



# Second Shooter (Betas in Waiting #28)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Win has spent her life on the run. Caught once, she has resolved to never be in that position again. She can be in two places at once and watch her own back.

Win survived being taken by the Elite and got herself home again. They didn't dare take her twice.

Now, Win's sister has been duped into leaving the safe zone and is out where the Elite can capture her, so she calls for help, and help arrives.

Massacring the brutal elves is the highlight of her week. Taking photos at a wedding as she filled in for a photographer who cancelled is a close second.

Working to save her family and free her friends and those like her, Win sets out to break the Stronghold and start a life after panic. It's a good thing that others have the same goal.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win jolted upright at the jangle of her phone. She dug it out from under the pillow next to her and sat up as she answered. “Hello?”

“ Win, this is Aggie. ”

“Uh-huh.” Win pawed hair out of her eyes.

“ My photographer flaked on me for this wedding today, and I was wondering if you could do it in a subdued style? Fifteen hundred bucks today and another fifteen hundred when the photos are presented. ”

Win yawned. “What’s the dress code?”

“ Formal. You can wear anything dark .”

“Cool. Cool. How long do I have?”

“ The bride is on the way to her hair appointment. ”

“Right. What is she like?”

“ She’s sweet. It’s her association with another photographer that’s the problem. Alexi is going to be at the wedding, and the family wants to have him as a guest. Harry can’t stand to be observed, and he is terrified of having Alexi watching him. He cancelled but is trying to hold onto the deposit.”

Winifred headed to her closet and found a bias-cut dress in a midnight blue that had

simple lines and she could move in. “Send me all the info, including the shot list and a link so I can see his style. She’s doing a getting-ready setup?”

“ Oh, thank you, Win. Yes. The list is on its way.” The intense relief rushed out through her voice. “ I will have coffee waiting and a pastry. ”

“Right. Is my appearance covered in your contract? I don’t want to deal with that again.”

“ It is. A second shooter can be assigned at my discretion as long as the shot list is complete and four hundred usable images are presented. ”

“Right. Extra memory cards.” Win put the cards in her bag and verified that she had three charged battery packs and a spare charger. Her spare camera was packed and would be hidden in her car.

“ The guests are international, and you need to keep your distance. This is an alpha-beta wedding, and the couple’s legion will be there. ”

“Oh, wow. Demon alphas. Okay. The rest of the guests are a blend of alphas?”

“ And betas and omegas. It is a really high-powered and wealthy mix.”

“Fancy sneakers. Got it.”

“ I know you will do great. Get there as soon as you can.”

Win nodded. “I am already in the shower. See you in a few.”

She cleaned up, got into her dress, bike shorts, stockings, and sneakers, and left her hair loose to dry as she got her gear and drove. Ten minutes after the call, she was on

her way to the very exclusive hotel that was becoming known for extravagant weddings and amazing images.

Win drove straight to the hotel and parked at the far end of the lot. She verified that the deposit was in her account and smiled. Agatha was always prompt.

Win got her bag and her favourite camera. She wrangled her hair up into a ponytail, flipped it on itself a few times to make it look fancy, and headed for the hotel's main entrance.

She asked for the concierge, introduced herself quietly, and Agatha bolted toward her. "Ohmygod, you made amazing time, Win. Hector, this is the photographer for today. Harry bailed, and Win has agreed to step in."

"Mr. Nickelson is interested in this day running smoothly."

Win nodded. "So am I. Please show me to the areas where photos are common. Or have a staff member run me around so you can get back to today's urgencies."

Hector nodded. "Thank you. Callie, can you show this lady the areas where wedding photos are frequently taken?"

One of the clerks at the desk nodded and came toward her.

Win nodded. "I am not trying to take anyone away for long. I need to get to the bridal suite."

"I will show you to the suite after I show you the grounds."

"Thank you. Let's go." Win smiled. They began to walk with long strides, and half an hour later, she knew where her sites were and where she needed to be.

Callie walked her to the bridal suite and whispered, “Good luck.”

Win nodded and knocked. A woman in a dark orange gown answered. “Yes?”

“Hello, I am the photographer assigned by Agatha. Apparently, Harry found out Alexi would be here and pissed himself.”

The woman with white hair smiled. “That sounds likely. Who are you?”

“Win. Second Shooter Photography.”

A voice came from inside. “Let her in. It will be a bit of a relief. Actually, Harry’s pulse always picked up when we mentioned getting the bride ready.”

The door was opened, and Win walked in, smiling and being introduced to the matrons and maid of honour. Karo, Luna, Millie, and Wren. Zara was getting her makeup done by the hired artist, and an elderly woman sat in the corner, eating from an elaborate tray.

Win introduced herself to the familiar woman. “Zara, welcome to your wedding day. I am going to begin recording it for you.”

Zara paused and smiled. The blindness in her eyes didn’t detract from her in the slightest. Win lifted her camera, removed the lens cover, checked the light in the room, and got to work.

She had been there for an hour when Agatha came up to check, and she looked at Win. “Win, honey, did you get your pastries and coffee?”

Win was pulled out of her focus. “Huh?”

“Sorry, everyone. Win has low blood sugar. I pulled her out of a sound sleep, and she didn’t have time to prep snacks.” Agatha pulled Win to one side and got a wrapped Danish into her hand.

Instantly, all the ladies were insisting she sit down and eat. A cup of coffee was being poured for her, and she was being asked how she took it.

Win cleared her throat. “I just want to get back to work.”

Agatha snorted. “Then, two pastries and a coffee, and I will set my alarm to get you some food before the ceremony.”

“Fine.” She ate the Danish and then another. When the coffee was in her hand, she downed it. She got up and washed her hands and then nodded to Agatha. “Thanks for the reminder. The second shooter has entered the building.”

Agatha nodded. “Where are they working?”

“Shots of the decorated hall and the photo sites.”

“Excellent. I will stay out of her way.”

Win lifted the camera and got back to work. Weddings went fast, but she was nearly through the bridal suite shot list when they finished, and downstairs, she had done all of the environmental shots.

Alpha-beta ceremonies weren’t religious but, rather, announcements that they had come to an agreement and wanted their friends to celebrate with them.

Wren looked at Win when she and the others were getting their hair done. “You have power.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You aren’t a member of the Book Club?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I work evenings. This became my therapy.”

Wren and the others froze.

Wren asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, I am older than most of you, except Luna, no offense.”

Luna laughed. “None taken.”

“Right. So, the club was starting up and collecting people who had been attacked and helping them out, but when I was assaulted, no one came. There was a bigger issue with someone else, and I was out on my own to heal and regroup. I have tried to make it to a meeting or two, but all the work I could get was evening work. Moving inventory, restocking, that kind of thing. Anyway. No chance for me to join. I hear it’s nice.”

The bride asked, “What happened to you?”

“Something unpleasant, and unpleasant isn’t for wedding days. Emma, you had some gifts for the bride?”

Emma got up and brought the hair stylist for the bride a set of jewelled pins. “My

mother wore these and my grandmother, so aside from me being the something old at this wedding, I thought these would sparkle like stars in your hair.”

Zara smiled, and her eyes sparkled as Win took shot after shot of Emma’s hand setting the pins in Zara’s hair.

Zara ate, and then Agatha came back and let them know that they had thirty minutes to get in place.

The dress went on slowly, and Win took the photos, capturing the moment for those who were not in the room and for Zara, who was humming with excited happiness and would not recall details.

She whispered soft instructions as the gown went on, and then she eased forward to get her in a twist with her legion marks, and with a whisper, they glowed.

Win grinned and said, “All right. Ready to travel.”

There was one last snap of the ladies getting ready to head to the staging space before the walk, and Win got the picture of all of them together. It seemed important.

They headed out. Win put her battery on the charger and kept the first card in a pocket on her dress collar.

The camera was set up, and she was ready for the next run; the lens changed while she walked.

The women picking up flowers was a lovely set of images. Luna and Wren duelling with bouquets was a laugh. They were all in good spirits before she said, “See you up there.”



Zara smiled and said, “Thank you for showing up, Win. This is becoming fun.”

There was a soft knock, and Win looked out at what she recognized as the groom. “Waiting for Emma?”

He nodded. “You are the new photographer?”

“Yes. I am Win. And here is Emma. Wait a moment.” She slithered out and aimed at the door as Emma eased out with her corsage in place. She beamed up at Randolph, and he beamed back.

It was a glorious photo. Randolph began to walk his grandmother to the front of the ceremony space.

She got to the front and tucked herself alongside the groomsmen but had a full view down the aisle. Her second shooter was ready at the start of the walk.

Win took images from every available angle and kept herself as invisible as she could.

The ceremony was sweet, but she focused on things like Randolph and his legion’s expressions as Zara began her walk down the aisle.

That shot was worth the entire day; their expressions of joy, lust, and wonder all blended together.

From there, it was the couple’s photos, legion photos, and family photos. Friends, buddies, and, of course, family counted Randolph, Nikolai, and Alexi, with Alita and the new baby, and Zara, of course.

Alexi was watching her closely, and he had his camera with him. He walked up to her

after she had finished with his family and said, “Do you mind if I take a few?”

She smiled at him. “Please, enjoy yourself.”

His eyes lit up as he realized that she understood, or that was her guess. He began to relax as he took photos after she finished with the shot list.

The rest of the shots were only the first dance, cake cutting, and the reception.

Win looked around and found Agatha, who was rushing toward her with a wrapped sandwich. “Oh, Win, I am sorry. I forgot.”

Win took the sandwich, stood, and ate.

Alexi said, “Cocktail hour is happening.”

She smiled. “I know you are an art photographer, but very few brides and grooms remember to feed the help. I get what I negotiated for and nothing else. This has to last me until the end of the reception.”

Alexi frowned but then asked, “While you are eating, can I look at your camera roll?”

She shrugged and handed it over. “Just don’t delete anything.”

He flicked through the images and slowly grinned. “These are really good. I can hardly wait until they show us the gallery.”

He got to the image of Zara with the gems in her hair, looking over her shoulder where the marks were glowing.

“Oh, wow. They are going to have that everywhere.”

She chuckled. “That would be nice for them. I can hardly wait to see what my second shooter caught.”

“Wait. I just saw you.”

“Yes, that’s the idea. Folks only remember one photographer. That’s the idea, but I get some amazing footage. Right now, she is filming falling flower petals for transitions.”

“Interesting. You really have an eye.”

“Some would say I have two.”

He smiled. “What do you think of these?”

She took her camera back and looked at his screen. “Nice. What are you trying to give them?”

“Reality.”

“I aim to capture an emotion. The weddings are so stressful that folks aren’t at their best. I try and find the best to provide them with memories they didn’t have of the day. Small bits of stillness when their emotions were pure.” She finished her sandwich and folded the wrapper. “And then it all turns to drinking and fucking.”

Alexi spluttered with laughter.

“But for those few moments, when they see the images, there was something there that got to shine through.” She looked at Alexi. “Take all the photos you want to satisfy your muse, but if you catch me in any, let me know, and I will remove myself.”

Alexi frowned. “You don’t like being in pictures?”

“Nope. It isn’t my family and isn’t my day.”

“Oh. Right.”

There was a group of women who were walking out with babies in their arms, and they sat in a corner of the gardens for a chat. Based on their clothing, they were part of the wedding. She switched to a long-range lens and took some close-up images.

“We can go up to them,” Alexi murmured.

“Shhh. You will spook them.” She got some lovely images, and then she switched her lens out.

She smiled. “I am going to head to the kitchen and get some shots of the cake.”

“May I come with you?”

“I thought you would be with your family.”

“We go to a lot of weddings lately.” Alexi chuckled. “They are enjoying being with the other new parents. The cocktail hour will be crawling with them, literally.”

She giggled. “Well, it looks like I have my next assignment then. Now is the time when I try and get everyone into at least one image. It always sucks when you know you were at a wedding, but you can’t prove it.”

Win walked with him, and they chatted for a while before she said, “You know, Harry was supposed to be here, but he heard you would be here, and I think he pissed himself and panicked. Or couldn’t find clean pants.”

Alexi grinned. “His faulty bladder is my blessing. I am very glad to have met you, Win.”

She nodded. “It was nice finally to speak to you as well.”

“We have met before?”

“Not met. Just been at the same place at the same time. You do a lot of family photos and art photos of couples. I take their families and steal their souls at moments like this.”

“I don’t remember you.”

“No one does. Well. Agatha does. I hear it happens with my kind of beta.”

“Oh, you are one of the ones with extras?”

She curled her lip. “That makes it sound like I have three breasts.”

Alexi chuckled. “I mean the betas with special talents.”

“Oh, yes. Well, it was a survival situation in my case. Okay, sorry. Playtime’s over. I have to go back to work.”

Alexi smiled. “I will see you later.”

She nodded and began to record the bits of folks playing, chatting, one alpha balancing a canapé on his nose before he caught it in his mouth.

There were fun moments, serious moments. Baby moments, young child moments. It was a fun time, and everyone was enjoying the day.

She went to the bar and asked for a soda.

“Are you a vendor?”

“Yes?”

“Four dollars.”

“How about water?”

“Three dollars.”

She looked at them. “How about a glass?”

He looked at her and handed her an empty glass. She went to the restroom, turned on the cold tap, and started chugging.

A woman with long brown hair, a pregnant belly, and soft brown eyes stepped toward her. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just paying the price for not thinking ahead.”

“Dinner will be served soon. It smells wonderful.”

“I am sure it will be.”

The woman cocked her head. “I don’t know you, but you feel familiar.”

“Oh, I am Win. I am the photographer. I have taken your picture for a few magazines, Dell.”

The woman was stricken. “I don’t remember you. I am very good at remembering faces.”

“I know. You do try hard. I will see you out there. Don’t let Antonio hog dessert.”

She took two more glasses of water and walked the glass back to the bar, setting it down in front of the bartender.

It was time to finish the night.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

She woke up to her phone ringing again. Damn it.

“Hello?”

“ Win? Oh, the couple and their legion want to thank you for stepping in. Where are you? ”

She looked around and laughed. “In my car in the parking lot. I passed out.”

“ Oh no. What happened?”

“You know. No meal, no soda, no sugar, no dessert. I did the whole day on two Danish and a sandwich with one cup of coffee.”

“ There was a meal for you. ”

“No one told the kitchen, or the person I asked about it forgot or never knew. Fine, I will come and meet the happy legion.”

She got her cameras and brought them with her, slogging back to the hall where the quad was waiting with smiles, and Agatha looked so relieved.

Agatha took a look at her and jolted. “Oh, god. Give me a minute.”

Win walked up to them and smiled at how happy they looked. For this kind of grouping, the big night usually occurred when they formalized their link. Tonight was just a party to celebrate the beta being able to inherit legally and for any and all



children to have a custodial chain.

“Congratulations to you all. It was a lovely day, and I hope to have the raws up in a day or so.”

Zara looked at her with two different eye colours and scowled. “What happened to you?”

She looked at her arm. She was greeny-grey, which meant she was out of power.

“Oh, I am powered by sugar. I also used my second shooter today, and that takes it out of me. I have a rider with Agatha to provide me with things, like food and beverages. Nothing fancy, just stuff. Today, she was so excited, she forgot.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t the first time.”

Agatha returned with a huge pitcher of orange juice.

“No glass?”

“No. They are cleaning up the bar.”

She held the pitcher with both hands and tipped it back, not spilling a drop. She felt the surge through her body and rocked her neck.

Agatha asked, “Better?”

“Better.” She smiled at Zara. “Borrowing souls? Very nice.”

“What?”

Win pointed toward her eyes. “The eyes are the windows to the soul. That’s why the

demons burn them out. So, after your link, you are borrowing their souls to see through.”

Zara blinked and looked at Randolph with a wide smile. “Why didn’t you put it like that? That sounds sweet, not creepy.”

The other two chuckled.

