture, and equipment all around me. Just when I think I can't take the pain anymore, the light goes off.

The darkness is a welcome reprieve, and as the intense burn retreats, my mind clears enough to focus on my surroundings. Jet is still near me, literally defending me as I recover. I glance behind me and see Kaiden doing the same for Griffen, who is hunched over, and his back is smoking. I try to reach out to Willow through the bond, but I'm hit with a wall of fear and pain.

She's alive but not okay.

I push myself up, the movement causing me to wince in pain. I see Rian and one of the hunters getting another light gun ready and see pure red. My mate is in danger, and my pack is exposed; I have nothing left to lose.

“Enough,” I bellow, letting my vampire beast surge to the surface. It duals with my wolf for supremacy, my bones crunching and flesh twisting as I morph into a true hybrid of my beasts. My fangs drip with venom, and my eyes burn with immortal rage as I attack.

Rian's eyes widen with despair at the sight of me, his scent of fear and adrenaline filling the entire room. Several of the hunters scream and try to run. I spin around to face Kaiden and see that even he has taken a step backward, caution on his features. I nod once at him, and he squares his shoulders in response. I feel Griffen's presence behind me.

"Find Willow," I say before leaping into the fight.

I slam into the hunter holding the light gun. He drops it as I pin him down. My claws sink into his chest as I snarl in his face, my voice deep and guttural with fury. "You will all die for this."

The overwhelming stench of blood and fear engulfs me as I continue to battle. My inner vampire has taken control, its primal instincts raging within me, making my eyes glow with a feral intensity. The hunters are mere mortals compared to my strength and speed, their weapons futile against my supernatural abilities. Their screams of terror only fuel my thirst for vengeance, driving me to overpower them one by one.

Next to me, another hunter lies motionless, his throat savagely ripped open by Kaiden's attack. Our growls echo through the building as he glances at me with a primal gleam in his eyes before turning back to finish off the remaining enemies. My own wolf is clawing at my mind, trying to regain control, but I push it down. This is not the time for mercy or hesitation. My vampiric beast is where it should be, in almost full control.

As I take out another hunter with a swift blow to the head, I catch a glimpse of Rian running towards the door. Without thinking, I launch myself at him, tackling him to the ground.

"You're not getting away," I snarl as my claws dig into his flesh.

"Please," he begs, his eyes wide with terror. "I didn't know they were going to do this."

"Bullshit," I snap, shifting back to human form, staring down at him as I keep him pinned to the ground. "Where is Willow? If you—"

"She's here," Griffen calls out. "Sara's on her way. She's unconscious but breathing."

The relief that washes over me is short-lived as I look back down at Rian. "Why?" I growl, my fangs millimeters from his neck.

"I...I..." he stammers. "They knew...knew about...about us. They already knew."

I shake my head. It's not possible. "You gave us up. Why?" I spit, slamming him back against the floor.

He whimpers and shakes his head again. "I'm telling the truth. They sent me a message, stuff about the Old World and what the vampires did. They said they knew we weren't all vampires and weren't all a threat..."

I recoil in disgust, my eyes narrowing as I look down at his pathetic and sniveling form. The sound of his voice makes my skin crawl, but a small part of me senses the truth behind his words. Not that it matters now—he is beyond salvation, and my grim determination to serve my own justice only grows stronger.

"And you thought betraying members of your own pack would save you?" I snarled, baring my fangs. "Your own father was a halfling. You carry his DNA. You know of our heritage. What did they offer you?"

I can sense the other alphas gathering around me, their heavy presence casting a somber mood over the lab floor. The scent of blood and death hangs in the air, and

the hunters lie scattered on the ground. I'm briefly aware that the more Rian talks, the more he reveals to Jet and Kaiden, but I'm past caring.

"S-Simon said that if our pack stayed isolated and t-the monsters were eliminated..." He looks like he'll begin losing consciousness soon, so I shake him. "They'd leave us alone. If we stayed hidden."

"That's it?" I scoff. "And you believed him?"

"And give them our research, so they'd know who...who was..." he trails off.

"...a monster?" I finish for him, my voice laced with disgust.

I stare at him for a moment, wondering at what point he felt his DNA was far enough removed from his vampire heritage to no longer consider himself a monster. I glance sideways at Jet, his expression set hard in anger and disbelief. Is there more betrayal to come? So many years trying to keep my pack safe, and this is what it has come to. It feels like a history that repeated itself so many times before has simply caught up with me again.

Betrayal and hatred.

"We've got a live one," Kaiden says, dragging a half-conscious hunter toward the center of the room. I glance over.

"Good. We need someone to question," Jet murmurs from his place beside me.

Rian coughs up more blood, dribbling onto the hard floor as he turns his head. "T-that's Simon. He's the one in charge."

I nod, staring down at the young wolf who had once shown so much promise. I'm

only glad his father isn't around to see what has become of him. He was a proud wolf who embraced his heritage and understood what it meant to be a beta and defender of the pack. The fact that I was the one who gave Rian the opportunity to follow in his father's footsteps, only to be betrayed, weighs heavily.

I straighten up and look down at Rian, my decision made. I turn to Griffen, who holds Willow in his arms. He returns my gaze with understanding in his eyes. "He betrayed us all," he growls.

Looking around, Jet and Kaiden nod in deference, their eyes narrowed, clearly affected by the carnage around us. I nod once in agreement.

"For your crimes against your pack and for betraying the trust of those who trusted you with their lives, I, Alpha of the Nicholson pack, sentence you to death. There will be no trial."

Rian's eyes widen in fear as I grab him by the throat and snap his neck with a vicious growl. The sound of bones breaking silences the room as Rian's body goes limp in my grasp. I want to feel something for the young man who had been on his way to becoming an integral member of our pack, but all I feel is rage and confusion.

"Take the hunter to the clinic, chain him to the damn bed," I snap, turning to Griffen and taking Willow from his arms.