Agatha cleared her throat. “They would like you to go over the images with them in person to find out which ones they want in their wedding album and which they need touched up.”

“Oh. Sure. When?”

Zara asked, “When are you free?”

“Um. I work for a warehouse, so I can move things around. You all look like you have actual jobs.”

Randolph smiled. “How about Wednesday at Lykon’s winery?”

She looked at Agatha. “Can you get me the address and give me a time? My time management is about as good as my ability to remember to eat.”

The broadest of the three was smiling at her. “May she give us your cell number?”

“Sure. Agatha, work number only.”

“Right.” Agatha smiled. “I have another wedding coming up that needs a photographer.”

“No. You know that I worry myself into a coma if I have a certain date and time, plus some couples want a thousand fancy effects that require a big-budget budget... and I still don’t get to eat.”

Zara smiled. “Well, for today, I want to thank you for coming. Alexi was able to enjoy an event, and he only had to pick up a camera when he wanted to, and you let him. You didn’t pitch a fit, and you didn’t storm out. We had three photographers that we were interviewing who pulled out just because Alexi would be here. It was disappointing to find that Harry had pulled out, but we were happy to find out that Agatha had a trusted and reliable photographer in the wings.”

Randolph cleared his throat. “There is just one thing. We haven’t seen any images of your work, so we were just wondering...”

She laughed, hauled her tablet out of the bag, and flicked through a small gallery she had made from the day. This always happened.

The male on the right—Taka—smiled at the images. “This is lovely.”

Zara was crying. “Oh. Oh.” The next moment, she was hugging Win, and Win had to pat her back until she was done.

Randolph smiled. “So, I see Agatha knew what she was doing. Why haven’t we heard of you?”

“I like taking pictures. I don’t like people. I don’t advertise, but a friend who was using Agatha had a photographer fall through, and they called me. Now she knows I exist.”

Lykon nodded. “I get that. The work is everything.”

“Yup. Well, my work is grunt work moving pallets in a warehouse, but this is how I have fun. When fun and work overlap, it can either go very good or very bad. This was my day off.”

Agatha sighed. “She did say she isn’t good with people. I will get you her information.”

Win bowed. “Thank you for the chat. I wish you an excellent and enjoyable few days until I try and find an address for a place I have never been before.”

Agatha smiled. “It’s easy to find. It’s just outside of town. All straight lines.”

“Good. Well, now for a well-deserved rest in a spot that doesn’t have a steering wheel.” She held her cameras, bowed with a flourish this time, and made sure she had her tablet stowed before she left the way she had come, high-top sneakers and a dress that passed for formal in silhouette.

She had made it through the entire day with no breakdowns and only passed out once. It was a banner day for her.

Win got out of her car, brought her equipment inside, and went to take a shower. She used the scrubbing gloves and the poofs to wash her body and then washed the scents of wine and sweat out of her hair. She smelled like fruit, just like a normal beta.

She loaded the memory cards into her computer, and when they were doing their thing, she got the hard drive ready. Once that was set up, she headed to bed.

Win had one day off this weekend, and she was going to lose it all to eating. She set up the preorder on her phone and crawled into bed. When she woke, she was going to hit the order button, and from there, she would eat until she was full. That rarely happened, but it was a goal to shoot for.

Her phone was ringing again, and the allure of living on the side of a mountain with no contact struck her again.

She sat up and grabbed her phone. Mom. She croaked. “Hey, Mom.”

“Win, oh, you sound horrible.”

“Thanks. What’s up?”

“Are you up to family dinner tonight?”

“What time is it?”

“Noon.”

“Oh. Okay. I am having a big food day, so I will cram as much in as I can.”

“Oh. Right. I will put in another roast.”

“Thanks. When do you want me there?”

“Four. We are having a family meeting about Cori’s school trip.”

“Why? Mom. She can’t go.”

“Of course, she can. She earned it.”

“Let me take her to the islands then.”

“She wants to travel with her friends, Win. Come at four. We will discuss it.”

Win growled, and her body flexed. “We will discuss it. If you send her, I am going as a chaperone.”

“Win. You can’t.”

“Put it in for a point of discussion. If she goes, I go.”

Her mother sighed. “Of course, Win.”

She said, “Okay. Off to eat. See you in a few hours.”

Win hung up, stretched, and went to get dressed. Her first delivery was arriving in twenty minutes, and she still needed to make her backups of the wedding photos. She didn’t screw with people’s memories.

Win set up the hard drive and began the raw copies. Those were for her. Her next few days were going to be spent editing and tidying up the files.

She started to work on the files while she waited for her food. Most of them needed some light cropping, and a few needed brightening, but all in all, she had had a pretty good day.

The pasta arrived, and she kept working. She drank plenty of coffee, had three rounds of takeout, and had gone through the first five hundred images, uploading a batch of them to the private gallery.

She worked right up until the moment she had to leave. The more she did now, the less she would have to do later.

Win saved everything to a separate hard drive and put her shoes on. The photos could not be recreated easily, so she copied the hell out of things and kept her files for one

year after any wedding she worked.

She put on a jacket and got her purse and her keys. Time to head out and drive the twenty minutes to her parents' house.

Win locked her apartment and skipped down the stairs to her car. She got in, buckled up, and was on her way.

When they were all sitting around the table, her mom asked, "So, Win, you were at a wedding yesterday?"

"Yes." She nodded. "It was pretty. The bride was lovely."

Her dad smiled. "Ever think of having one of those for yourself?"

She looked at her father and raised a brow. "That's a doubter."

He sighed. "Come on. You are the oldest. It is strange that Maggie got married before you."

"Not strange. It is normal." She looked at her family. Three siblings and the two generous and open-hearted people who had taken them in. The girls were of different ethnicities but had one thing in common. They were all genetically half-Elite.

Maggie was twenty-five and had just gotten married to her husband, Thomas. They were a nice, cheerful young couple, and their wedding had been gorgeous.

Maggie smiled. "I can find a nice guy to hook you up with."

"Hookups aren't a problem, Mags." She flicked a glance at her sister.

Maggie turned scarlet. Thomas put his arm around his wife and said, “She’s told you to let it go, so let it go.”

Cori cleared her throat. “I have won a place on the team, and we are going to nationals on Thursday.”

Win straightened. “I thought we were discussing this.”

Her mom said, “We are. We are looking to see if anyone can afford some spending money for her so she can have a really good time.”

Win ran her hands through her hair. “It’s dangerous.”

Cori frowned. “There hasn’t been a child or woman taken from the city in over a decade.”

Win rolled her eyes. “The city is protected. The rest of the world isn’t.”

Her father said, “Win, relax. I am sure that it will be fine. She’s with a group of other students. She won’t be on her own.”

Cori smiled. “It’s going to be fun. I will be fine.”

“Do you already have chaperones?”

“Yeah. Why? Oh. No, definitely not.” Cori shook her head. “I am not going to have my sister on this trip.”

Win sighed. “Give me your phone.”

“Why?”



“I am putting a tracker on it and installing a hot button. If you tell it to call me, I will be there in three minutes. You just have to hold on for three minutes.”

Cori frowned. “You are really worried about this.”

Win nodded. “I am really worried about this.”

Their mom said, “Just because something bad happened to you, Win, doesn’t mean it will happen to Cori. It is highly unlikely that they will find her in a group of girls.”

Win stared at her. “You forgot.”

“What, Win?”

“You forgot that I was with a bunch of friends at the beach when I was grabbed. All out in the sun. Three thousand people at the beach. They just grabbed me and disappeared. I managed to get myself to the hospital, but I don’t want anyone to go through that.”

Her parents paled. Mom muttered, “I... forgot.”

Dad looked at Cori. “You aren’t going.”

“I am. You can’t stop me. You already said I could. I worked and made the money for the trip. I earned this. I deserve this. I am going. I don’t care what happens.” Cori thumped her fist on the table.

Win sat back and nodded. “Well, you will have what I didn’t. Someone waiting to help if I needed it. Like I said, when you call me, there will be three minutes, and I will be there.”

Cori crossed her arms. “I am not going to need to call you.”

“I hope so.” She smiled and switched topics. “Now, who wants to know which celebrities I saw at the wedding yesterday?”

The conversation switched, and they chatted as if the previous warning hadn’t occurred.

The wedding was the talk of the evening, and Cori was pressing for images, but Win just looked at her. “You know I am not going to show you images before the couple has seen them.”

Cori smiled. “Yeah, but the ones in the tabloids aren’t any good.”

Win blinked. “Tabloids?”

“Yeah. They must have been quite a distance away. The lens is horrible. No drone images either.” Cori opened her laptop and showed the gallery of blurry images taken of the bride and her legion.

“Oh, the outdoor shoot. Right.”

The image of a blurry Win with Alexi standing next to her, heads together, was suggestive of more contact, and Cori asked, “Who’s this?”

“Alexi. He’s a bound beta to an alpha and omega. He is also the best photographer in the city, so we were swapping images.”

Cori snorted. “Sure. Sure.”

Win nudged her with her arm, and they continued looking through the fuzzy images

with the hilarious taglines.

No one was paying attention to her in the images. It was obvious that she was the photographer.

She looked at Cori and took out her phone, sending her three hundred dollars for the trip. “I know I am a worry wart, but I don’t want you to be scared; I want you to be aware. There is a weird feeling in the air when they arrive. The hair on your arm will stand up, and the back of your neck will feel it. Your hair will prickle up, and your eyes will feel electric. I don’t know how else to describe it, but if you feel any combination of those and aren’t licking a battery at the time, call me. I will hide until I know they are there. You won’t be embarrassed. I promise.”

Cori swallowed. “You don’t embarrass me. The girls on my team think you are amazing and imposing, and it makes me feel smaller.”

“Aw, honey. I became amazing and imposing because I wouldn’t let those bastards win. I have practiced and worked out, and if I see them again, I am not going to be seventeen and petrified. They are going to meet an angry woman in her thirties, and I am a crazy fucking bitch.”

“Win!” Mom shouted.

“Pardon. I am a rabid, copulating female dog?” Win looked at her sister. “Pay attention. Language matters.”

Cori giggled, her golden hair sliding over her shoulder, and it mixed with Win’s dyed dark locks.

Dyeing the hair was what they learned first. They kept their hair their birth colour because no one noticed. The eyes were explained away by saying that they were red

because of an infection and expressed natural-coloured contacts started the next day.

Mags had gone for her natural red, Cori was blonde, and Win was brunette. They probably all looked like their mothers, but they had all been given up in different cities across the continent and brought here where it was safe. They each arrived seven years apart, and their parents had tucked them in and made sure that Win didn't feel ignored when the new ones arrived.

She had held Maggie when she was four days old and Cori when she was three. No one wanted to hold onto the bastards of the Elite and definitely not the females.

She looked at their parents, talking to Thomas and Maggie about the new house that they were building. Thomas was good. He was a nice, steady beta and exactly what Maggie always wanted, which is why she married him.

Win hoped that being married to a beta was enough of a cover for Maggie. From what she had heard, it wasn't, so Win was hoping that her sister and brother-in-law were smart enough to call if they needed her.

She had all of her family set up, and if they called, she would be there. She wasn't sure what she would do, but she was going to be there... and the Elite were going to pay.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win had her GPS turned up, and it helped her find the driveway to the winery. She had finished the image drive over the last few days and had plenty of images for the couple. Unlike other photographers, she let her raws go and didn't watermark everything. She wasn't advertising her skills; she just liked to do it and paid accordingly.

She pulled into the driveway and went to the building that matched the picture Agatha had sent. Win slowed and parked in the visitor area near the shop part of the winery. She grabbed her camera bag with the drives and got out of her car.

The money had cleared her account that morning.

A woman came out of the shop area and grinned. "You must be Win."

Win looked at a woman who was at least half-Asian and nearly six feet tall.

"I saw you at the wedding. I am Lyric. Lykon's sister." She extended her hand, and Win shook it.

It was like oil and silk colliding, and they both flickered.

Win blinked. "Oops."

Lyric stared. "Oh, wow. I met a few at the wedding, but wow. You are powerful."

Win blinked. "I think I should go inside."

“Wait. So, you know what we are.”

Win nodded. “I know. Half-Elite.”

“So, who are your parents?”

“Uh, no idea. I was adopted.”

They entered the building, and surprisingly, all of the legion was waiting for them.

Win smiled, got the drive with the gold trim, and held it up. “I have them all done. There are a lot, so they are in folders.”

Zara smiled with her red gaze. “Can you go through them with us, Win?”

“Oh, sure. Do you have a computer set up?”

Lykon opened a laptop. “Here you go. It is linked to the projector.”

She sat on the chair that was waiting for her at a high table. Lyric sat near them and smiled with shining eyes.

Win looked at Zara and Randolph. “Where would you like to start?”

Zara smiled. “Start with the venue. We didn’t really get to see it.”

Win got the first slideshow of background set up and started it as the quad sat cuddled together, and they spoke quietly about the beauty of the venue.

After the venue, they asked to see any parts of the food that she had captured. She had gotten it all. The set plates, the dessert buffet, and the custom cocktails with

layers of red and one white.

The bridal suite was next, and there were a lot of compliments for Zara until the dressed picture was on the screen.

“Pause it.” Taka rapped out.

Win looked at Zara, and there was a light blush and wonder at the picture of her looking toward her shoulder with her marks fully exposed and her eyes glowing.

Lykon cleared his throat. “Can we get that one blown up?”

“The drive has all the large files. You can do whatever you like with them. I hold a backup for a year if something happens to the hard drive.” Win smiled. “Your images, your business.”

Rayd laughed. “Thank you. Alexi always treats them as incredibly precious.”

“Oh, they are, but I just like taking them. I don’t keep them or make prints. This isn’t my day job.”

Zara looked over. “It should be.”

“Nah. I like being the photographer of last resort. I don’t have to deal with the families, with the bride and groom, and their endless nitpicking. I come in during a crisis. They are usually happy I am there to save the day. I send my photos, and then I am done. Back to the regular job.”

Rayd asked, “What is your day job?”

“I drive a forklift in a warehouse.” She shrugged.

“You prefer that?”

“Yup. I don’t have to do it in a dress for one thing.”

The group chuckled, and the images continued.

The sweet one with Emma taking Rayd’s arm was another one to pause on.

There was laughter at the bridesmaid duels, and then everyone held their breath as the wedding ceremony began.

The walk of the wedding party, then the look when Rayd looked at Zara for the first time, and the rest of the legion saw her as well. She had split-screened it, using her second shooter, so both sides of that moment were displayed side by side.

Taka asked, “How did you do that?”

“I have a second shooter. Well, I am the second shooter. But anyway, that is how we managed two thousand images.”

She smiled, and they continued through the slide show. They were all taking notes about their favourite images. It was adorable.

They went through the family photos where Lyric was standing with her brother and then with the legion and an older male who looked like Lykon.

The pictures of the couple with Emma were so sweet. She looked like she was going to explode with pride.

The others were with their families, and when she saw one of the photos, Win understood how they had gotten the hotel. Taka was standing next to Minoru and his



wife. Since it was family photos, it meant he was related to the hotelier.

They continued on through the images and then got to the cocktail hour, and the laughter started. Then, they went quiet as the images of the women and their babies went across the screen.

Friends and family eating snacks and having fun while they talked about how excited they were for the quad was fun. There were children. Folks with enhancements and talents using them, among others. It was a truly safe space for them, and they used it.

The reception, meal, speeches, and dancing were discussed, and they laughed at so many moments that they hadn't been able to see because they were stuck at the table while people handed their mates food they didn't want to eat.

The dancing came last, and Win paused. "Excuse me for a minute. I need a break."

She grabbed her snack bar and bottle of water. They were looking at her. "Sorry. My metabolism is a little weird."

Zara asked, "Weird how?"

"Really fucking fast. It's why I like to work evenings. It's easier to manage your hunger when all the restaurants are open."

Rayd blinked. "Right. That does help."

Lyric smiled. "It doesn't help that she has two metabolisms that are fighting for dominance in her."

Win glanced at her. "Squealer."

“Oh, come on. This is the coolest thing ever. Another Elite omega right here? This is amazeballs.”

Win sighed and finished her snack. “Right. Can we continue the slideshow? There’s some amazing dancing coming up.”

She dusted her fingers on her jeans and hopped back up on the seat.

Zara asked, “You are really one of the Elite omegas?”

“Yup.”

“Can you show us?”

“Nope. Not unless you want this area soaked in blood. It’s a long story, but there is a reason I don’t shift into that form unless it is urgent.”

Rayd paused. “How bad are the scars?”

Win rocked her jaw from side to side. “Six Elite alphas tried to bind to me at the same time and competed with each other for damage. The scars are extensive.”

The group’s jaws opened in shock.

Zara gasped. “How did you survive that?”

“Well, I got myself to a hospital and had them scrub the marks. There wasn’t a lot of blood in me at the time, so it was easy in the grand scheme of things.”

Lyric asked, “Do you have a heat?”

Win snorted. "Of course not. My body barely qualifies as female anymore."

Lyric's voice was a whisper. "Can I see some of the scars?"

Win sighed. "I am out of here. Use any or all of the images. Congratulations on your wedding. It was a lovely event. Food looked good." She got up and picked up her bag. "It was fun to be part of your day."

She bowed to the quad and nodded to Lyric. She walked outside and gulped in fresh air. Win waited a moment for her spinning senses to settle and walked to her car.

"Win, wait."

She turned and was surprised that it was Rayd who followed her. "What?"

"I am really sorry about my sister-in-law. She's just excited to meet another one like her. Uh, if you want, I know of a few Elite omegas who might be able to help you with the scars."

"Thank you, but why is it a concern of yours?"

He looked at her with a small smile. "I watched Zara's scars torture her and make her life difficult. She only wore them on her own for two years, but it was hell for her. I don't like the thought of that for anyone else. How long ago was it?"

She smiled slightly. "Twelve years. It's fine as long as I don't touch my own skin. The scars are nauseating."

He winced. "Zara is going to talk to one of her bridesmaids. Wren. She is familiar with strange assists for unusual ailments."

“It isn’t an ailment. It is just scar tissue. I have been hearing that the recovery centres have been getting more funding for alpha attacks, but my injuries are old, and I can live and work with them. My insurance doesn’t cover the rehab either.” She smiled. “It was nice working for you. Congratulations again. You make a lovely legion.”

“You know we are a legion?”

She grinned. “There is a folder on the drive called enhanced images. That is how I see you together.”

He blinked. “I really want to help. Take my card. If you need anything, just call. I will be there to help. Something tells me you are going to need it.”

She took his card, and it was for a helicopter charter service. “Uh, thank you. I am going to go. The images are yours to do with as you like.”

“Thank you again for stepping in when Harry decided he couldn’t handle the job.”

“No problem. I enjoy taking the pictures; I just despise the business aspect of it. Too peopley.” She wiggled her fingers. “Have a good day.”

She got into her car and drove off, trying to find her way back into rush-hour traffic.

She had her money, the pictures were handed off, and she could forget all about the wedding as soon as she archived her copies of the images. Time to get back to the daily routine that comforted her.

The next morning, Win was dressed and thinking about where to have coffee when she got a text.

Hey, Win. This is Lyric. Listen, I was a little too enthusiastic yesterday and would

love to meet you for coffee. Do you know the cat café on Seventh?

Win responded. Yes. I am a few blocks away. I can walk there if necessary.

Can I meet you there in twenty minutes? I really need to apologize for butting into your private business.

Fine. I am hungry. You have been warned.

See you in twenty.

Win smiled and got her purse. After thinking about it, she took her car to the café. She might as well do some errands on the way home.

She was enjoying the attentions of a cat named Achilles when Lyric came in with two other women. One was a beta with a lot of magic around her, and the other was another Elite omega. An elf.

She got to her feet and looked up at the other elf. “You are... Keres? This is Wren. I saw you at the wedding.”

Wren reached out for her, and Win shook her hand.

When Keres reached out, Win shook her head. “No offense, but if your touch does what it is supposed to do, there will be a bit of a mess.”

“Scars stretch.”

“Not when Stronghold Elite makes the bites.”

Keres blinked. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I tried once about five years ago. Hurt like hell.” She bowed with a slow flourish. “Hello. Nice to meet you.”

Keres chuckled. “Nice to meet you. So, you know what you are.”

“Oh, yes. All of my siblings are Elite omegas. My parents had a sixth sense about it and adopted us all so we couldn’t be handed over on demand. They moved here with me and then brought in my sister seven years later, and finally, my last sister was brought home. My auntie worked at a lab and got our genetics tested one by one. None of our files have information. We were all hospital surrenders.”

Wren blushed. “Sorry. I have a discovery enchantment going right now.”

“No problem. Shadow mages haven’t attacked me, so I am not too concerned with information transfer.”

Wren froze. “How do you know that?”

“I can see it. I see the energy of the soul.” She nodded. “I can see the shadows around yours.”

Lyric said, “She isn’t kidding. She did some photos of the wedding guests, and you can see their other faces. It made for an amazing pack photo with the bride and groom.” She got her phone out. “I put it on my phone.”

She brought up the image and showed it to Wren and then Keres.

“Whoa. Those are lovely. Can you do one of me and my mates?” Keres smiled.

Win smiled. “Only if your regular photographer bails. I don’t like to arrange things. It feels like folks are waiting to pounce.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I suppose I could try. The result isn’t as good as me going in cold, though.”

A staff member came around with a large tray filled with drinks and pastries. “Ladies. Park it.”

Keres smiled. “Hey, Persephone. You got away?”

“Yeah, but this is an illusion.”

Win looked and blurted, “You are one, too.”

Keres chuckled. “She is. She is restricted, though. But she’s my twin sister. She has her own den of enhanced alphas and her own omega.”

“But... she’s an omega.”

“She was stunted as a teen. She’s going to finish her evolution this year. She isn’t the only elf omega that has alpha mates. They suit her very well.”

Persephone set the tray down. “They do and are at home with the babies. I needed a break, and this was an excuse.”

Keres chuckled. “Well, you do have four at the same time.”

“Hence my escape.”

Win sat down and said, “Omega, spider, zebra, and death tentacles?”

Persephone smiled slowly. “You are good.”

Win shrugged. "I just came for the snacks."

Lyric laughed. "True. I did promise you snacks, but if we can find you help for the scars, I would like to."

"Okay. I will let you try." She snagged a Danish as the ladies sat down, and all the free cats in the space focused on them. She checked her watch. Cori's bus was leaving. She tried to calm the nervous flips her stomach was doing.

She sat and chatted. Bluntly explaining what had happened to her. Persephone tried to reach out, but Win avoided the touch.

"Sorry. I can't touch you. I had to fight to keep myself short when Lyric touched me. It hurt. A lot."

Persephone nodded. "I understand. Sorry. It's a reflex."

Keres smiled. "Just be sure you don't get close enough to hug you. She'll burp you."

Persephone blushed. "Well, maybe. It was just that one time."

"Achilles did digest his meal easier that night." Keres laughed.

Win smiled as the woman groaned with covered eyes. "Funny. My sisters and I are further apart in age. We don't have that kind of relationship. So, Keres, you started the barrier around the city?"

"I always thought so, but I have heard that folks are seeing two anchor sites. Our kind can add energy to either one to expand the shield."

"Nice. I have donated when I can."



Keres picked up her phone and called someone. “Myrtle, what do you have from the book regarding a scarred-up omega?”

The person on the other end said, “ Nothing. There is the blood witch, the mirror master, and triumph. They are going to appear with solace and sabres. Their mates are still at the Stronghold. ”

Win mumbled, “That is a lot of omegas.”

“ It sounds like it, but that is what the book said. It’s pretty accurate. It identifies Keres as the mother for all.”

Keres blushed, and Persephone rubbed her shoulder. “Keres has been a surrogate at least four times.”

Win smiled. “That would do it.” She checked her watch again. Cori was reaching the outskirts of the city. Half an hour and she would be beyond the barrier.

Wren said, “I keep trying to actually see you, but it is difficult. You keep shifting.”

“You know, modern women. Changing moods and focus every moment. Sister, daughter, worker, friend. I can do it all.” Win sipped at her excellent coffee and stroked the seven cats that were nesting on her in turn. “I also leak power, so the cats are curling up near the energy leaks.”

Another omega came through the door, and she waved. “Oh, wow. You are just everything.”

“Yup. Don’t touch me.”

“Oh, I get that. Your future... wow.”

Win smiled. “My future is currently finishing my coffee and going grocery shopping.”

Myrtle sat down and rotated her wrist, and a fresh cappuccino settled in front of her.

“You know we sell those at the counter.”

“Teyval doesn’t know I am playing hooky. I have to keep this quick. I just wanted to see her for myself. Win, if you need anything, just scream out.”

“I don’t really scream.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you?” Myrtle nodded. “I would love to have my characters half as stoic as you.”

“Characters?”

Keres smiled. “She’s a writer. Very good, actually.”

Persephone smiled. “Armand would argue with some of your logistics.”

“Try it with Mateo.”

Persephone’s eyes went wide. “Oh, right. That is something I hadn’t considered.”

Lyric asked, “Win, do you date?”

“Not often. I just get what I need and get out. Folks forget me after a few minutes or hours. Normal folks. My parents and siblings remember me.”

The rest of the conversation turned to photography and who she admired as artists

and who she didn't like. She smiled. "You are asking if I like Alexi. Well, I don't mess around with bound betas. He is very firmly linked to his alpha and omega. He's a nice person, though, and we had fun talking about the images. It made for a nice break."

Lyric snorted. "He's been asking about you."

"Well, he can ask all he likes. I am not getting near dragons."

Keres stared. "So, you see it all?"

"I guess so. I knew what the Elite were when they found me on the beach with my friends. I saw their ugliness behind the pretty white skin as they laughed and transported me to the Stronghold."

Keres paled. "When were you there?"

"Thirteen, fourteen years ago. I cracked the foundation of the stone under me and got my ass out to a hospital the moment that they took a break." She shrugged. "My parents said I was missing for a month, but I think it was more. None of my high school friends remembered me, so I just went to work when I healed. I mean, we moved here, but that was the only uproar."

They tried to get more details out of her, but Win was done. She was about to start making her way out with polite excuses when she heard a noise. She picked up her phone and heard Cori's whisper. "There are ten. They stopped the bus."

Win got up and said, "Start the clock."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Lyric was in the car with her. Win couldn't stop her, as she explained as she made her way out.

Lyric kept a call open with Keres, but Win knew what Wren would say via speaker before she heard it.

“ They have put up a barrier. The dark Elite can't get in. ”

Win got to the interstate and floored it, her car blurring as they travelled two hundred kilometres in twenty seconds. “They are using Cori to power their shield. It's a fun game they play to drain her so she can't fight.”

“What are you doing?”

“Making my deadline. There are normal students on the bus. They have to glamour every one of them.”

“So, this is what happened to you.”

“Oh, yeah. Not on a bus, but they came in a group. They aren't playing nice with three-to-one anymore. Cowardly assholes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to kill them all or send them back to the Stronghold. It depends on my mood.” She grunted as her senses showed her the bus surrounded by Elite. “Hold tight. We are drifting.”

She let the car kick the rear wheels sideways, and her vehicle thudded into Elite after Elite. They swung around and had diverted seven of the ten away from the bus before the car shuddered to a stop.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Put the bus in neutral. Push it back through the barrier if you have to. They have put glyphs on it. This next part is going to be messy. Watch your back and maybe let your brother know where we are so he doesn’t worry.”

She got out of the car and stood straight before she walked onto the bus. Two of the Elite were in there, trying to sniff out Cori. Another had a different girl in his grip. Win smiled, bit her cheek and spit on the one with the other teenager. He looked at her. “You are expressing contempt, beta?”

“Not a beta, but you are locked here until you get a bus home, bitch.” She reached up and grabbed the other ones by the ears and hauled them off the bus as they yelped and shouted. When she got them off the bus, Win threw them to the ground. She crooked her fingers, and the one wearing her blood lifted and was levitated off the bus.

The young woman was still in his grip and sobbing, so she told him, “Let go.”

“No. She’s close enough.”

“Let go, or your head comes off.”

Cori shouted, “Megan, close your eyes and look away.”

The male was glaring at her with red eyes. “No. You don’t scare me—”

She grew to her full height, her skin tearing as she went from five-five to six-eight.

She whispered softly as her clothing was covered with blood. “Do I scare you now?”

She used her own blood to create a blade and took his head off.

She got Megan away from his body and back onto the bus.

Lyric was astonished. “Wow. Okay. Moving the bus.”

“They have bound it, so I hope you are strong. You are going to have to push.”

“On it. I have the kids; you get the Elite.”

Win looked at the nine males left. She sprayed blood across them to hold them where she could get them and charged forward. She may have been smiling as she met blade with blade and used the blood of the fallen as chains and arrows to destroy those who ran from her.

Win took care of them and then helped Lyric push the bus, but it wasn't moving fast.

Helicopters began to land. Big ones. Rayd and his pack came out, and Lyric waved.

Win watched and waited for the energy around her to solidify. There was a pulse, and an Elite formed next to her. She turned and pounded her fist into his face, sending him stumbling back to disappear back to the Stronghold.

The kids were split into groups and loaded onto the helicopters. Cori looked her way and paused. Instead of staying with her friends, she ran to Win and whispered, “Three minutes. On the dot.”

“You need a shower, Cori. I am all bloody.”

“Don’t care. I am so sorry. You were right. How did they know where I was?”

Win nodded. “Yes, how did they know? Stay here. I have to look for something. I am feeling a bit sick.”

She looked to find a signature on one of the bodies, and she found the phone on one, pulling it away from the armless torso.

She thumbed through the messages and found one that made her nearly crush the phone. She went to her car and got her phone. She dialled and whispered, “Hey, Maggie, I would start running now. If you are still there when I get home, you are not going to be happy about it. I will pull out your omega and stake you naked in the middle of the Stronghold. Are we clear?”

Maggie started sobbing and hung up.

Cori said softly, “I wondered how she could afford that new house. She sold me?”

“She tried. When the Stronghold finds out what happened, they will blame her. They lost ten warriors in one day. They won’t forgive that. Let’s let her reap what she sowed.”

“Mom and Dad are going to be heartbroken.”

“Yes. They are.” She stroked Cori’s hair. “But you are here, and the Elite don’t have you. Want to stay with me for a few days? I am going to take some time off, and I can introduce you to more ladies like us. Like Lyric.”

Lyric walked up to them. “So, I see why you mentioned messy. Are you covered in your own blood?”

“No. I have a lot going on here. The bodies are stuck here and won’t be able to be teleported or moved through a portal.”

Lyric asked, “How can they get their dead back?”

“Oh, they have to ask.” Win smiled. “Me. They have to ask me. They won’t rot, but they won’t move.”

Rayd came over to them and said, “We have all the kids. They were live-streaming it. Lykon saw Lyric and called immediately.”

Lyric smiled. “See? I was useful.”

Win said, “Cori, can you get my purse from the car? It’s pretty much totalled. I also don’t fit in it like this.”

Cori smiled. “Got it. I am also going to grab your registration. Don’t want to make it too easy for them to find your house.”

“Oh, shoot. Right. Well, I made some new friends today. Perhaps someone can offer some advice.”

Lyric nodded. “I am sure they can. We can hide out at the winery. No one knows my face yet.”

Rayd nodded. “Good idea. Win, do you need medical assistance?”

“Probably. If I am not using blood, I get lightheaded. Right now, it is keeping me upright. I am using it as a second skin.”

Cori looked around. “Where did they put the bus driver? Miss Norelic tried to stop



them from getting on the bus.”