Looking down at her beautiful face, I don't know where the blood on my hands and body and hers begins or ends. She's unconscious but appears to be waking, her face contorted in pain. My rage feels unending as I take in the bruises forming on her neck. I wish I could revive Rian just to kill him again more slowly. The metallic smell filling the air affects my vampire, and it howls, rattling around my head.

"Sara is here," Griffen says quietly, and I hold Willow close, heading for the clinic.

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I sink into the warmth enveloping my body; there are comfortable sheets, and I can smell my mate. My body feels unusually relaxed, as if I'm floating on a cloud. Something nags at the edges of my mind, but it's almost completely brushed away by an all-encompassing sense of peace.

I hear Rowan's voice, low and steady, and it makes me smile. My fingers move, looking for him in the tangle of the sheets. I wonder who he's talking to. I open my mouth to ask him, but something seems to be stopping me.

"She'll wake up," I hear someone saying in the background, and I want to say I am awake, but the words don't come out.

I still feel cozy, but the feeling that I should be doing something only grows. I feel like I'm half asleep, somewhere between waking up or dozing off, and I've just remembered something I need to do...did I forget to run some data? Do I need to tell Rowan something?

Yes. I need to tell Rowan something.

I shouldn't keep it from him anymore. I need to ask him what he's hiding from me, what it means for our...

Baby.

Suddenly, a tidal wave of fear washes over me, and my hands fly to my stomach. I feel a dull ache, almost as if it's far away or partly numbed, as my fingers brush over my skin. Where are my clothes? Why does it hurt?

“R-Row—” I force out. My voice feels strange, as though I can’t speak properly.

I feel a hand brush my cheek, and I already know it’s him. My mate. Rowan’s warmth seeps into my body, and I lean into his touch. “Shh, love. You’re okay now.”

“I’m not,” I mouth the words with very little sound coming out, and my eyes flutter open. The room spins, and my head feels like it’s filled with cotton wool. I blink a few times, trying to make out what’s in front of me. “I can’t see straight.”

Rowan leans down and kisses my forehead, his hand finds mine, and he holds me close. “Sara gave you something for the pain. You’ll be okay in a moment. Just breathe.”

Tears prick my eyes, but I try to concentrate on breathing and make sense of my surroundings. “I-I need to...we need to check...” I know I’m mumbling, but everything feels so mixed up in my head.

Rowan is kneeling beside me, his face etched with worry. “What is it? What’s wrong? Do you need more painkillers?”

I look down at myself, taking stock of the situation. I’m in some kind of gown, and there are sheets tangled around my legs. My skin feels clammy, and I suddenly remember. Rian. He attacked me.

“Rian,” I whisper, fear turning into anger as I think about him trying to hurt me. He’s the traitor. Rowan’s hand tightens on my arm.

“He’s dead,” he says simply. His voice is calm, but there’s a hint of something darker beneath the surface. “You’re safe here, love. It’s over.”

I shake my head, tears beginning to fall as I try to sit up but can’t seem to move

properly. Rowan helps me into a half-sitting position and supports my back with one arm. He then leans closer as he hands me a glass of water.

“Here, drink,” he says. “That bastard hurt your throat, but I can see you’re already starting to heal.”

“I need, Sara,” I say weakly. He nods and goes to move, but I grip his arm, “I’m pregnant. H-he kicked me so hard, Rowan...”

Rowan freezes, something akin to pure darkness crossing his features. It’s enough for me to drop my grip on his arm, my breathing faltering under his unwavering gaze. Seeming to notice my reaction, he reaches for me, his hand trembling.

“I shouldn’t have killed him so quickly,” he says so quietly it’s almost indecipherable.

He turns and leaves the room without saying another word, the door closing softly behind him. As soon as he’s in the hall, I hear a crash, and a strange low growl filled with emotion and rage. Moments later, Sara comes rushing into the room.

“You’re awake, thank god,” she says, touching my arm lightly. “Rowan has filled me in, sort of. He’s kind of on a rampage out there.”

I try to smile at the pack’s kind-hearted doctor, but the pain in my side intensifies again, and fresh tears burn my eyes. “He didn’t know,” I say. “Is he angry?”

“That’s one word for it. He’s going ballistic,” she says, and my blood runs cold; he’s that unhappy about the pregnancy. As if reading my expression, she gasps, “Not about the baby! He’s trying to get into the room to kill the hunter. The other alphas are having to hold him back.”

“He didn’t know,” I repeat sadly.

She rubs my arm, “It’s okay, Willow. Let’s just get you hooked up to some of these machines and check on the little one, okay? How far along are you?”

I open my mouth to answer just as the door opens. Rowan stands in the doorway, looking more disheveled than I’ve ever seen him, his usually groomed hair out of place and his clothes torn from an apparent fight. Behind him, I see Griffen in a similar condition.

“The hunter?” Sara asks them both.

Rowan walks toward me, taking my hand but remaining silent. “Alive until he answers our questions,” Griffen says. “I’ll go wait for the other alphas to arrive.”

With that, the door closes, and Sara continues setting up the machine. “How many weeks?” she asks again.

I can’t bring myself to look at Rowan as I answer quietly, “Eight to ten from the blood tests, and I checked the heartbeat last week in the lab. But I haven’t known long...” I say shakily. “I wasn’t expecting...”

Sara nods as Rowan lets out a shaky breath next to me, his fingers stroking my hand, but he seems unable to speak as Sara switches the machine on. The tiny pads on my stomach feel cold as the monitor runs through a series of beeps. Sara frowns and adjusts the pads. The silence growing ever more deafening. I grip Rowan’s hand as I watch the emotion flicker across Sara’s face. Eventually, she turns the monitor around to us, and I see the completely flat lines. I know what that means.

“I am so sorry,” she says, tears shining in her eyes. “There’s no heartbeat.”

I stare at the screen, the pain in my side forgotten as I feel emotion course through my entire body. Rowan pulls my body against him, and I feel his shoulders shaking as he tries to hold back sobs. “No,” he gasps. “No, no, no...”