Rayd sniffed around and grimaced. “I can’t smell anything but blood.”

“Sorry.” She looked around. “Cori, did someone else take her?”

“I didn’t see. They came on the bus, she got up, and they pulled her out. There were only ten of them. No more.”

Lyric nodded, looked at the bus, and jumped straight up. “Oh, fuck. She’s on the bus.”

Rayd nodded. “Got it.” He launched upward and landed on the bus. “Oh, fuck.”

He gathered the woman up, and Win could see that the arm she could see wasn’t hanging right. Blood and bruising were everywhere.

Win and the others ran for the last helicopter. Rayd handed the driver over to Lyric, and when the contact was made, the whimpers started as the body changed from short beta to Elite omega.

Cori stared as they lifted off. “Miss Norelic. Oh, my god.”

They held on, and two of the helicopters peeled off toward the school grounds while they split up and headed for the mountains.

They flew over huge homes until he set them down. “I have called in every medic in the families, the healers from the dark Elite, and everyone they could think of.”

Megan and Cori were holding hands, Wren was on the phone, and Lyric was facing off against her brother and his mate with a barely breathing omega in her arms.

Win got out of the helicopter, and the grouping stepped back. She didn't smile. She was bloody, her scars had opened, and her clothing was shredded.

She looked at Cori and smiled. Cori clung to Megan.

Four men stepped forward. One said, "Hi. I am Nikolai; this is Rikart, Erik, and Feng. We are offering our fire for healing."

"The driver is the most injured. Please attend to her first." Lyric brought the woman out and set her on the ground.

The younger male, Erik, came toward them. "Please. You are covered in blood. They know what they are doing, so I will let them do it."

Win nodded and chuckled. "Sensible. Whoa."

The men turned into dragons and began to exhale all over Miss Norelic.

Cori touched her arm. "If he can help, let him help."

Nodding, Win dropped to her knees. "Please do what you can."

Erik nodded and pursed his lips, blowing slowly over her face and hair. The touch was cooling and not the searing pain she remembered when healing was attempted. When he was certain she wasn't in pain, he sprouted wings, and a slow wave of magic spilled across her, dissolving the blood and soothing the torn skin.

There were gasps and sobs as her clothing dissolved; she was naked with ridges of skin, and he continued to set the damaged skin on fire.

The fire changed pitch, and she looked around. Miss Norelic was sitting up and

holding her head. Win was now the sole focus of the dragon fire.

It was invasive, but the dragons seemed concerned rather than perverse. Erik was the only one in his human form, even with wings.

It took five more minutes, but she finally stood up and had skin with no ridges or marks of violence on it. She was also butt-ass naked.

Lyric looked at her and grinned. “Wow. You are. Wow.”

“The word is naked.”

There was a polite ripple of laughter in the crowd. A man with a bronze complexion and midnight hair stepped forward. “I’m Yemeen. I brought you this. It should fit.”

Win smiled. “Thank you.” She slipped the dress on and wrapped the wide sash at the waist, drawing it tight. She missed being able to use her waist, but it had hosted a lot of teeth and claw scars. “You look surprised. Did I put it on right?”

Yemeen nodded. “Yes. You just look very familiar.”

Feng had resumed his human form. “Yes. What is your other form?”

“The dress is going to get all baggy, but...” She shrank and put her black hair and dark hazel eyes on.

Feng covered his mouth and stared. “Who are your parents?”

“Dunno. Some Elite and their victim. I was surrendered in Durelian City.” She resumed her omega height. “I was adopted.”

Cori nodded. “Me, too. Different city. Same scenario.”

“This is my little sister, Cori.”

Cori’s clothing was free of blood, probably curtesy of the dragons.

Win looked to the driver, who was wobbling to her feet with her shredded clothing hanging off her. Win looked to Yemeen. “Do you have an extra dress with you?”

He smiled and lifted a black outfit. “I do. You ladies are a tricky fit.”

She nodded her thanks and brought up a wall of mist to get the woman changed. “I am sorry that this has happened, but you are healed, and we are going to get you dressed. If you take off the damaged clothing, it will be easier. What is your name, aside from Miss Norelic?”

She pulled her clothing off in the little column of clear that was her and Win. “My name is Juno. Juno May Norelic.”

Win smiled. “A good name. I am Win. I am Cori’s oldest sister.”

“I have heard her talking about you on the bus. She’s very proud.”

“I know. I am proud of her, too. I am sorry this happened.”

“I have always known that the Elite would try and take possession when they found me, but I had no idea it would be an attack.”

“Elite omegas are powerful, and they want that power, and it makes them crazy.” She finished putting the dress on the woman. “There. All decent but still barefoot.”

Juno smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s just some privacy.”

“No, I mean, thank you for coming for Cori. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here now. They muttered something about saving me for later.”

“I doubt they even knew why. They just knew that you were a good target.” She looked at Juno. “Are you ready to face the others?”

“Yeah, how did you get so pretty?”

“Oh, it’s my skincare regimen. I just rub in the blood of ten Elite, and I look ten years younger.”

“They are all dead?”

“Oh. Very.” She smiled.

Juno hugged her, and Win made the fog dissipate. “Thanks for that. It will help the nightmares. What do I do now? Everybody knows.”

A soft voice said, “I believe I can help with that.”

Win smiled. “Hello, Keres. I wondered when you would show up.”

“Win, it was only a few hours ago that you were saying you couldn’t take on this form.”

“I just needed motivation.” She smiled, and Cori came over to hug her from the other side.

Cori whispered, “The fight has gone viral. You are all over the internet.”

“Oh. Oops.”

Keres chuckled. “One of ours is coming to get you. She and hers have a large home with an expansive yard. You four can use their home to regroup and plan your next steps.”

Win snorted. “Or wait for a mate?”

“That is a possibility for you or possibly the other omega.”

“Hm. I don’t think so. Mine is still at the Stronghold, or at least, they were when I was at the Stronghold years ago.” Win shrugged.

Keres’ eyes widened. “You’ve seen them?”

“No, but I heard them freaking out below, and then I fought my way out, and together, we cracked the Stronghold.” Win shrugged.

“Holy hell. You...”

Wren spoke up. “Blood witch. She’s the blood witch.”

“Well, I am not the Scourge or the Memory, but I do what I can.”

Keres whispered, “How do you know those names?”

“One of the men who attacked me survived my revenge. What he knows, I know.” She smiled. “Of course, he can’t say anything, but his keepers like to gossip. When I have what I need, I will let him die if he wants to.”

Keres said, “What if he doesn’t?”

“Well, he wasn’t one of my attackers, so I guess I can let him live. He hasn’t enjoyed my occupation. Omegas deserve more in his opinion.”

Keres blinked. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing. He was at the door while they attacked me. He was the caretaker. When the stone cracked, he got hit with magical whiplash, and it stunned him. It cut off his ability to interact with the world around him, and he is now under the care of the elder concubines. They clean him and bathe him. The elder Elite try and break our tie now and then, but he is hanging on.”

Win paused. “Where are my manners? Dragons, thank you for your healing. Mates of the dragons, thank you for allowing it.”

The women inclined their heads, and Erik rubbed the back of his head. “It was the least we could do.”

“The least you could do was nothing. You did more. I haven’t been able to take this form in over a decade. So, accept my thanks.”

Erik nodded and inclined his head. “I accept your thanks.”

Cori moved to her side and held on. “Where are we going? Mom and Dad aren’t answering their phones.”

Win looked at her and smiled. “Three minutes on the clock.”

She focused and found their parents. This next part would be fun.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win raised her hands and said, “Bring what is mine to me.”

The gathered folk stared as her parents were seated in front of her. Win stared as she saw two dark Elite and an unconscious Stronghold Elite. “Oh, that can’t be right.”

Keres snorted. “Sorry, guys. She was just doing a summoning, and you got caught in it.”

A new arrival walked up. “Hey, I am Iris, and you just made my mates sprint to get here, and those dudes hate cardio.”

Win looked at the two dark Elite in suits that were staring at her. “I am so sorry to have caught you in that. I have no idea how that dude got here.” She pointed to the Elite on the ground.

Cori whispered, “What did you do?”

“Untie the parents. I am trying to figure it out.” She bit her thumbnail and frowned.

The broader of the two dark Elite walked toward her. “Do I know you, lady?”

“Nope.”

“How do you know?”

“I avoid dark Elite like the plague.” She looked at him and smiled.



Cori had finished untying their parents, and her mother sobbed and hugged her. “It’s okay, Mom. Win saved me.”

Their dad looked at them. “You are both all right?”

Win nodded. “Yeah, Dad. We are fine. I have to spend money on my new wardrobe but, otherwise, fine.”

He nodded and hugged her. “I am glad you are you, Win.”

She paused and hugged him back.

His hand touched her shoulder and froze. “The scars.”

“Uh, gone. Some of the folks here are healers of a sort, and they took care of it. So, now I am whole, but I am down one sister.”

Her dad backed away. “What do you mean?”

“Well, they couldn’t get Cori, so they will come for Mags.”

Their mother went white. “What? She said she was safe because she was married.”

Win giggled, and it wasn’t a nice sound. “Oh, no. They are losing mates left and right. No more are coming in, and they don’t take good care of their pregnant mates, so many die birthing. Then, the babies aren’t sturdy, so they die without their mothers, and the Stronghold Elite are going extinct. In about two centuries, they are going to be gone.” She paused and said, “Oh, right. Mags. She’s in a beta marriage, which is just like having a roommate to the Stronghold. She will be taken, any child she has with Thomas will be purged, and then she will be trained to be a concubine for the Elite.”

Her parents looked appalled.

Win sighed. “On the plus side, she will probably have a child in the next eighteen months. They will be on her constantly until she’s knocked up, and some of them after that.”

Her mother was crying. “We tried to keep you from knowing that.”

“I know, Mom. But I need to do something, and then you and Dad can go home and wait until Cori is ready to come home. She needs some time to be safe. Today was scary.”

Win calmly touched her father’s forehead and then did the same to her mother. “She can’t touch you now. Can’t see you and can’t think of you. When she wants to get leverage, you are going to be out of reach.”

Her parents frowned. “We want to stay with you.”

“That isn’t possible, Mom. We need to be somewhere they can’t get us for a while. We will keep in touch. But I killed ten men today, and I need a bit of a rest.”

Her parents recoiled, and Cori said, “This gentleman said he will get you home.”

She was standing next to the young dragon Erik. He smiled at her and said, “Please. I can take you home. My truck is this way.”

Her parents were dazed. Win and Cori hugged them, and the betas were led through the crowd and toward the houses in the distance. Erik was talking to them, and Win watched them go.

Cori looked at her and asked, “What did you do?”

“The same thing I did to all of you when I got home from the hospital. I blurred the memory of us. They are very proud of us and will talk about us as if they just saw us, but we will be disconnected, and the Elite and Mags will have nothing to grasp at.”

Cori walked to her and hugged her. “Oh, Win.”

Iris looked at them and smiled. “Let’s get you to our place, and you can rest. All of you. This is Ymer. It’s his home, and he has the magic to bring you there.”

The other two she had with her moved to speak with the two males Win had pulled with her. The Stronghold Elite was lifted and flipped over the shoulder of one of Iris’s partners.

Ymer said, “Please gather together. Hold still.”

Megan and Cori held hands. Juno stood still, and Win watched the dark elf that was going to transport them. He looked her in the eye and was surprised as he nodded in acknowledgement.

Win spoke to Rayd. “Thank you, and Lyric, thank you as well.”

Lyric smiled, and then the world faded and changed. When the world formed around them again, they were at Iris’s home.

\* \* \* \*

Cori looked at her sister, gleaming with power and her hair rippling in a wind that wasn’t here. “Win, were you always like this?”

“Yes.” Her sister smiled sadly.

The man named Ymer said, "Please come this way. We have rooms for you and a guesthouse if you need silence."

Miss Norelic raised her hand. "I would like the guesthouse."

Win nodded. "I will go as well if at all possible."

Juno swallowed. "I am fine with that."

Ymer nodded. "The boys in pictures everywhere are Brexel and Iris's boys, Denel and Bennet. The dogs are Juno and Jupiter, but Iris has them firmly in her thrall."

Juno cleared her throat. "Call me May then. I don't want to be confused with the dogs."

Ymer had a kind expression. "May it is. May, you and Win will be in the guesthouse. Brexel and Oren will be in with Iris to talk to you later."

Cori looked at Megan. "How are you holding up?"

Megan swallowed. "I didn't think anyone would know. I was so good at keeping up my hair, spraying my skin, and putting in lenses. I did everything I was told to, and they still found me."

Cori looked at Win. "They took her when I was little. When she came back, she was different. Covered in scars. Her eyes were haunted, and she jumped at every sound. After a few months, I stopped noticing that she was still upset. She was, I just couldn't tell. She stopped us from noticing and gradually just faded into the background. My big sister didn't want to haunt me."

Win smiled. "More or less. I needed to fit in. People had to forget about the scarring.

From there, I could start again.”

Cori smiled. “You want to ruffle my hair.”

Win swooped in and ruffled both sides of Cori’s head, putting smacking kisses all over her face. “There. Have you been sistered enough?”

Cori smoothed her hair. “I will let you know when I need a top-up.”

Megan whispered, “When can I call my mom?”

Ymer smiled. “As soon as we are in the house. If the Elite want to track you here, they are welcome.”

Cori noticed the sharp fangs of the smile. “Okay, so we are going to crash at the house, and Win and J—May are at the guesthouse.”

Win nodded and followed Ymer’s gesture to the smaller house behind the enormous manor. She and May walked away.

When they entered the house, Cori could hear muffled sobs, and the voice was not her sister’s.

“Oh. Right.” Cori held Megan’s hand. Megan’s hand clenched back.

Ymer led them to the house, and there were two large and friendly dogs next to Iris. The white Elite wasn’t in the room.

Iris smiled. “You two are bunking here?”

Cori nodded. “Yes, ma’am. If it’s all right.”

“It’s great. We have two twelve-year-old boys who are due home in a few hours. They are both alphas, and because you are bound to ask, they were adopted when they were six. Brexel was their mother’s business partner, and when she and her husband died, he adopted them and hired me as the nanny. I left for a few years, and when I returned, the relationship started. The Elite were after my butt as well. My father was one of them.”

Cori nodded. “Us, too, and Win. And I am guessing that May is half-Elite as well. It would explain a few things.”

“May?”

“She decided with another Juno on the property she would go by her middle name here.”

The dog in question looked up and woofed.

Iris chuckled. “Right. Okay. Ymer will assign you rooms. There won’t be any issues with the other Elite. The dogs don’t like the scent of fear, and I don’t like treacherous bastards. Also, your sister is within screaming distance, and I think that will be a good deterrent to any nosiness.”

Cori smiled. “Yeah. She’s scary when she’s mad.”

Megan asked softly, “Can I go lie down?”

Ymer nodded, and Megan and Cori followed him. She was in the room and smiling as she closed the door. Megan looked exhausted and was probably on the phone the moment the door closed.

Ymer looked at Cori. “You don’t need to rest?”

“No. I need to see what kind of footage got out. I think I know why she was able to kill so many of them, but I need to see it.”

Ymer looked at her. “You are remarkably calm for coming so close to disaster.”

They walked back down the hall and headed to the kitchen, where Iris was setting up food. Lots of food.

Ymer said, “We have a laptop here. You can look up what you need.”

Cori nodded and looked up the words Elite attack . Clips from all the girls in the bus began to roll, and she looked for something specific.

She grunted when she found the video she knew about. It started when the bus stopped due to the lineup of Elite in front of it. They surrounded the bus and did something at all four corners. Then, Miss Norelic got up and tried to stop them from entering while the coaches and parents remained silent. The Elite had moved fast, and then there was a thud and laughter. It wasn't good laughter, and they could hear it along with slithering and thuds from the roof of the bus.

Knowing what had happened made it so much worse.