Sara slips from the room as we rail against our emotions. Pregnancy has been so rare for so long; carrying to term is even rarer. As I stare at the flat lines on the screen, I simply feel numb. Rowan’s sobs slow, and he simply holds me to his chest. After what feels like an eternity, I lift my hand to his shoulder and turn my face, burying myself against his neck and breathing in my mate.

I thought I knew pain and loss, but I’m not sure I did until this moment.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you,” I say weakly, knowing that nothing I say now will be enough. “I’m so sorry, Rowan. You must hate me for this.”

He shakes his head, “Hush. It’s not your fault.” His voice is raw, but he holds on to me like I’m the only thing keeping him grounded. “I will find everyone involved in this, and we will make them pay. I promise.”

I close my eyes as the tears slide down my cheeks, “And then what? Will we kill every hunter in revenge for our child?”

He kisses my forehead. “Yes. Every last one of them will die.” His alpha power crackles around the room as I feel his resolve. Silence falls between us before he tilts my chin up and asks, “Why didn’t you tell me, love?”

I take a shaky breath, my eyes returning to the monitor, unable to tear my eyes from the flat lines that signify my baby’s death.

“I was scared,” I admit softly, “I didn’t know how you’d react...or the pack, and I...I needed to understand the DNA mutation. I needed to get my head around it first.”

I can't bring myself to look at him as I hear him sigh sadly, "I would have been happy, love. So happy. To have a child with you would be more than I ever dreamed possible."

I lean against him, allowing his wolf to try and calm my grief even as my tears fall, his very essence warming the broken shards of my heart. A soft knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts, and I look up to see Sara peering around the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you both," she smiles sadly. "The other alphas are here, and the lunas would like to see if you're okay. I can send them away if you're not ready."

I shake my head, "No, it's okay. They're my friends." I wipe my eyes and look up at Rowan. "It's okay."

"Only if you're sure, love," he replies. When I nod, he tells Sara she can let them in. He then steps back slightly as Kit, Senna, and Kenzie file slowly into the room, grief etched on their faces.

"Oh, Willow," Senna says, stepping to my bedside and taking my hand. "Sara told us, we are so sorry."

Kenzie and Kit step forward, offering their condolences, and I allow my tears to fall again. I look at the lunas and feel such gratitude that they are here. I only wish I'd told them about the pregnancy, too.

Rowan squeezes my hand, and when I look at him, I can see how affected he is. Tears glisten in his eyes, making them shine silver, and his luminescent skin glows even more under the clinic lights.

As our eyes meet, I'm suddenly reminded of the conversation I heard between Rian and the hunters after he attacked me. He was saying something about getting rid of all

the elders...he mentioned the DNA.

Vampire.

I stare at Rowan, and it's as though the room and everyone else in it falls away. He looks confused for a moment, and then understanding seems to dawn on his features; I feel his trepidation through the bond as we stare at each other. It is as though I've spoken the words out loud. I'm dimly aware of the others talking in hushed tones as Rowan takes a step back.

"I'm going to go talk to Grayson and Cade," he says quietly. "I'm sure Kaiden and Jet will be briefing them."

I want to stop him, to ask him about what Rian said, but there are too many people in the room, and I know my questions would probably make me sound insane. Vampires don't exist. Did they ever exist? Was I just hallucinating?

Deep down, I know I wasn't. I've always known, haven't I?

He stops at the door and looks at me. I hear Senna talking about needing to eat and unpacking some food she's brought, but I can't tear my eyes away from his. All the answers to my questions are reflected in his gaze.

I see him turn to go, but something catches his eye, and he rushes forward to the monitor, spinning it around toward me. The flat lines have been replaced with a steady rhythm of peaks. "G-get Sara," I say, not daring to consider what this means.

"What's going on?" Kenzie asks, stepping forward to stop me from falling out of bed as I twist to see the screen better. Senna gasps and then runs from the room to find Sara.

Sara appears, and Kenzie moves to the side, turning to the other lunas. "Let's step outside and find the men, give them some space." She squeezes my hand. "We're here for you."

The moment the door closes, Sara grabs the monitor and stares at it, shock written all over her face. She turns to me and adjusts the pads that were still on my stomach. Silence falls in the room as the monitor readjusts. A second later, she turns ashen-white, her eyes widening. "I...I don't understand." She glances from the monitor to my stomach and back again.

"What is it, Sara?" I ask, fear squeezing my heart, and I hold my breath.

She looks at me, inhaling slowly. "There's a heartbeat now..."

I stare at her, my mind whirling with so many questions that I can't form a coherent thought. How is this even possible? Is it real?

"I-impossible," Sara mumbles. She looks to Rowan, who appears completely dumbstruck. "Have you ever? Have you ever known anyone do this? The baby was...gone. I'll take some blood. Run t-tests."

He grabs my hand, a smile breaking out across his face. Genuine happiness radiates from him. "No, but I don't care," he laughs. Our baby is okay."

My heart feels like it might burst from my chest as I take in the reality. Our baby is okay. But will it stay okay? I need to know why this is happening before I can be certain our baby is safe. I need to know the truth.

One truth I do know is that Rowan will make a wonderful father, whatever his DNA. The moment he knew our baby was alive, I felt a surge of pure love through our bond, and I know that whatever happens next, I want to face it with him.

Turning to him, I take a deep breath and say, “Tell me, Rowan. Please. Is this because our baby has vampire DNA?”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

Nothing mattered except saving Willow, stopping the hunters, and punishing the traitor, Rian. And then, after...nothing mattered except the Willow and the baby.

Our baby.

I stare at the rhythmic line of our child's heartbeat and rest my hand on Willows's still-flat stomach in reverence. That I would have a mate and a child? I would never have believed it.

Sara finishes taking Willow's blood and slips from the room with a sympathetic smile.

Thanks to the hunters and Rian's treachery, I may lose everything. Kaiden and Jet fought alongside me, but I know they heard all our pack secrets revealed. I'm sure they will have their questions. I don't want to go to war against men who have become my friends—but it wouldn't be the first time.

And I don't want to lose my love.

I know she's waiting for an answer. I saw that she knew the truth when she looked into my eyes. Now, she's just waiting for confirmation, or at least some kind of explanation. Perhaps she's hoping I'll deny that vampires are real or that our child will harbor such a beast.

I've never considered myself a coward, but as I prepare to tell her the truth, I know it's genuine fear coursing through my veins. I know they say the truth will set you free, but that has not been my experience in life.

“I don’t know why the child lives,” I say honestly, my voice hoarse. “I know there are many myths about vampires, but I’ve never heard of something like this. I know many who have died, none that have come back to life...like this.”

She seems to think about my words, and I can practically see her scientific brain at work as she appears to consider her next words carefully. “Tell me I’m not crazy, Rowan,” she says quietly, “I heard them. Rian and the hunters. They were talking about your vampire DNA and killing all the elders who have it.”

A story as old as time, I think to myself as I sink into the chair beside her bed. I know she expects a simple answer, but this may be the only chance I get to tell who I really am. I’m not sure it will matter, but she is my mate, and our child lives; I have to try.

“I don’t remember much about my parents,” I begin, “but I know they loved each other, and me. For a time after their death, there were people who knew them, and they told me the stories of how they met and how happy they were to have a child. Unfortunately, not everyone was happy about their love.”

I take a deep breath. I’ve never been comfortable talking about my parents or my past. Griffen knows most of it, but it’s not like we sit around talking about it or analyzing our feelings. Sitting here with the weight of Willow’s pregnancy consuming me, I can’t help but imagine how my own parents must have felt.

“My father was the alpha of an ancient pack of shifters that ruled the entire eastern border in France, though, of course, the borders in the Old World were rather different back then,” I add, watching as her brows raise, but she says nothing as I continue, “My mother was different. She had no pack or family and was hunted across the continent. When my father found her, he should have killed her. Instead, he realized she was his mate, and they fell in love. His pack forsook him. They ran...had me...but were eventually killed.”

I can't bring myself to look up as I utter the words I know Willow has been waiting for. "My mother was a vampire."

Deafening silence falls over us. I realize I'm still holding her hand, almost unwilling to let go in case I never get to hold it again. I stare down at her slender fingers in mine and wait for the reaction that is sure to follow. After a pause that stretches forever, I hear her let out a steady breath. "That does make sense."

Her calm voice takes me by surprise, and I risk a glance, finding her staring at me with compassion shining in her eyes. I try to speak, but my words die on my tongue as she gives me a gentle smile. "Tell me about them. Your parents. The vampires," she says.

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath before continuing, "The vampires were a mix of good and evil, much like everyone else in the world. Some wanted to live in peace with humans, others saw them as nothing more than food. It was those who considered them lesser beings that caused the most harm. The wars between the vampires and shifters intensified around the same time. Eventually, hunters rose up against them, seeking to eradicate them from the planet. The vampires had weaknesses, like enhanced light. Eventually, both hunters and shifters killed so many of them that true vampires ceased to exist. Even halflings, like me, are a rare occurrence now, hunted into near extinction until a safe haven was created."

Willow's eyes go wide. "The Nicholson pack."

I nod. "So much death, Willow, so much pain. There was a time when I relished the fight, and perhaps I still do in some ways. But as the centuries went on, the wars remained the same—the same hatred, the same righteous killing. I grew tired; I wanted my people to find peace."

Willow squeezes my hand, speaking softly, "And now you find yourself hunted

again.”

“I am used to it, love. I will not be defeated.” I lift her fingers to kiss them. “But I will not let them hurt you or our baby. I will kill them all. This is not your fight.”

She sighs, suddenly looking conflicted, and I hold my breath, afraid of what comes next. “There’s something you should know...about me,” she says quietly.

Stroking her hand, I smile, asking, “Is it a day of revelations?”

She smiles weakly, and I feel my heart clenching. “It’s quite strange, I think. Our stories are a little similar. My mother was a shifter, and my father a human.” I nod, already knowing she is half-human. “They were so happy. We were so happy. I didn’t even realize what it meant. To be different and hated for it. One day, they came—the hunters, they came for my parents. I think my parents always knew they would eventually.”

“But why?” I ask, feeling the weight of her raw emotion through the bond.

“My father,” she replies shakily, “was a hunter who fell in love with a shifter. He was a traitor to them.”

I pull her close to me as her tears fall, kissing the top of her head. “But a hero to us, no? That a hunter can fall in love with a shifter should give us all hope that hatred can be overcome,” I whisper into her hair. “We are made from the same type of love. One that has to overcome.”

The sound of her soft voice soothes me as she speaks again. “You’re a good man, Rowan. Your parents would be proud of you.” She pauses for a moment before adding, “And I am proud to be your mate. To have our baby.”

The hope and acceptance in her voice almost floors me; I sweep her into my arms, my lips brushing hers, demanding entry. Her lips part, and I taste her, the sweetness of her mouth mixed with tears. Her arms wrap around my neck as I deepen the kiss, her body pressing against mine, craving the contact, our tongues dancing slowly. I can feel the shivers running through her body, which only intensifies my connection with her.

We break apart, panting, and I look into her eyes. “I won’t let anyone hurt you or our baby ever again.”

She nods, tears streaming down her face, “I know.” She sniffles, then smiles slightly. “You are mine, too, you know.” Her hand runs down my chest to my stomach, making my eyes cloud with lust.

“Now, love.” I chuckle, “Sara will have my head if I allow you to get too excited.”

“Allow,” she laughs. “Will you allow me to show you how much I love you when we go home.”

We both pause, realizing the gravity of the words that have been spoken. She blushes and looks almost uncertain for a moment. I brush the hair from her face and kiss her again reverently. “I love you, Willow. I will spend the rest of this long life telling you that every day.”

We are disturbed by Sara and the nurses, who are desperate to check on the baby again and talk to Willow about the blood results. After assuring me that everything looks good, I slip from the room and let the lunas see Willow again. The clinic's mood is dramatically different from a couple of hours ago. I emerge into the hall to whoops of joy, everyone celebrating our miracle baby.

Jet steps forward and slaps my back. “There could be no better news today.”