Cori wiped tears away and continued to look through the files until someone caught Win's car on video sliding in through a portal of shadow and smashing through a bunch of Elite.

The next view was out a window as Win stood straight, and blood bloomed on her shirt and jeans. The sword formed in one hand and the chain in the other, both made of blood, and then she started to move while Lyric tried to push the bus back through the barrier. She had moved it, but the Elite rounded on her and then came the moment that Cori had been looking for.

Win carrying a crossbow had formed between Lyric and the others, and she had taken out knees, elbows, and one got it in the neck. But the wounds didn't bleed, and Win was also across the field doing battle.

"Holy shit. There she is."

Iris looked at the screen. "What are you seeing?"

Cori backed it up and caught the moment when both of Win were in the same frame. "That is my sister's second shooter. She used to joke about having a second shooter or personal backup. I thought it was just something silly, but here it is." She pointed. "She's in two places at the same time."

Iris blinked. "Play it."

Both of the Wins were moving independently, and they were battling as if the lives of thirty kids and chaperones were at stake.

"You knew she was coming?"

"I called her. We had lunch on Sunday, and she said that if anything happened, call her and start the clock. I just had to hold out for three minutes. I called her when I saw them, and three minutes later, she was there."

"You are sisters but..."

"We were both adopted. Mom and Dad collected half-Elite kids and taught them to hide themselves. My other sister sold my location, and Megan and May were collateral damage."

Iris paused. "What are your parents' names?"



Cori smiled confidently, but her confidence failed as her mind scrambled around and said, “Why can’t I remember it?”

Iris touched her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. I am guessing they were mages. Mages are slippery.”

Ymer chuckled. “Flatterer.”

Iris rolled her eyes. “All of my mates are dark Elite mages. Basically, they were content to be akin to monks, and then I stumbled in. What did your sister say before she brought in your parents?”

Cori blinked. “Uh, she said she was summoning what was hers. I think it was supposed to be Mom and Dad, but those other two guys and the light Elite were there, too. I could tell by Win’s face that she was confused.”

Iris smiled. “They are hers. They knew it the moment they got over their shock. The light Elite is breathing on his own, but he isn’t awake.”

“She said she has to wake him. I don’t know if she will.”

Iris asked, “How long was she at the Stronghold?”

“I remember her being gone for a week or two, but when we got the call from the hospital, she looked so worn and thin. It took her quite a while to get back to herself.”

Iris nodded. “I know it’s hard to remember. Would you like to remember?”

Cori swallowed. “Yes, and no. I don’t want to remember her like that. I want to remember her like she was today. A warrior.”

“Even warriors get wounded. It took four dragons at full blast to heal her. That isn’t normal, but Wren said it had to be the dragon fire, and it seemed to work.”

Cori nodded. “Those dragons were... dragons.”

“Yes, all but Erik. He’s young.”

“How young?” Cori covered her mouth the moment she blurted it out.

Iris smiled. “He’s in his second year at university. His father is also a dragon, and his mother is a succubus.” She smiled. “His parents’ flight contains three light Elite, just in case you see them and freak out.”

“Oh. Let Win know. That is way more of a danger.”

Iris chuckled. “I will. Good tip.”

Cori nodded. “And don’t tell anyone I asked about Erik.”

“Uh, Oren is right behind you, so I won’t tell anyone, but he’s a blabbermouth.”

Cori turned and saw the very large dark elf leaning against the counter with an innocent and smug expression while sipping coffee.

“Um, hello, Oren.”

Iris cleared her throat. “It seems that Win is blurring the memory of herself, but Cori remembers what happened when Win was taken. Can you find out what happened?”

Oren looked to Cori. “May I look?”

Cori blinked. “I think I should be sitting down for this.”

“Do you have anything that can spark the memory?”

Cori paused. “I do. Wait a second.”

She went back to the computer, and she brought up the video from the abduction twelve and a half years ago.

Cori explained, “It’s kind of grainy because phones weren’t as good back then, but this was what happened. This is where it started.”

Oren was watching. She played the video of a group of girls playing volleyball on the beach. Win was wearing a tankini and was laughing with her black ponytail swinging with every volley and jump. The Elite appeared out of the portals around the court and converged on Win. Six of them. The alphas seemed to get bigger as they grabbed Win, and she didn’t scream. She fought like hell until the fists hit her from several angles. They weren’t laughing anymore; they pulled her through a portal, and she was gone.

Cori swallowed. “That was the last time she was the woman I knew. I was five when that happened, so I didn’t remember much. I looked this up on websites that keep Elite footage moving so folks don’t forget they can be monsters.”

“That sounds like a site I would like to visit. Now, do you want to sit comfortably while I find out anything I can about what happened to your sister? May I share it with her mates?”

“That might be wise.”

“Let’s go into the living room, and I can share the signal.”

Cori swallowed. "I am either going to need water or throw up after this."

Iris nodded. "I will get a bucket, just in case."

They walked into the living room while five dark elves stared at her as she sat. She got settled, and Iris sat next to her. "I am going to be here, and Jupiter is on your left. If you need this to stop, just say stop."

"I need this never to have happened." Cori rubbed her face. She put her arms on the arms of the chair and exhaled. She looked at Oren. "Ready when you are."

Oren touched her temple and said, "I am going to keep a light touch as long as I can."

"Okay. Thank you. I am going to try and keep as many emotions out of it as I can."

Oren smiled. "Good. Okay. Let's begin."

Cori felt the tears on her cheeks, and Iris handed her tissues. A huge dog head pushed into her lap and whined. Cori chuckled. "It's okay, Jupiter. I am good. I am fine. They know what she used to be, and now they know why she is what she is. Well, the parts I could see."

Oren nodded. "The need for dragon fire is now explained. Has she had a heat since?"

"No. She told me the doctors said that there was so much nullification that they had to go through. She didn't work that way anymore."

Oren nodded. "That is what you heard as well. It's all right, Cori. By the way, prepare to be questioned by two tweens. Brexel headed out to get them and should be home shortly."

“How long were you in my head?”

“An hour and a half. I had to go slow. Are you hungry?”

Iris smiled. “I baked cookies.”

Cori came back to her senses. “Right. Yes. Cookies would be good. Where is Win?”

“Still comforting May. There is nothing like shared trauma to form a bond. Keres joined them an hour ago.”

Cori let Oren help her to her feet and went in search of chocolate chip cookies.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win held May's hand as she sat with a stunned expression. Keres was pouring tea and sharing her own experiences.

Win muttered, "It is a bitch of a club to be in."

May was startled into laughing.

Keres smiled. "Yeah, it is. Win, you kept the details vague."

"Oh, that is because I cast a spell on myself to fade the memory. They are still there, but they are behind frosted glass, if that makes sense." Win shrugged. "I know that we are here because one of Iris's males is a telepath. He is going to be in for a rough ride. So am I."

Keres cleared her throat. "You remember this morning how Wren said that today was going to bring the blood witch, the mirror mage, and triumph? Do you know who is who?"

Win smiled. "I do."

"And?"

"That is me. They are me. I am them. I am the blood witch and the mirror mage, and I didn't lose, so I am also triumph."

Keres blinked. "Oh."

“Just as there is the Scourge and the memory of death. The Elite are very spooky in their naming of us.”

“How long were you kept there?”

May looked at her.

“A close estimate is two months at the Stronghold and five years in the realm of shadow mages.”

May muttered, “What’s that?”

“A place you don’t want to be. You know how we have alphas, betas, and omegas? Well, and occasionally deltas?”

“Yes.” May was interested.

“Well, the mages were all betas with power. Lots of it. They got banished for feeding off others to power themselves. So, they create fissures in the world at moments of high emotional strain, and they try and pull in the energy or the actual stressed-out being through the crack in reality. I was under a lot of stress.”

Keres said, “But they can’t eat Elite omegas. Our energy patterns don’t digest, for lack of a better term.”

Win smiled. “It is like wanting to eat marshmallows and putting building bricks in your mouth. But the shadow mages know how to control their energy. They have books upon books upon books to teach folks, but their books dissolve when you get them over here, so studying has to be done on the other side. I was the blood witch by nature, but I became the mirror mage by studying when I stole the grimoires and hid in the forests.”

Keres said, “You are remarkably cheerful about that.”

“I was the blood witch first, and I used it against any mage who tried to capture me. I got quite a bit of practice.” Win smiled.

“Uh, I don’t know how to say this, but do you ever wonder about your parents? I mean, the Elite killed my family when they captured me, but you know you were adopted.”

“That was direct.”

Keres shrugged. “I am nosy.”

“No. I haven’t wondered. She was obviously either in physical or social pain, so I don’t want to add to it.”

“Fine, but know that at least two members of the crowd we were in today took hair samples and a lot of photos.”

Win shrugged. “Not my concern.”

“Yeah, but you might have family claiming you.”

“I have family. Well, I did. I still have Cori until she’s old enough to formalize a union.”

“What about your mates?”

“What about them?” Win raised a brow.

“They are in the big house.”



“I am not sure they are for me.” Win shrugged.

Keres’ mouth opened. “You summoned them!”

“Yeah, I am trying to find the spell to put them back. Maybe something involving a ride-share.”

Keres laughed. “Go to the big house and bring May back some cookies. Iris was baking. I will stay here with May.”

May smiled. “Thanks. I am feeling better.”

Win smiled. “If you are feeling better, come to the big house. How many cookies do you want?”

May sniffled. “Six?”

“Milk?”

“Yes, please.”

Win grinned and headed off. Keres called out, “Don’t you want to know how many cookies I want?”

“No. You have mates who can make your own.” Win stuck her tongue out as she left to head for the house across the lush green yard.

Her feet were happy to walk across the grass, and she spun over and over on her way to the house. The sunlight made her feel relaxed. She was safe, Cori was safe, and their parents were safe. Any Elite grabbing hold of them would burst into flame.

She hummed and walked to the house, petting Juno when she was greeted at the door. Win carefully wiped her feet and looked at the folks gathered in the kitchen. “Is there a chance for cookies?”

Iris smiled as the oven binged and went to pull another tray out to put it on the hot spot. “How many did you want?”

“May wants six, and Keres wants three.”

Cori’s voice mumbled around a cookie. “She really doesn’t do dessert. She eats for calorie count, not for flavour.”

Win walked over and hugged her. “Squealer.” She explained to Iris and Ymer, “I don’t actually have a sense of taste. I think it tanked with my sex drive when they were scrubbing all the marks.”

Ymer blinked. “That’s terrifying but usually fixable.”

She shrugged. “It is what it is.”

Iris blinked. “Damn. That’s... damn.”

Win smiled. “You get used to it. I certainly have had more time for hobbies.”

Cori snorted. “Photography isn’t a proper hobby.”

“I like it. It’s fun.” She kissed the top of Cori’s head. “So, what did they fish out of your brain? A five-year-old’s version of events?”

Ymer narrowed his eyes. “How did you know?”

“She’s my sister. You think she isn’t warded nine ways from Sunday? If they had grabbed her, they would have been fine until they tore at her clothing. Then, fwoosh . Up in flames.”

Cori blinked. “Seriously?”

“Yup. I warded Maggie, too, but I have removed the protection. She wants to fuck around; she can find out.”

Oren walked in, saw her, and straightened his shoulders. “Lady Win, may I get details of what happened to you?”

She grinned slowly. “Oh, honey, you don’t want that.”

“Your mates are also interested in learning about you.”

Win stared at him. “Are you kidding? You are a telepath. You can shield yourself when shit hits the fan in my mind. Are they trained?”

A deep, rumbling voice said, “We are willing to take the chance to help ease your burden.”

She looked at him. “Dude, I don’t even know your name.”

He smiled. “Wellyn. Our third is Atil. I don’t know why the light Elite is here.”

Win sighed. “I know why he’s here. He’s for me. Our connection is complicated.”

“What is his name?”

“No clue. The Elite sent him in to clean me up and heal me. It extended the torture

but kept me alive.”

Oren said, “I would still like to understand.”

“Fine. Let’s go outside and do it there. That way, you can hose the patio off.”

Iris paused. “Barf bucket?”

Win nodded. “Oh, yeah. Come on, sport. You two as well if you are dying to know.”

She walked out and told Oren, “Have a seat. I will kneel nearby.”

“Why?”

“It is more comfortable for me. I can meditate for days if necessary.”

She grabbed a pillow and sat next to one of the chairs. Wellyn and Atil sat nearby, but when Iris brought the buckets, they accepted them.

Oren nodded. “I have already seen your wounds. I am braced for it.”

“Oh, buddy, that is the least of the issues.” She closed her eyes and smiled. “Whenever you want to get started, boss.”

The hand settled on her head, and she let Oren take a tour through the events of more than a dozen years ago.

Win looked at him as he went to an ashy blue-grey. The sound of vomiting filled the patio area, and Ymer watched from the door with shock. There were two younger boys behind him, and Brexel eased them back from the doorway.

She got up and went inside to get some cold compresses. She nodded to Iris, and they went outside to take care of the guys. Oren was shuddering as his brain was stuck replaying some of the things she obscured, even for herself.

She went to Wellyn, wiped his face, and shook her head. She folded a cold towel and placed it on the back of his neck. She did the same to Atil. He was less shaken up, but he looked at her. “How did you survive?”

“I am a big ol’ bitch. That’s how.” She smiled and held the compress on the back of his neck. “Feeling better?”

“Feeling nervous. It appears that I have a mate that hits harder than I do.”

“What?”

He grinned. “I didn’t think you recognized me. I box for a living.”

“Box?”

“Hit people.”

“Oh, is that fair?”

He laughed. “I use my other form. It’s a little more standard alpha.”

“Got it.”

She walked over to Wellyn and checked on him. “How are you doing?”

“Better.”

“Any tidbits about your occupation?”

“I design and assemble motorcycles, also part-time wrestler.”

“Why were you wearing a suit?”

“Meeting with shareholders.”

Atil piped up. “Meeting with my manager.”

“Oh.”

“You had excellent timing.” He chuckled.

She paused and looked at Wellyn. “Wrestler?”

“I am semi-pro at sumo. It is a lot of fun.” He smiled.

She heard movement and watched as Iris and Brexel helped Oren back inside. “I think I broke him.”

Wellyn got up and swayed. “No, but he was surprised. You are so cheerful that the horrors hadn’t truly occurred to him.”

“I am sorry I yanked you here. I will pay for a cab to get you home if you like.”

Atil stood as well. “You don’t need to get us home. We can manage it. How long will you stay here?”

“Um, until I get used to the height thing. I will take the light Elite with me when I go. I will need to find a house outside the city or something. He stands out.”

Atil nodded. "I understand now why he's yours."

"It wasn't that I wanted a collection, but once they took me, everything spun out into madness."

Wellyn smiled. "You don't look a day over twenty-two."

"Flatterer."

Atil shook his head. "No, aside from your recently healed damage, you have a very youthful face."

"Thanks for the observation. I can't believe it took four dragons unloading on me in a group to get the job done. Like a fire bukkake."

Wellyn blinked twice and then started a slow, rolling laugh. Atil looked astonished. "What?"

"I was kneeling naked with four different dragons pouring fire over me. What would you call it?"

"I think we missed that. Did anyone get any video?"

She snorted.

"There were quite a few videos taken." Keres and May came over. "Where are the cookies?"

Win paused. "Oh, right. Oren asked me if he could romp in my memories. I said yes, and he has regrets. He's probably eating the cookies."

Keres blinked and headed for the kitchen.

Win smiled and caught the scent of cookies. It was light, and there was a hint of chocolate in the air. All she got was the hint. Over the years, she had learned to fake enjoyment of food, and she had it down pat.

She looked back at Wellyn and Atil and said, “Go brush your teeth.”

They paused, and Ymer said, “This way to a guestroom.”

She watched them go and drifted past the others as the cookies were consumed. She got to the couch where the Elite had been, and he was gone.