I nod, fighting back a wave of emotion. “We can’t believe it either,” I manage.

“Thank the goddess,” Grayson smiles. “Truly a miracle.”

Kaiden steps forward and shakes my hand. “It’s been a hell of a day, Rowan. We’re all thrilled and relieved for you and Willow.”

I look around the corridor, taking in the warmth of my fellow alphas. Knowing that Kaiden and Jet witnessed the hunter's attack, the revelation of my vampire beast, and the conversation with Rian, it seems even more incredible to have their support. After the cheers and congratulations die down, I steady myself for the difficult things that need to be addressed.

“Kaiden, Jet,” I say, addressing them and then other alphas. “You came to our aid today. We have much to discuss regarding our captive and our next steps. I need retribution, but we need to know what that looks like.”

The men around me nod soberly. The hunter will be interrogated, and we will determine if the wider threat is contained or if there are more imminent attacks. I take a steadying breath before continuing, “Today, you learned of the Nicholson pack heritage. Our vampire heritage. We have fought long and hard for our peace, and we don’t want war, especially with those we consider friends. It’s clear the hunters know about us, our weaknesses...”

Kaiden steps forward. “You are our fellow alpha and friend, Rowan; nothing I heard here today changes that.” His eyes shine with sincerity as he speaks, nodding toward Jet. “We saw a shifter fighting for his mate. And you may have something extra, but that changes nothing for me.”

Jet nods. “I saw a fighter today...and a friend. I’m proud to stand with you, vampire or not.”

Alder chuckles, “Aye, I always thought there was something of the oldest families about you, Rowan. And it never meant anything more to me than that.”

I stare at him for a moment, the knowing glint in his eye. It’s true that Alder comes from the packs in Scotland and is probably old enough to remember the end of the vampire era himself. I nod gratefully at him. “I appreciate that, Alder; I traveled through Scotland when I left the Old World. I knew your clan; they were good people.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Alder scoffs, laughing good-naturedly.

With a promise to sit down and discuss the ramifications of the Nicholson vampire heritage later, when Willow is settled and the pack has dealt with the captive hunter, we focus on the immediate potential threat of further attacks. I call in our reserve pack members and divide them into patrols while my fellow alphas arrange for their own land to redouble defenses.

“We simply don’t know if this was a one-off or if there are more hunters out there,” Cade points out.

“Before Rian...died,” I say, “he told us that the captured hunter is their local leader, Simon. It seems unlikely that another attack would be imminent without their leader, but we need to increase patrols and surveillance. Rian may have helped them, but they still managed to infiltrate the very heart of my pack. That cannot ever happen again.”

Everyone nods gravely, equally aware of how badly today could have ended.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

“She’s here, shush everyone, she’s here.” I hear muffled voices and scattering feet as I walk up the steps to the lab.

I can’t help but smile at the less-than-subtle surprise welcome-back party. Rowan did a terrible job keeping it a secret anyway, with his insistence that I visit the lab at a specific time and wear one of my nicest dresses. He was practically shooing me out the door as we left, and now he’s trying and failing to hide his mischievous smile.

The lab doors have been repaired, and although I can’t see inside yet, I know the whole pack has been working hard to repair the devastation caused by the fight with Rian and the hunters. The building appears brand new, the doors look heavier, and I notice the enhanced security cameras that I know Kaiden and Grayson helped install.

I didn’t realize how much damage had been caused when the hunters attacked, but in the days after, as I recovered at home, Rowan had filled me in on the structural damage, broken machines, and ruined research. Thankfully, most of the research was backed up, and Rian couldn’t access all of it after our suspicions were raised about the lab being compromised. Still, it was clear the hunters would have been able to pass some information back to the Order, and we have no way of knowing what that will mean in the future.

I sigh deeply, pausing on the steps, and Rowan squeezes my hand. “Hey, are you okay?” he asks, looking concerned.

I shake the thoughts from my head and turn to him. “I’m just thinking about the research—”

He shakes his head comically, stopping me in my tracks. “No, no,” he laughs, “there is plenty of time for us to talk about the research. Will you indulge me a moment?”

I roll my eyes at myself and nod, laughing. If being with Rowan has taught me anything, it’s that I deserve a life beyond my research. I need to make space for the family we are creating—and that includes our wider family, the pack. I can still hear the hushed tones of the people inside, and Rowan clears his throat dramatically as if trying to mask the very obvious gathering taking place inside.

I feign ignorance and smile as he pulls me to the door and uses one of the new key cards to open it. The room is shrouded in darkness, but even without my shifter senses, I could make out the shining silver banner and shadows of my badly hidden friends and colleagues.

“Surprise!”

The room erupts into cheers as the lights come on, and I see just how many people have turned out. The room is filled with my colleagues from the lab, Sara, members of the clinic who cared for me, Griffen with the other pack alphas, and my luna friends. Finally, I see Forrest standing with Kaiden and Kit, beaming at me.

In a clamor of well wishes and excitement, Rowan leads me through the crowd. The lab looks immaculate and very festive, decorated with bunting and banners. Food and drink stations are dotted throughout the main reception area.

Sara rushes over and hugs me. “You are glowing, Willow,” she smiles. “Rowan has clearly been looking after you at home.”

I blush because it’s true. Nodding, I return her embrace, waving at the clinic nurses who helped me so much after the attack a couple of weeks ago. Next, I turn and see Kit, Senna, Kenzie, and Forrest smiling, waiting their turn to greet me. Rowan is

shaking hands with the other alphas, and seeing the happiness radiating from him fills my heart. I smile widely at Forrest before he leans in and hugs me.

“It is so good to see you,” he sighs. “This has been quite the drama to watch unfold from afar. It’s so good to be here.”

I feel the lump form in my throat as I look around at my friends and feel a wave of support emanating from them, “I’m just so glad you’re all here.”

“Was it a big surprise? Seeing us all here?” Senna asks, grinning.

“Umm,” I laugh. “No. Rowan has been like a big kid wanting to show off the finished lab. They’ve put so much work into it all.”