Brexel said, “We moved him to the first bedroom on the left. I didn’t want him down here when the boys came home.”

“Of course. May I go to see him?”

“Please. He won’t notice.”

She snorted. “Right. Of course not.”

Win headed up the stairs and found his energy signature behind the door Brexel had directed her to.

She paused and opened the door, heading for sleeping beauty on the king-sized mattress. He was wearing the white leathers of the Elite and the last thing she remembered seeing him in. She sat next to him. “Hello. I never did get your name.”

He breathed in and out slowly. The long column of his braid was draped over one shoulder and went down to his knee.



“It’s been nearly thirteen years. I am all grown up now. My power and I have made friends.”

She felt Wellyn and Atil come in.

“The magic said you were mine. You helped me, and you saved me, and when I came back, it nearly destroyed you. Sorry about that.” Win looked at him and sighed. “I don’t know what I am supposed to do with you. You look like an iceberg. Like you should be in the end of a sword and sorcery movie.”

Atil moved up next to her and said, “Do you want to wake him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to leave him here, and I don’t have room in my apartment unless I turn him into my sofa.”

Atil snorted. “Kiss me, kiss Wellyn, kiss him.”

“This isn’t a fairy tale.”

“I know. If you want to jump-start him, our energy will do it. If he wakes angry, we will be here to restrain him.”

“Aw, it’s cute that you think I need help there.”

He smiled. “If you want him awake, kiss us.”

Win looked to Wellyn. She shrugged. “Okay.”

She went to Atil and slid her hand up his chest, touching his neck and pulling him down to her. For her, the kiss was varying degrees of pressure. Atil gave her a spark of power, and she leaned back and nodded.

“Did you feel anything?”

She shrugged. “Pressure.”

He sighed and stroked her cheek.

Wellyn touched her arm and eased her to him. She felt the warmth of his arms around her, and then he leaned in to kiss her. He passed along another spark, and she nodded as he backed away.

She sat next to the Elite’s shoulder and looked at him. She held in the power as she said, “Can you let our hosts know that I am trying this?”

Ymer said from the doorway, “We know.”

She gave him a thumbs-up and leaned to the Elite, bending in to press her lips to his for a moment before she breathed in the sparks she had taken in.

There was nothing for a moment, and then his lips moved against hers. A gentle hand held her head to his, and his eyes slowly fluttered open. When she leaned back, his swirling mercury irises took her in. “My lady. You are all grown into your power.”

“Yes, thank you. What is your name?”

“Draven. How did you wake me?”

“My other mates gave me a spark of magic to give to you. You woke up.”

“Other?” He turned his head and stiffened. “My lady, there are dark Elite here.”

“I know. I was just making out with them.” She looked at him. “Suck it up, Draven.

You are out of the Stronghold now. If you want to go back, I am sure that arrangements can be made.”

She looked at him.

“They will come for me.”

“They really won’t. You are marked as mine for whatever reason, and as such, you are untouchable. If anyone from the Stronghold attacks you, they will burst into flame. Dark flame. From the feet up, they will burn by inches.”

Atil asked, “How do you do that?”

“I learned it from the shadow mages.” She smiled. “I protect what is mine, and the magic says you are mine. I just don’t know what to do with you.”

Wellyn murmured, “We can get you an educational manual if that would help.”

She looked at him. “Hah. Hah. No, my sex drive is nonexistent, and I don’t want to trap anyone into a situation like that.”

Draven slowly sat up. “What?”

“Yeah. They had to hit my system with broad-spectrum antivenin so hard that it basically killed my cycles and hormonal processes. I have no sense of taste, very little sense of smell. I am a bargain basement omega if you don’t have anyone to fight. If you need to fight someone, I can’t be beat.”

Draven smiled. “You have grown strong, little dove.”

She snorted. “Right. You are up. I don’t know what to do with you. I am assuming

you can manage to keep yourself alive and comfortable.”

He nodded slowly. “I can. Your mates will take care of you?”

“I am not mate material.”

Atil said, “Let us worry about that. There are ways to help your body recover. We just have to figure out which one will work for you.”

She looked at him and shook her head.

Cori’s voice came from behind Ymer. “She doesn’t have anywhere to live. She broke her car. She’s pretty sure the Elite have broken into her apartment and destroyed her stuff. And she’s a foot taller than she was this morning. She doesn’t have clothing. She doesn’t even have shoes.”

Ymer had stepped aside as she spoke.

Win flushed in mortification and stood up. “Cori. Your candour is ill-timed.”

“They think you are rejecting them. They don’t seem to get that you don’t think you have anything to offer.”

Win walked to her sister, put her hand on her shoulder, and headed downstairs. She passed the group in the kitchen and walked out onto the lawn, heading for the woods. She got deep into the woods, climbed a tree, and kept climbing until she was forty feet up and had anchored herself against the trunk and a branch.

She curled into a ball and tried to figure out how much money she had and how expensive it would be to clothe her new figure.

The tree trembled with her nightmares.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win woke up as the tree bent, and she was slid into warm arms.

Wellyn held her, and Draven released the tree. Atil stroked her hair, and Cori spoke.  
“Is she okay?”

Wellyn said, “She’s a little cold but not too bad.”

“If she’s cold, she’s hungry.” Cori was walking with them.

“Thank you, little sister. You are good to stay here?”

“Yes. Megan has spoken with her parents, and they are urging her to stay where it’s safe. The Elite have hired people to keep an eye on their house.”

Win opened her eyes and looked at Wellyn. “Where are we going?”

“Atil’s place. It is quiet, in the woods, and has a large gym. You and Draven can get on your feet there.”

Atil said, “It is also easy to secure.”

Cori was walking next to them. “Iris and the guys have breakfast ready. Me and Megan and May will stay here until other accommodations are arranged. Keres is going to teach us a projected glamour that will let us return to school or even go to college if we want.”

“Good. How long was I up there?”

“Fourteen hours. Your guys kept an eye on you. Are they going to be my brothers-in-law?”

Win looked at her. “I don’t know how much law will be involved.”

Cori chuckled. “Cool. I am willing to be bribed to tell you what she likes, eats, and wears. Also, what her dream camera is, the type of computer she needs to work with photographs, and her favourite kind of hard drive.”

Win looked at her. “Cori.”

“What? We have been talking all night, and Wellyn has already said he will design a motorcycle for me.”

Win looked at Wellyn. He grinned. “As long as she can provide me with a valid license and sit through endless safety lectures and checks.”

Cori nodded. “That, too.”

“Why did you give her that?”

“So she would tell us where you were hiding. You go up high.”

“It is easy to make that spot safe. Fewer birds, no foot traffic, and few look up.”

There was a truck approaching the house, and it made Win smile. “Oh, look. Erik is here.”

Cori turned bright pink. “Erik? Like the dragon Erik?”

“The very same. I guess we will meet him inside.”

There was a low black vehicle that glided up behind the truck, and Win cocked her head. “I don’t know who that is.”

Wellyn walked into the house, and Cori was sort of hiding behind them while looking around them.

Erik was talking to Brexel with a folder in his hand. He looked at her. “Miss Win, I have a genetic match for a parent for you, and I had to get here first because your great-grandmother is aggressive. Here.” He shoved the paperwork at her, and Wellyn moved her close so she could take it.

She grumbled, “I didn’t want to do this.”

Erik nodded. “I understand, but you look remarkably like one of the local families. They took samples from the blood you were dripping and lost hairs. The sampling was a rush, but they were insistent.”

Win looked at Atil and said, “Can you help Oren stall them at the door, please?”

He nodded and went. She pulled the documents out and sighed. She nodded and said, “That is what I thought.”

Wellyn asked, “Who are you related to?”

A shrill voice snapped from around the corner. “Get out of my way, you enormous brick!”

Win pointed at the tiny omega who stormed around the corner. “Oh. My little granddaughter.”

“Good morning, Lady Fen. Wellyn, please set me on my feet.”



He sighed and put her down.

She stood and walked toward Lady Fen. “Hello. I have not been little since I was six. I accept that one of your granddaughters was my mother.”

“I called her. She broke into sobs. I will deal with her later.”

Win was outraged. “Lady Fen, shut your mouth. Whether consent was engaged, and I doubt it was, my birth would have been traumatic, and she was alone in a strange city having a baby that she knew her family wouldn’t want. She was a beta and not an omega, and she was alone.”

Lady Fen opened her mouth, and regret surged into her expression. “I need to make another call. Quickly.”

Win took her hand and pulled her outside onto the patio. “Here. Less prying eyes. Call her.”

Lady Fen lifted her phone to her ear and said, “I am sorry, little treasure. I was surprised. I did not mean what I said.”

Win sat and watched.

There was a pause, and Lady Fen teared up. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

There was another pause, and Fen’s expression turned to horror.

Win walked to the edge of the stone and looked out over the yard as Lady Fen gave her granddaughter an outlet that she had never had before.

“The baby? Oh, she’s a woman now. A very powerful woman.”

Win turned to meet Lady Fen's gaze.

Lady Fen said, "Yes, I have met her. No, she didn't seek us out. Feng noticed the resemblance to his mother and grandmother. He got samples and sent them for testing. You were the only child out of sight thirty-two years ago."

Win nodded. Their research had gotten the age right. Her parents must have been forthcoming with details.

"No. She is here with me now. She pointed out the error in my temper. I am sorry you were alone."

Win smiled. That was the right phrasing.

Lady Fen whispered, "Come home, Jia. We have missed you."

Win cocked her head and frowned. She had always assumed her mother had returned to her family.

Lady Fen looked up and saw the frown. "Just a moment, Jia. Win looks irritated."

There was a shriek that Win could hear from several feet away. Lady Fen flinched and held her phone away, saying, "Yes, she's here. Compose yourself."

Lady Fen looked at Win and said, "She would like a video call."

Win nodded and gestured to the loveseat. "Sure."

They sat together, and a lovely woman filled the screen with a hesitant smile. "They named you Win?"

“They did. They got your note.”

Her mother pressed shaking fingers to her lips. “ Oh, your father is going to be amazed. They said you weren’t going to make it, and since I couldn’t afford treatment for you, I should put you into the system. ” The words came out in a rush, and Win could see the issues. Young mother. Father unlisted and definite Elite interference.

Jia looked over her shoulder, and she whistled sharply. Thudding of feet happened behind her, and Win saw something she hadn’t counted on. An Elite in an open shirt and loose slacks walked up and kissed Jia on the cheek before he looked at the screen in astonishment. “ That isn’t... ”

Win’s head reeled. This wasn’t a scenario she had ever imagined. “Is he...”

Jia had tears in her eyes and nodded.

“I never considered that he was still with you.”

“ He had to fake his death, and I had to disappear for a number of years after you were born. When I got in touch with my family again a few years later, they were furious. ”

Win swallowed. “Do you have other kids?”

Jia shook her head. “ You were a one-off, but I knew that you were in the universe, and that made me happy. ”

“Does he have a name?”

The Elite, with tears in his red eyes, choked out, “ Alwin. ”

“Oh. Right. Win.” She smiled. In the background, she saw tropical plants and bright flowers. “You are in the islands?”

Jia smiled. “ We are. Alwin can’t be there. The Elite are watching for him and others. ”

“Oh. Well, you two are in love?”

Jia grinned. “ I wouldn’t put up with his pasty ass if we weren’t .”

Alwin chuckled and kissed her temple. “ Yes, we are .”

Win was still dazed. Everything she thought she knew about her origin was gone in an instant. “I had holiday time at my workplace, but I think I just got my last check coming to me. I don’t think I can do my regular job anymore.” She swallowed. “Would you mind a visit?”

Jia and Alwin both started sobbing. Jia squeaked a frantic nod. They smiled and said, “ Please .”

She smiled. “It will take a few weeks, and then I will get Lady Fen to give me your number.”

Lady Fen muttered, “I am giving you the number today.”

Win sighed. “I met my mates last night, but our union is complicated, so I want a few weeks to sort things out.”

Jia paused and looked at her expression. “ Take the number, but contact us as soon as you are ready. We will get our guesthouse ready. Um, how many mates? ”

“Two dark Elite and one light. So, four of us.”

Jia blinked. “ We are going to have a discussion about moderation, Win.”

Win started laughing. “I am a little bit extra. I am very happy to have talked to you, Jia, Alwin. I will leave you to your grandmother now. I haven’t had breakfast yet. I spent the night in a tree.”

Alwin’s eyes lit up at that, but he nodded and waved.

Win waved again and then walked into the kitchen. Wellyn and Atil were looking at her, and Draven held his hand out. She took his hand and sighed. “I was not expecting that.”

Draven pulled her against him and stroked her back. “Was it horrible?”

“No. I have a dad who loves my mom, but I was sick, and they had to give me up,” Win mumbled. “That is not what I had anticipated or imagined.”

She was turned to Wellyn, and he stroked her back and hugged her gently. Atil was next with a hug.

Atil sighed, “So, happy news?”

“Yes, but I care for the parents who raised me, but knowing what I learned, they were on assignment.” She thumped her head against his chest. “I have parents.”

“Most people do, Win.” Wellyn chuckled.

“But you don’t get it. We were told that we were handed over. That the Elite got our moms pregnant and left them for dead. The fact that he had to hide from the

Stronghold is confirming one thing.”

Atil asked, “What?”

She looked around at the elves in the room. “Sooner rather than later, the Stronghold is coming down.”

She thumped her head against Atil again. “Now I have to figure out where to get clothes that fit a nearly seven-foot woman.”

Lady Fen returned. “I can help you there. You will be coming with me.”

Wellyn said, “She will not.”

“She is my great-granddaughter, and my nose is telling me that you have not mated yet. It is also telling me that she is an omega.”

Win paused. “I don’t want to go without them. They will probably keep me from killing someone. I don’t have a lot of self-control in this form. But wait. Omegas have a smell?”

Everyone in the room stared at her. She looked around and grumped. “What? I have no sense of smell or taste. We have established it.”

Lady Fen paused. “That is rare.”

“It happens in multiple alpha marks being scrubbed. Or in omegas taking suppressants. I don’t have to do that.”

Lady Fen touched her cheek. “We will get you sorted out, Win. Do you have another form? I know some of the others do.”

“I do, but it was painful and hard to be in. I haven’t tried to get back to it since I grew.” She leaned into Atil and exhaled slowly. She closed her eyes and tried to resume her normal shape.

She held her dress against her and opened her eyes. Cori grinned at her from her extra inch in height. “Hey, shorty. Why didn’t you do this after the fight?”

She looked eye to eye with Lady Fen. “Because this height next to a dark Elite has some unfortunate connotations, but it might save my knees.”

Wellyn stared at her and laughed. Atil gripped her arms, and Draven gasped. She was five-five in her beta shape. She kept her dress covering her breasts. “Yeah, yeah. Laugh yourself silly. I don’t care. But, now, I still don’t have clothes.”

Lady Fen smiled, and tears started streaming. “You look just like your grandmother.”

She blinked as she realized Fen meant her own daughter. “Oh, right. I forgot. You must have a bunch of kids.”

“I have indeed, and everyone is an aunt, uncle, or cousin of yours. Jia went missing three decades ago and only contacted us to tell us she was alive. None of us could find her. If you go to visit her, I would like to come along.” Lady Fen reached out and hugged her, murmuring, “Finally, a lady in the family who is my size.”

“There might be two of us. I have a friend who looks a lot like me, but I think, in her case, one of your male offspring had a weekend at play.”

Lady Fen blinked. “Do you have a picture?”

“Yes. I photographed her at a wedding last weekend, but you can also turn around and look behind you. Hi, Lyric.”

Lyric was grinning and said, “I got your address and grabbed some clothing for your stubby form. Who is that?”

“My great-grandmother. Lady Fen. She looks really familiar.” She grabbed the omega and turned her to face Lyric.

Lyric got shorter, and she looked at the other woman. She blinked and grinned. “Now that is a face I see in the mirror or will in a few decades.”