“Did he ruin the surprise?” Kenzie says, rolling her eyes.

I chuckle, “Not intentionally; I think he knew I’d be excited about the lab reopening. He must have to make us all get so dressed up,” I say, gesturing to everyone’s semi-formal outfits.

I don’t miss how Kenzie’s eyes go wide, and Kit nudges her in the side. Before I can ask, I see their eyes look beyond me, and I turn to see Rowan standing behind me, the whole room falling silent.

My mouth goes dry as I take in the intensity of his handsome face. Confusion floods my system as I realize this party isn’t simply for the reopening and my return to the lab; I glance around and see smiling and expectant faces.

“Willow,” Rowan says, stepping forward and taking my hands. I feel them tremble in his as uncertainty clouds my vision. “I knew I couldn’t really hide a surprise party from you, but I think I have managed a slight deception, all the same.”

I know I must look completely dumbstruck as Rowan drops to one knee in front of me and gazes at me, both his beasts dancing in his silvery, mismatched eyes. “I did you a grave disservice when you joined our pack,” he continues. “Allow me to remedy that by giving you the mating ceremony you deserve. Allow me to tell everyone here how grateful and happy I am that you are my mate and luna?”

Cheers erupt as I nod through tears I didn’t even realize were falling. As he stands, he slips a beautiful antique-looking diamond ring onto my finger; as I stare at it, he lifts my hand to kiss it. “Not my mother’s ring, but one of the many jewels I’ve accumulated over the years from where they lived. I wasn’t sure why I’d kept this particular one until I realized it was meant for you. I think it always was. See, it’s made for you.”

I gasp, staring at the beautiful ring. It fits perfectly. “I don’t know what to say, Rowan.”

“You say your vows, love,” he says, turning me around to see how everyone is creating a stage area behind us. The lights dim as a projection of snowflakes fills the back wall, and music plays. I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

“Was everyone in on this?” I laugh as Forrest hands me some beautiful winter flowers.

As we walk toward the stage, Rowan offers me his arm. “I am exceptionally devious,” he grins.

“Now, repeat after me,” Griffen says, appearing on the stage and looking smarter than I’ve ever seen him.

The crowd cheers as I recite my vows first, my voice barely audible over the noise. Then it’s Rowan’s turn. He doesn’t repeat the same words. Instead, he gazes into my

eyes and speaks as if there was no one else in the room.

“I promise to love you for all eternity, Willow. To protect you and our unborn child with every breath in my body. I vow to love you forever as your mate, to stand by your side when times are tough, and to celebrate with you when they’re good. As much as I can, I will help make the world a better place with you and for you.”

Tears stream down my face as the crowd erupts into cheers and applause, the music swells, and Rowan leans into me, pressing his lips to mine. His lips are soft yet firm, and I melt into him as he tastes like winter and sunshine. The kiss lingers long enough to make everyone hush before pulling back and smiling at me.

“That was perfect,” he whispers in my ear before turning to face our pack and friends.

"I would now like to introduce you all to our luna, Willow," he says, his voice booming through the room. "She is strong and kind and beautiful. She has shown me what love really means."

The room erupts into applause again as he pulls me back into his arms, holding me close. It's a surreal moment, one that I feel like I've been waiting for my whole life. As the night wears on, everyone joins in on the celebration, dancing and laughing.

Eventually, the music slows down, and Rowan leads me to the middle of the dance floor. We sway together under the stars and snowflakes projected onto the walls. It feels like we're the only ones in the world as he dips me back, his lips finding mine once more. I've never been much of a dancer, but somehow, Rowan makes it feel effortless. He presses me against his body, and I'm amazed at how, despite my curves, he makes me feel tiny.

“I think we should make our escape soon,” he whispers into my hair, sending shivers down my neck.

I giggle as I reply, my voice low, “The night does appear to be winding down.”

He chuckles, pulling me by the hand toward the door, only stopping when he sees his beta nearby. “Griffen,” he calls out. “Tell everyone I’m taking my pregnant luna home for some rest after a busy day.”

Griffen pulls a face, and I swat Rowan’s arm in mock protest, but I don’t stop him from whisking me away. We walk arm in arm across the square toward the house, desire and anticipation thrumming between us. Rowan stops me on the steps to the house, gazing down at me.

“I have never imagined a love like this, Willow,” he says. “A mate and a child. A family. You have given me everything.”

I reach out and touch his cheek, his skin appearing even more luminescent in the moonlight, making me wonder for a moment if our own child will have the same stunning appearance. “I have a theory,” I say, “it’s not particularly scientific, though. I think our families wanted us to have this. They lost their lives to hate; I think they wanted us to have this love.”

Emotion shines brightly in his eyes as he nods and kisses me tenderly before scooping me up dramatically and carrying me into the house. “It is tradition, after all,” he exclaims.

I laugh, and I’m about to tell him he’s crazy, but when I look, I see his desire burning brightly in his eyes, and I’m lost for words. I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him, and it’s all we need to light the torch.

We barely break contact as we rush to the bedroom, his strong arms anchoring me in place at the end of the bed. He kisses me again, tasting of pure desire as he begins unbuttoning my dress. Each button pops open with a satisfying sound, and I shiver in

anticipation. He slips it off of my shoulders, revealing my black lace bra. With gentle fingers, he kisses his way down my neck before taking my sensitive nipple in his mouth and sucking gently. I gasp as pleasure shoots through me, arching against him. His hands travel lower, tracing patterns over my belly before slipping under the fabric and finding my soft skin already slick for him. His fingers graze my clit, and I bite into his shoulder to muffle my moans.

"I swear you're even more responsive now that you're pregnant," he says reverently.

I can only nod in response as he increases the pressure. Just as I think I'm about to come, he removes them, and I groan in protest at the loss. With unnatural speed, Rowan drops to the floor in front of me and replaces his fingers with his tongue.

"Mmm, oh my goddess," I mumble incoherently, tangling my fingers in his long dark hair. The bed helps to hold me upright as the waves of pleasure become almost too much.

His tongue works magic on my sensitive folds, his tongue darting in and out.