Lady Fen stared at her and blinked. “Will you submit to genetic testing?”

Lyric nodded. “I will. In case you wonder, my parents were swingers, and they swung a little too hard. Condoms broke. Genetic scans didn’t exist, and I am my father’s beloved little bastard. I had a good life and never lacked for love and care. My brother’s mate is over, so I am making myself scarce today. They get loud and shock the grapes.”

Lady Fen smiled. “Excellent. I will call my daughters, and they will get something prepared for you. We will go, and I will take you to one of your aunties’ salons and get your split ends sorted.”

Draven stepped forward. “Not until Win has something to eat. She has metabolic weaknesses. She needs to eat.”

He picked her up and set her down on a chair where a plate of waffles and sausage was waiting with a side of strawberries. He waved his hand over her plate, and steam began to rise.

“You know how you just picked me up?”

“Yeah.”



“That is why I was staying tall.”

He grinned and kissed the top of her head. “You are adorable at any height.”

Atil and Wellyn seemed to realize they were being left out and came over to touch her arm and back. With all three of them in contact with her, something strange happened.

The scent of strawberries came to her, and she tried to hide it. She drenched everything in sweet-smelling syrup, and the moment one of her mates let go of her, the smell disappeared.

At least she knew how it worked now, but it meant her first time with consent was going to be a doozy. She hoped they could find an extremely big bed. It was going to be one weird game of twister.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Lyric had grabbed some clothing from Win's apartment.

Win wasn't surprised when Lyric said, "Rayd helped me get it open. He seems to have adopted you in some manner."

"I think it was because he really liked the photos of his wedding. Soul photography isn't as common as it used to be."

"Oh, right. Well, he got your equipment, and we grabbed your clothes. It has certainly been a weird honeymoon for them, but they appear to be having fun." Lyric smiled. "Your stuff is in one of the storage buildings at the winery."

"Thank you for doing that."

"Well, they were watching your home. I am guessing they got through the barrier on a justice boner." Lyric shrugged.

"I am waiting to be interviewed by police, but we were outside the city, and that means they are going to have to find some law enforcement to lay charges but are also going to have to explain why they stopped a bus full of children and attacked a bus driver while attempting to steal two of the girls."

Draven asked, "Miss Lyric, why are you so confident? You are a target as well."

"Oh, my brother and his legion are at my disposal, and a bunch of demon alphas is not something they look forward to. My brother drove a pack of them off when I was ten, and they haven't come near me since."

Win asked, “Did you bring me a bag?”

“Oh, yeah. This way.”

Lyric grabbed the bag and tossed it at her. Win grabbed it, and her dress slid off her shoulders, leaving her yelping and holding the bag to her breasts. She held the bag with one hand, lifted her skirt with the other, and went in search of a bathroom.

Wellyn asked, “Are you barefoot?”

“Yup. Didn’t get shoes; don’t like shoes.”

Cori said, “Second door on the left.”

Win darted into that room, and it was a bathroom. She opened the bag and smiled at the full selection of underwear, a set of jeans, a baggy t-shirt, and fluffy socks. The sneakers were appreciated.

Dressed and completely covered, she folded the dress and put it in the bag. She returned to the kitchen and looked for Cori.

She looked outside and saw Erik holding Cori. Her eyes went wide, and she walked out. “I am filing my opinion here. I know she is your omega, but no shenanigans until she finishes university. I want her to get a degree.”

Erik looked at her, and his dragon was shining through his eyes. “It is enough that she is close and that she is safe. We now have time to court our lady over time.”

Cori swallowed. “What if I turn into the kind of elf my sister is?”

Erik smiled. “I will have my maiden and an elf at the same time. Do you want to go

to a Ren Faire with me next weekend? Both of you. I will take you as well, Win.”

“Oh, as this me or tall me?”

An arm wrapped around her and pulled her against Atil.

“If you are going to a Ren Faire, we are going with you. I think Draven would enjoy it.”

“What about Wellyn?”

The deep rumble said, “Wellyn wants to take you to bike and tattoo shows.”

“Third person. Classy. Wait. Tattoos? Seriously? I always wanted to get some. Mom told me omega bodies were sacred. But with some of the stuff I have done to this chassis, I should be excommunicated.”

She tried to look around to see Wellyn. She met his gaze. “Tattoos?”

“Sure. Our marks are used to focus magic under the skin. You look like you need a lot of focus.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He laughed and reached out to ruffle her hair.

Ymer crossed his arms. “You are too small to contain that much power.”

She muttered, “Iris contains power from all three of you on a regular basis. She doesn’t look weak or small. Make better assessments, wizard.”

He jolted, which surprised the two males in their grouping.

She asked Brexel, “Where will Cori, Megan, and May be safest?”

“The girls will be safe here. We will arrange schooling to finish their high school. I believe they only have a few months left, and from there, we will gather funds to send the girls to college. If you could design energy masks for them, that would be ideal.”

Win nodded. “That can be done. I have to check my drives.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

“Because I memorized twelve grimoires in the dark mage zone. When I got home, I put that information on hard drives as well as wrote them out. The hard drives are searchable.”

Ymer was shocked. “What?”

“I was hurt for weeks, and they used my pain to open a rift into the mage dimension, and when it was imminent, Draven came in and tended me, healing what he could and cutting me loose. When the rift opened, I was conscious and able to see what was coming for me. I went.” She chuckled. “I knew something they didn’t know.”

Oren murmured, “What’s that?”

“Elite omegas are indigestible for their purposes. The magic doesn’t come out of me, and what I will part with is not good for them. It’s unusable for them. But their research and techniques on magic are very nice primers for my kind.”

Ymer asked, “How long were you there?”

“The closest estimate I have is five years.”

Ymer greyed. “You survived?”

“I stole grimoires and hid up trees. The trees have always been friendly to me. They concealed me from the searchers, and once I started knowing how to use the magic, I created my own little house in that space.”

Oren had a strangled note in his voice. “You lived there. You lived in the realm of dark mages.”

“Well, I was scarred up and carved up in my human form, so I knew what I was going back to when I exited. That was the first rule I read. You return to the point you entered if you were not using the realm for transit. I was going back to the Stronghold, and when I did, I did it with a bang.”

Ymer murmured, “You cracked the wards.”

“Yes. Keres followed and broke many of the prisoners out. I returned to the form I had left in, broken and bleeding, and I fought my way out and transported myself to a hospital near my home. My family moved us into the city the year after Keres was taken and fought her way out. Ruby had already started the barrier with her desire never to be hunted or see others hunted. The barrier flared with each addition of pain. My sisters grew up safe.”

Oren spoke, “How did you get out?”

Draven said, “She tore them apart. The chains they wrapped around her wrists became whips, and everywhere those whips touched, light Elite flesh parted. They were dead in eight minutes. She cried the whole way through, and then she screamed. The stone under my feet groaned and split. That is what slammed me through the

walls of the Stronghold and put me on the floor of the women's quarters. They got me to the treatment centre."

She nodded. "And that is where you stayed."

"Until you summoned me."

There was a new voice. "And that is one of the fascinating aspects of this situation."

A dark Elite with Keres and a slightly smaller male came in. "So, four omegas obtained in one mission?"

She looked at the man and put a face to the name now that she was moving through the thoughts left behind by the blood of the Elite. "Achilles, Dante, and Keres. Morning."

The dark Elite were startled until Achilles got a look at her, and his eyes widened. "Oh, my. Would you consider posing for a battle Elite? I work with a gaming company, and I believe you fit their aesthetic." He paused and smiled. "The omega you. Not the little beta you."

She wrinkled her nose. "Which company?"

"Sityr games."

Lyric laughed. "I am familiar with them. Lykon has made armour for their con costumes. His work is spectacular, and it will be very flattering. Sityr is insisting on unisex armour, but Yemeen is designing some of the other costumes. I think he is either exhausted or tired of working for weirdos by now."

Win smiled. "Where did Lady Fen go?"

Iris smiled. “To get reinforcements.”

Lyric chuckled. “She took a hair and blood sample. I don’t even want to know why her driver had a kit.”

“Omegas are mysterious.” Win smiled.

Lyric grinned and blinked. “I will be right back.”

She left the room and returned with a black bag. “Alexi mentioned that you might want to have this with you.”

The moment the bag was in her hands, Win smiled. “Hello, baby.” She pulled out her camera and sighed as she checked the battery and the memory card space.

She lifted the camera and captured Draven, Atil, and Wellyn. “Other people I ask; you three don’t get a vote.”

The guys grinned, and each reached for her. She caught the scents of them when all three made contact and tried to fight the response.

Iris covered her mouth. “Oh, boy. I know that face.”

Win could see she knew what was happening. “Quiet you.”

Wellyn paused. “What’s going on?”

Lyric cocked her head. “I am guessing it will take bonding with you to get her senses back online. They were blocked with antivenin, so you need to overwhelm the block.”



Win stared at her. “If you are my cousin, I am so going to make fun of you at family gatherings.”

“Knock yourself out, cuz.” Lyric chuckled. “My particular skill is seeing truth. Very annoying when you are trying to date in your teenage years. Oh, and when your brother and his mate were just having sex on the kitchen table.” She shivered and made a face.

Win looked around and saw the dozen people in the space, but it wasn’t weird. Everyone that didn’t live there was there for the same purpose. Them.

Iris asked, “Win, you seem to have a practical-clothing style. What formal designs do you like?”

“Leather. Lots of it. Hard to find it in a sundress, but it cleans up well for me and lets me move the way I like.”

Ymer’s eyes lit up. “There happens to be a leather worker one manor over.”

Iris grinned. “I will call Lya and see if she wants to get back into the swing of things.”

A phone appeared in her hand, and she walked into the next room.

Win smiled and tiptoed after her, taking a soul image of Iris. She caught Lyric’s gaze and took a picture of her. Then, the dark Elite all succumbed to her lens.

She took a picture of Erik and Cori and sighed as she saw their energies reaching for each other.

Keres and her mates were direct power. Iris and hers were more subtle but complex at

the same time. Lyric's expression was calm wisdom.

Megan and May were glowing but hadn't formed their energy yet.

She smiled, looked around, and then walked outside to do something she hadn't done before. She lifted the camera, aimed it at herself, and took a selfie.

Swallowing, she turned the camera around and nearly dropped it.

Blood-red designs moved along her skin, her eyes were black and silver, and her fingertips were crimson.

Atil said, "You hadn't done that before?"

"No. Seeing everyone around here made me curious."

"May I look?"

She grimaced and showed him the image. To her shock, he smiled.

"When I was a teen, they asked me what I thought my mate would be like. I said she was a fighter that could beat up any of my siblings."

Wellyn walked out and said, "I said she would defend her family."

Draven came up to her and smiled. "I said she would shake foundations."

She lowered the camera and blinked. "They really ask you that?"

"They try to give us focus to work toward. They keep our minds on a fixed point so that all we do is for that eventual moment. We know it is a tremendous distance

away, but we move toward it. Toward you.” Atil touched her shoulder.

She sighed and leaned into him. “I hide in trees.”

Wellyn smiled. “Cori told us. You also hate shoes if you don’t have to wear them.”

“That’s true.”

Draven chuckled. “And when I asked, the tree lowered you so we could take you. The oak had no business bending like that.”

She blushed. “Trees like me.”

“I think I know who or what your father is.” He smiled. “A botanist disappeared thirty-three years ago. His signal simply cut off one day, but he was highly regarded. The gardens at the Stronghold have never been the same.”

She thought about the man who looked relaxed as he stood with Jia. His silent movements into the house didn’t have any footfalls that she had been able to hear. The barefoot gene might be a thing.

She smiled and then heard a sound. A golf cart was driving to them. A dark Elite was driving, and the omega next to him was grinning with excitement.

Iris walked up to them, and when the other omega bolted out, she caught her. “Hey, Lya. You are looking good. Oren, looking amused.”

Iris couldn’t see what Win could, which was a half dozen Elite omegas looking at the man in the cart.

Wellyn walked over to the man and said, “Yeah, it’s freaking us out, too.”

Win snorted. “Yeah, you didn’t have to arrange special clothes for the event.” She snapped a picture of the newcomers and laughed. She had never seen scales on an omega before.

She looked up when she saw movement in front of her. “Oh, hey.”

Iris smiled. “Win, this is Lya. Lya, this is Win. Win has said she likes leather components to her clothing. She’s also really tall in her other form.”

Win held up a hand and got the dress out of the bag. “This tall. Actually, this falls to just below the knee.”

Lya took the dress and held it up. “Oh. Wow. That is a lot to play with. Can we chat?”

“Sure.” Lya took her hand, and they walked away from the house. “Sorry. Pointy ears have good hearing.”

Win smiled. “I know.”

“Oh, right. Mine are still coming in. My den doesn’t want me growing too fast, and the baby doesn’t want it either. I will finish when I finish.”

“You are pregnant?”

“Yes, and I have a thirteen-year-old daughter.” She looked at the dress.

Win took the dress and tossed it into the air. When it settled, it was on a three-dimensional projection of Win’s warrior form.

“That is neat. Can you show me how to do that?”

“When you finish growing and your pregnancy does the same.” Win said, “You might not be born to magic; you might be born to scales instead.”

Lya blinked. “Did Iris tell you?”

“Nope. I took a picture of your soul.” Win grinned and showed her the picture.

Lya got excited, and they stood and looked at the other pictures. “Wait. Erik and someone?”

“My little sister, Cori. She’s not eighteen and hasn’t finished school. Or gone to college or university. I want that for her. She needs to know what she is capable of before she has a mate.”

“How are you going to stop him? I have heard stories about his father’s dragon.”

“I threatened the fucking dragon, and he knows I meant it.” She chuckled. “The first time it saw me, I was covered in blood, skin shredded and torn up, and yet still witty.”

Lya chuckled. “What did you study?”

“Nothing. If my attack had born fruit, our kids would be in school together. I have had a lot of menial jobs. I do like photography, though. It is fun.”

Lya smiled. “When I make outfits, do you want to be my photographer? Everybody uses Alexi, but I have to guess that he is getting tired of it.”

She smiled. “He likes it. It keeps him busy, and it is like endless new stimulation for his brain. He’s a good guy.”

Lya looked at her and grinned. “You made a friend?”

“I did. And he’s in a bonded trio, so no shenanigans.”

“If you say so.”

“What? He is.”

“Uh-huh. You haven’t bonded with your alphas yet, right?”

“Nope.”

“Close your eyes and think of the guys and sort them in order of liking.”

“Well, I don’t actually know much about them yet.”

“Just do it.”

“Did Alexi pop into the roster?”

“Yes, but I have seen Alita. She’s gorgeous and spunky.”

“You aren’t competing with her. You are competing with Niko.”

Win opened her eyes and grinned. “I could take him.”

“A dragon?”

A voice called out from the group of dark Elite. “She can take him.”

Win looked, and it was Erik.

“Don’t tell him anything!”

Erik gave her a thumbs-up, but she knew he didn’t speak for his dragon.

Win sighed. “I am going to be so embarrassed the next time I see Alexi.”

“Probably, but if he feels the same, then your pack and Nikolai’s are going to have to have a chat.”

Win sighed. “I am probably just crushing because I found someone who likes photography as much as I do.”

“Find out.”

Win cleared her throat. “I haven’t dated anyone since I was seventeen. I am beyond rusty. And I am definitely not a homewrecker.”

“Fine. What kind of outfits do you like?”

Win put a sound shield around them. “Honestly? I love the Greek toga silhouette, the Chinese Hanfu, and leggings and an overdress. I like my upper arms covered and my back. That’s where most of the damage was.”

“How about your midriff?”

“That’s fine. I do have a mark on it, though.” She lifted her shirt and showed Lya. The sun above her navel was the same dark red as the designs in the selfie.

Lya blinked. “Tattoo?”

“Nope. It appeared when I got taller. Just like my eyes go from mercury to ruby.”