"Rowan," I pant, "I'm going to come."

He doesn't stop. Instead, he licks faster and harder until I do. I feel myself gushing juices over his face. I'm almost embarrassed at the force of my orgasm, but he looks up at me with adoration as he drags his tongue slowly back up to my clit, circling it before sucking it into his mouth. My knees buckle, and he holds me steady while he continues to pleasure me. When my body has no more to give, Rowan stands and pulls me down gently onto the bed with him. He kisses his way up my body, stopping to tease my nipples again before settling between my legs and removing the last of his clothes, his huge cock springing free.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers, his cock nudging at my wet entrance. He kisses

me, and I can feel my come on his lips as he pushes forward, slipping inside of me in one smooth motion. My walls contract around him instantly, and he groans against my skin. He starts slow, thrusting slowly in and out, each movement causing more friction than the last. His hands hold on to my hips tightly as he begins to pick up speed, pounding into me with a rhythm that borders on desperation. The smell of sex fills the air as our bodies collide, and I can feel another orgasm building as his cock hits a sensitive spot deep inside me.

“You feel so incredible,” he groans, “I-I can’t hold on.”

His words push me higher. “I’m coming, Rowan,” I scream as my release hits me hard. I feel more of my juices squirt around his cock. I can feel him stiffen and grip my shoulders as he pours himself into me deeply.

We lie entwined for what seems like an eternity, his arms a safe haven around me. I can feel him pulsing inside of me as he comes down from his high. He nuzzles into my neck, “I love you so much, Willow,” he mumbles.

I sigh contentedly, “I love you, too.”

And with that, we drift off to sleep in each other's arms, the scent of sex filling the air around us.

I snuggle deeper into his embrace, feeling safe and loved. He sleepily wraps his arm around me, hand resting on my stomach and our baby. I love the feeling of his weight pressed against me, and I know that this is where I belong. Forever.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:30 am

“Here you are,” Griffen says, walking into the kitchen and heading straight for the coffee. “Is the meeting still on today?”

Handing him a fresh cup, I nod. “Sure is, the conference room is all set up. I think Kaiden said the guys would be calling in just after noon.”

“Did you get the files I sent over?” he asks, wandering around the large kitchen island and helping himself to the food Willow left out for us. I nod as he continues assembling an enormous sandwich before sighing, “I was sure hoping the hunters were gone for good.”

I release a breath and empty the remnants of my coffee down the sink. “That would have been nice. It’s no surprise that they were simply regrouping, though. Laying low until the better weather.”

“I’m starting to think it’s never-ending,” Griffen says seriously, “especially with all that we’ve discovered about the Order.”

I chuckle darkly. “Well, I’m starting to think we wouldn’t even know what to do without some sort of adversity. Someone to fight.”

“It helps to have something worth fighting for,” Griffen replies thoughtfully. “Speaking of, where is my favorite bairn?”

I can feel my face lighting up at the mere mention of my beautiful new son. “Willow took Wynter to the lab. I can’t decide if she’s trying to turn him into a scientist really early or if she simply can’t stay away from that place.”

Griffen laughs. “Both, I’d say; Sara told me she caught Willow sneaking through to the lab all the time when she was supposed to be resting. Can’t say her hard work hasn’t paid off, though.”

I nod, knowing that’s an understatement. Thanks to Willow and her extensive DNA sequencing, the interpack Volva research, and the lab’s facilities, we have been able to create new vaccines against the diseases ailing our packs for decades. Countless lives have been improved or saved—so many wolves are back to full health, and fertility rates have improved, with several new pregnancies announced recently, all because of Willow’s hard work. I couldn’t be prouder of her.

At least, I didn’t think I could be any prouder of her until she labored for two days to bring our son into the world. The moment I saw Wynter, it was like all the centuries fell away, and the only thing that mattered was Willow and our family. His iridescent skin is a nod to our shared heritage, and his auburn hair and blue eyes mean he’s the perfect mix of his parents. He is perfection.

The moment I announced his arrival to the pack, we were overwhelmed by the shared happiness and celebrations, especially from our neighboring packs, who have become such good allies and friends. After centuries of avoiding alliances and not knowing who to trust, these past years have taught me that the hatred the hunters are consumed by is no match for our resolve. They will never win; not when I have a family to protect.

I grab fresh coffee, and we head to the newly installed conference room. It still amazes me how pack relations have improved to the point we have a secure link to meet and discuss joint ventures. The first alphas join the call, and Jet and Alder appear on the screen, demanding an update on my infant son. I never thought I’d be one to gush about my offspring, but I find myself doing just that. Kaiden’s face appears on the third screen, and he asks how Willow is; I know he still feels an affinity for her, as she was part of his pack and is friends with his luna. In fact, all the lunas are friends, and I suspect our children will be, too.

When the other alphas join the call, and we've caught up on pack and family matters, Cade and Alder present their findings after their recent trip back to Alder's pack in Scotland.

"Absolutely freezing," Cade mumbles. "Strange but decent folk, much like Alder here."

Alder rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "Cade here fit right in. Anyway, it's freezing here, too." He laughs before becoming more somber. "Sadly, they're well acquainted with the Order, lost good wolves."

"Seems to be the same old pattern," Cade continues, "the Order recruits hunters, hypes them up on hatred and fear, then organizes them to target packs. It gives them weapons and intelligence and controls them from afar. Who knows how many hunter groups are active around the world."

"Weaponized fear," I say grimly, "A story as old as time, no?"

The other alphas nod, Jet speaking up. "So how do we stop being on the defensive here? Why have we been so in the dark about this threat for so long?"

"Alder," I ask, "how many years were the hunters attacking your clan in Scotland before they learned more about the Order? Did they ask other packs if they were also attacked?"

"Many decades, on and off. Defeating one group before another would take their place." He pauses and then laughs. "The only talking they do with other packs is with their fists and teeth."

"As I suspected," I continue. "Shifters are not known for their alliances. Old grievances have passed down through entire generations. We distrust outsiders and are self-reliant. This is not a bad thing sometimes, but this is how the Order has

flourished. We fight them in a vacuum. Packs all around the world may be fighting hunters off, never knowing that other wolves nearby are equally suffering. They are flourishing in our silence.”

Silence falls over the call as we each consider how widespread the Order’s network may be and the scale of the challenge to defeat them.

“So what are we going to do about it?” Grayson speaks up.

I take a deep breath. "Look at what we have achieved here. We have overcome and built alliances. Not only that, but we have also combined our research and discovered more about the Order and hunters in a short period of time than Alder’s clan has in decades or more. There is power in collaboration and friendship.”

“Let’s look at other packs we can contact. I have business connections on the East Coast. I could reach out. Do we have any others that we have an in with?” Kaiden suggests. “Can you speak to the other clans, Alder? Rowan, you’re from the Old World. Is there anyone you can contact?”

My immediate reaction is to say no. But the truth is, you don’t live as long as I have without knowing many people. “Well, most of them would rather see me dead than have a catch-up. But I will think about it.”

We continue to discuss some of the meeting’s main points, but no one pushes me to contact the Old World again. It is true that I think we need to encourage shifters to work together to overcome the threat posed by the hunters and the Order, but that doesn’t mean I want to involve myself in the European pack business. There is a reason I created the Nicholson pack and embraced isolation, after all.

Griffen is on his way out when I hear him meet Willow and Wynter as they arrive.

“My favorite people,” Griffen roars in greeting from the front door, and I hear

Willow laugh. A sound that never fails to soothe my beasts.

Walking into the hall just in time to witness Griffen blowing raspberries like a goofball at Wynter, I pull Willow in for a kiss as she's trying to take her coat off.

"Wait," she laughs.

"I simply can't, love," I chuckle, kissing the top of Wynter's head and allowing their presence to wash over me, calming my wolf again.

Willow

I can feel his waves of emotion through the bond, and I know something has been bothering him since the call with the alpha alliance. I don't want to push him, though, so I let him distract himself by loving our little boy.

To see such a strong man cradling his baby son, caring for him so gently, makes my heart swell. Wynter may have only been with us for a few weeks, but it feels like he was always meant to be ours. I know every parent says that, but the change I see in Rowan's eyes when he looks at his son feels transformational. He says he has found true peace within our family, and I see that is true.

That's why I feel saddened by his turbulent emotions now. I wait for him to settle Wynter in his crib and return to the kitchen island, where I'm preparing dinner. I stop what I'm doing and walk toward him, wrapping my arms around his broad, muscular body. He

immediately returns the embrace, his hands skimming my body until I blush and bury my head against his chest. Pregnancy has only enhanced my curves, and while it's still taking some getting used to, Rowan only ever makes me feel good about myself. I'm slowly starting to see myself more through his eyes. Somehow, he always knows the right thing to say or do to make me feel beautiful.

“Tell me about the call with the alphas,” I say. “How was Cade and Alder’s trip? I bet they drove each other crazy.”

His deep chuckle reverberates through my body, and he doesn’t disagree. Instead, he tells me about the clan and how the Order is using humans’ fears about shifters to recruit them into becoming hunters. Hearing the potential scale of the Order around the world, I can’t help but glance over at Wynter and fear for his future. Since becoming a mother, I can understand more than ever why Rowan formed the Nicholson pack and embraced isolation after all he endured in the Old World. Losing both our parents to hatred has given us a unique understanding, but it also makes me even more fearful.

“Is that what’s bothering you?” I ask gently. “I can feel you’re conflicted. Is it about the meeting?”

He strokes my hair, kissing my ear and sending goosebumps dancing across my scalp. I think he’s trying to distract me for a moment, but then he pauses. “We all made some good points about how, by working together, we have made progress in stopping the hunters and uncovering the truth about the Order,” he explains. “If Alder’s old clan stopped fighting with neighboring packs, they might do better against the threat. If all packs understood the Order and how hunters are recruited, we may be able to defeat them.”

“Not to mention all our advancements, including the Volva magic,” I add.

I feel him nodding against me, “Quite, love.”

“I’m confused,” I admit. “These are good ideas, why don’t you seem happier?”

“I was asked if I had any contacts in the Old World to share information with and build alliances,” he sighs. “Of course I do. But I left all that behind me. We have our life here; I have you and Wynter. And I wish to leave all that in the past. My father’s

pack, for example, I have no interest in hearing about how much they hate me. The packs I grew from nothing in the Dolomites that now rule that region hunted me across Europe. They were my brethren once, and they turned on me in the most cowardly way. How can I work with these people? Do I simply trust that time changes people?."

I lean into him, letting my love travel through the bond as I speak. "It has changed you, has it not? I think your parents would be proud of you. The Order threatens us all, including Wynter. I think we can do whatever is necessary together. You're not alone now."

"And neither are you, love." He says, tilting my head to kiss me deeply. Just then, Wynter stirs, and Rowan steps away to tend to him. It's clear that Rowan knows it's a good idea, but I understand his reticence. We're all learning that we're stronger together, but it's not easy to forget the sins of the past.

Later that evening, I'm getting ready for bed as Rowan tiptoes into our room. The master suite was reconfigured, so the nurse's station is connected, and I can't help but giggle at his attempts to not wake Wynter as he closes the door.

"I think I have the magic touch," he says proudly.

"Oh, I know you do," I smile as he pulls me closer.

He kisses me gently and then pulls away slightly to look at me. "I think you are right," he says, "We will do whatever is necessary to protect Wynter. The Order has become successful by building a network, and so must we."

I reach up to cup his cheek. "But you won't do it alone. You have a family who loves you now."

"I love you, Willow. I fear nothing with you at my side, love."

“Except for your son waking up,” I laugh. “I love you, too.”

He chuckles and then kisses me again, sweet to begin with and then increasingly hungry with desire. “Let me show you exactly how much I love you,” he murmurs as he pulls me down to the bed, his firm hands roaming my body.

As we lose ourselves in each other, all thoughts of the battles to come fade into insignificance, replaced only by thoughts of love.

THE END