Lya looked behind her. “They are trying to get your attention. I think you can take the dress back. I’ve got it.”

Win took the fabric back and let the projection dissolve. She turned and saw her three and Lyric waiting. “I think I know what is happening now.”

“What?”

“We are either going to Atil’s place or to the city for Lady Fen to make me over.”

She hugged Lya, they walked back to the others, and she murmured, “My little sister also has an interest in leather, and May definitely does. She wants to stay on the soft side of things.” She looked at Lya. “I want my sister armour-plated.”

Cori blushed. “Win!”

“What?” She crossed her arms. “I want you to go to school or college and not to spend your life having little dragon babies.”

Erik blushed and rubbed his neck. “He gave you his word.”

“Yes, and she isn’t in heat right now. The moment she so much as sighs, I am locking her down and making her do homework.”

The alphas chuckled.

“And I will be outside the house with chains and a sword just waiting for an air attack. Any place Cori is will be so heavily warded that we will be lucky if oxygen can escape. Are we clear?”

Erik nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Can I have you explain this to my father? He’s super-



excited that I have found my mate already.”

“Give me a few days, and I will be in touch.” She looked at her three. “So, who all is going?”

Lyric chuckled. “I am following you guys so I know where to find you. That area is tricky to navigate.”

Brexel chuckled. “Right. Ladies, you are staying here. Rest, relax. Maybe go for a walk to Lya’s den. I think Tamara would get a kick out of seeing so many omegas who are taller than Venka.”

Lya chuckled. “She will enjoy that, but ladies, if you want to go for a walk, Iris, you are invited as well. And any of your entourage. Keres, are you interested in coming to see the snakes?”

Cori was next to Lya and grinning. “Snakes? I love snakes.”

Achilles smiled. “I will run security.”

Ymer nodded. “I will as well, and of course, Jupiter and Juno. They go where Iris goes.”

The group started to move across the lawn, and Cori turned back to smile at Erik.

Win patted the young dragon on the shoulder. “Back in your truck, and go chase horses around a field for a while.”

Atil chuckled. “Come on, Win. Time to see your new territory.”

They headed to the drive, and between one step and the next, they were in a beautiful

forested area with a huge house made of rich wood with wide windows sitting in the centre of a glade.

“Oh, this is pretty.”

Atil took her hand. “Come on.”

He led the way to the steps of the deck, and their other two followed. It seemed Lyric had missed the portal.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win looked around and nodded at the neat arrangement of tables, chairs, and counters, and deep inside the space, a living room with puffy couches.

She wanted to dive onto one of those couches, but Atil took her on a tour. He showed her the bathroom on the main floor, the powder room. His study was as neat as everything else, and then he hauled her up the steps, past the guestrooms, and to the large bedroom.

He held her hands, and she heard the footfalls behind her.

“Gee, I can’t imagine why we are here.” She smiled.

Atil grinned. “Funny. We need to bond with you, and Cori suggested that you might be more comfortable in a bedroom.”

“Why did she suggest that?”

“Because we want to see all of you, and this is where you disrobe.”

She snorted and shook her head, looking at the others who were vibrating with tension. “Right. We can get this started. We are going for cold sets?”

Wellyn nodded. “We are. If all three of us are required to make you whole, this is the fastest way to do it. I am sure you understand our urgency.”

“If you are worried about a heat. Don’t be. I am not going to let myself fall into that until I am secure and can defend myself.”

Draven said, "If you are pregnant, we will defend you."

She looked at him. "You know. That wasn't the case the last time."

Wellyn suddenly clued in. "So, the last heat you had was when you were taken."

"Yup. I was like chum in the water, and the more of them that were there, the more violent they became. So, I will wait until I feel it is safe for me." She sighed. "And Cori and Megan and May."

"You are blocking their heat?" Draven asked quietly.

"Not development, just eggs. In May's case, I am keeping her from having to relive that day over and over. She was just edging into receptive, so things had not yet progressed. I kept it from progressing."

Atil looked at her and smiled slowly. "That is a good thing."

She nodded. "It is. She is going to have a journey to feel that her body is hers again."

Draven said, "You are aware of that journey."

"Yes. That is why I am nervous about sharing possession." She shrugged.

Wellyn said, "We stop when you say stop."

Win smiled weakly. "Good, because if my instinct enforces it, you might get hurt."

He nodded. "We understand, but when we create the initial link, there will be pain, and we will bind the braids before we leave here."

She smiled. "I can deal with a little pain, and I know it has to be together."

"So, will you remove your clothing so we don't mark over another injury?"

She blinked. "Oh, right. I think the dragons got all the scars."

She removed her shirt and bra, sweeping her hair over one shoulder so they could check out available real estate.

Draven looked at her torso and blinked. "You have a mark."

She nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't there two days ago, but it's there now."

Wellyn said softly, "Will you remove your jeans?"

Win sighed. "Sure." She stripped to the skin and looked at them.

He trailed his fingers over her shoulders. "You mentioned scars on your back."

"Yes, it was covered with ridges of knotted and torn skin. I couldn't touch myself when I showered. It was gross." She went to full height now that her clothing wasn't in danger.

"Then, I believe it would be good to avoid your back." He lifted her left hand, Atil knelt, and Draven lifted her right hand.

She smiled. "Thank you." She relaxed and focused on keeping relaxed as her sense of smell woke, and she could smell pine and birch and walnut trees. Atil bit the curve of her waist, and the inside of each wrist burned with the bites.

Win felt the links forming, and she looked down at Atil and met his gaze. His eyes

were glazed, and she could feel pleasure and satisfaction spilling through him and now through the link. Wellyn came to her second; the urgency spilled through him, and Draven was having a religious experience. His mercury gaze took her in, and he grinned around her wrist.

Her heartbeat began to speed up, and as they released their bites, she retained her sense of smell.

When they started to lick, her pulse got heavy. She could feel it in her chest, her arms, and even her toes. Win could vaguely remember the feeling. She inhaled again, and it got stronger.

Atil gripped her hips while he licked the curve of her waist next to the red sun on her belly.

The others licked the bites on her wrists, sealing their venom into her body.

She shivered and looked from one of them to another. They were in her mind right now, and they all were blazing with lust, but they were taking care and moving slowly. Moreover, they were all dressed. That relaxed her a bit.

Atil looked up. “Are you willing to complete the bonding?”

She looked around. “One at a time, but the others can tend their marks.”

“Which of us first?”

“Well, since it’s your house, why not start with you?”

He grinned, and his fangs flashed bright white against his skin. He got to his feet and then bowed. “You honour me.”

“If that’s what you want to call it. We can call it an honour, but I call it hard work. If you are looking to find an orgasm in me, it has been a while.”

Atil smiled. “If I can’t find one, I will put one there. Trust me?”

She inhaled the scent of pine. “Sure. The clothes are already off.”

He grinned. “That’s the spirit.” He kissed her.

Win leaned into him and freed her wrists from the others. She stroked his neck, cheek, and jaw. When her fingers trailed down his neck, his shirt was gone.

She smiled against his mouth. “Nice trick.”

“I am sure you have many of your own that we will see in time.”

“If you ask nicely.” There was chuckling behind her, but the guys sounded breathy.

His erection pressed against her, and she wrapped her hand around him, eliciting a groan. He pried her hand away and lifted her, settling her at the edge of the bed so he could drop to his knees. He lifted her hips to his mouth and leaned forward, licking slowly and then with more ferocity.

Win tried to hold herself up on her arms, but she just wanted to see what her body was going to do. It felt warm, and the warmth turned to heat as Atil took his time, moving his tongue slowly, and when he gripped her thighs and found her clit, her body seemed to understand what he was after.

The first bit of slick made her blush, but he kept going, and her body got hotter, and staying still became impossible.

She clutched at the bedding to either side of her hips, and Atil cupped her butt and lifted her higher. She whimpered and shifted her grip again as she didn't want him to stop, but a hand gripped hers, and another gripped hers on the other side. They provided the anchor she needed as her arousal continued to mount while the hot flick of his tongue against her clit drove her higher. When he slid his fingers into her, she gasped, and a high whine came out of her as her body clutched at him and her clit throbbed. He kept her in that position until her sounds changed, and then he eased his fingers out and pressed a kiss to the top of her sex.

Atil stroked her thighs, and she struggled to sit up. Hands helped her. She was still gasping and twitching.

“That was lovely to watch.” Atil smiled. “It was even more wonderful to have caused it.”

She was being supported on either side by her black-and-white bookends. She let out a throaty, “No comment.”

He grinned and licked his lips and then his fingers. She turned pink and saw the colour reach all the way to her navel.

She whispered, “That is exceedingly odd.”

Draven murmured, “Get used to it. Taste, touch, scent, they all reaffirm our connection to you. It makes it stronger.”

She looked at him with raised brows. “Are you sure you want that? It's a lot to contain if you get too close.”

“We are linked through you. You will not give us what we cannot take.” He stroked her hair.



“You have a lot of faith in me.”

Draven said, “I have seen you in action, Win. You did me no harm when the foundation broke. You could have, but you threw me to safety where I could get medical care.”

She shrugged. “You tried to help. You did help.”

He smiled. “It’s good to know it.”

Atil stroked her thigh. “May I continue?”

She bit her lip. “I would like to get on top if I may. I don’t want to be held down until I have a bit more confidence.”

He smiled and moved to the bed, sitting up slightly and holding his arms out to her. She grinned, and the other two helped get her back into a writhing mess. Fingers, mouths, no restraints but surrounded and supported. When she got Atil inside her, she paused, and he was perfectly still. She fell forward and braced herself on his shoulders while she swivelled her hips and got used to the feel inside her. His eyes were narrowed, and she leaned in to kiss him before she started a slow rise and drop. Wellyn and Draven kissed her neck, breasts and stroked her back slowly while she moved.

Atil was holding tight, his thick shoulders rigid as he gripped her hips and stroked his mark. The repetitive stroking got her moving faster until she locked on him, and he locked in her. She inhaled sharply. “Oh, right.” She felt heat inside her, and the pulse repeated.

His hands gripped her hips, and he grinned. “Any bad feelings?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Despite seeing it and feeling it, I forgot about the knot.” She sighed. “I remember now.”

He grinned.

Draven chuckled. “That was lovely.”

Wellyn muttered, “Speak for yourself; that was torture.”

She grinned and checked the link with Atil. It was thick and gold. Apparently, trust was an ingredient to a good relationship.

Draven kissed her and bent her back slightly, which caused a gentle tug below. She gasped and fluttered around Atil, and he groaned. There was more heat within, and Wellyn laughed.

Atil growled. “Just wait until she’s wrapped around you. You will understand.”

Draven lifted his head and grinned. “Feeling okay?”

“Yes. I get the feeling that the question is going to be asked a lot today.”

He grinned. “We want to make sure you feel safe.”

“I feel full; he swelled again.”

Atil chuckled. “Don’t clench on me, and I will eventually recede.”

“Meany.” She made a face at him, and he stroked her mark. She pulled his hand away. “I am guessing your placement was purposeful.”

“It was. Cori said you are ticklish, and those ticklish spots usually hide secrets.”

She made a face. “I am going to have to cancel her allowance.”

Wellyn chuckled. “It is good to have a little sister. She is a keeper of many interesting bits of information.”

Win sighed and rolled her neck as Atil came loose. She eased off, moving up his chest for a kiss. He grinned. “You did that on purpose.”

“Absolutely. Let’s all share the fun.” She glanced down at the glossy mess of pearl and slick. “Just glad it isn’t onyx. That would have been weird.”

Draven kissed her, threading his hand in her hair, tilting her head back. It started her moment with him, and after tidying up, they all continued to be in contact with her as moans and sighs filled the air, and the bed was thoroughly wrecked in a matter of hours.

Win lifted her head out of the pile, and while she was pressed down, it didn’t matter. Her mattress was breathing with her. The links in their minds were thick and bright. They had been thorough in reinforcing it.

She looked around and paused. “I would say that no one needs to know that we were having sex all afternoon, but—uh—Draven, you are living proof.”

He slowly opened his eyes. “Really? I feel fine.”

She smiled. “Look at your hands.”

He lifted his hands, and his eyes went wide. Wellyn groaned and lifted his head from his position under her. “Looks like you are on your way to becoming part of the dark

Elite. It is certain that you are no longer identifiable as a Stronghold Elite at a glance.” He chuckled. “Our mate has a lot of magic, and that magic darkens our skin. Well, your skin. We have been steeped in magic since we were born.”

Win muttered, “At this point, I can only be thankful that the effect wasn’t localized.”

Draven laughed and looked at himself. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

Atil said from her left, “We can help you out. So, Draven, what do you want to do, aside from Win?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know. I was removed from school when I was sixteen and then spent the next twenty-five years in the Stronghold. I was a caretaker there.”

Wellyn said, “I know of a few companies who need alpha stuntmen. Can you take a hit?”

“I can.”

“Good. We will get you working out, dangle you in front of a certain filmmaker I know, and from there, you can start earning your keep.”

Draven extended his hand, made a fist, and rotated his wrist. A heavy platinum and ruby necklace was in his hand. “I can make jewellery.”

“I think it’s a little heavy for Wellyn.”

“It is for you, mate.” Draven smiled.

“It’s worth about eighty thousand at a glance.” Wellyn chuckled. “Assessment is my skill.”

“Wait. Like, is that a thing?” She stared at Wellyn.

“It is. We all have general skills, but we each have one focus. Assessment is mine; accuracy is Atil’s.”

She smiled. “He is accurate.”

Atil chuckled. “Precision is more of a calling.”

Draven was staring at his hand with a delighted smile on his face. He was halfway between pearl and the deep charcoal of the others.

She giggled. “It looks like we ran out of toner.”

Atil laughed.

She sighed. “Okay. I need a shower. My bits are both hot and sticky.” She looked down. “I think I am stuck to you, Wellyn.”

Wellyn sat up, and she ended up kneeling on him. He kissed her neck, dragging his tongue up to flick her earlobe. She convulsed with giggles.

He leaned back and grinned. “So, that is fun.”

She rubbed at the lick mark. “Yes, yes. I, the blood witch, the mirror mage... am seriously ticklish.”

Draven said softly, “We promise only to use it for our own benefit.”

She snorted and shoved at him. She got up and left the disaster that had three very friendly and careful mates in it until she sped up, and they chased her into Atil’s

shower.

Twelve years of therapy seemed to be working. The fact that they didn't look like Stronghold Elite anymore didn't hurt.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

When they returned to a clothed state, they sat and braided a lock of each other's hair with blood coating the segments. They had to take turns on Draven's hair. His darkening locks were waist long. Win's hair was only to the small of her back. Her lock was from the centre at the back of her skull, but Draven's was at his temple, nice and proud. Wellyn's was behind his ear, and Atil's was at the base of his neck as well.

When the braids were done, there was a strange sensation in their minds, and they all started grinning. Draven's eyes were wide. "Wow."

Knowledge was flowing into him, and Win was getting more magic from him. They were all sharing power levels.

It took everything in her not to crawl back into the messy bed with them. She sighed and checked her phone. "Oh, holy shit. Lady Fen is calling me. Lots."

She made a face when Wellyn said, "Better you than me."

She looked at him as a thought occurred. "Some of the stuff with Lady Fen and the family is going to involve you guys being along for the ride."

She walked into the living room and made the call. It rang twice, and someone picked up. "Hello? "

"Hello, I am returning Lady Fen's calls."

"Lady Win? "

“Yes, I suppose that is what happens. Yes, I am Win.”

“ Just a moment. She’s right here. ”

There was a fumble, and then Lady Fen said, “ Win? How are you?”

“Mated.”

“ Ah. That explains it. Well, Lyric is my granddaughter. My son, Bolin, was into fetish clubs and swingers’ nights. I have had a discussion that I never thought to have with him. He recalls the likely couple and is eager to meet his daughter. Will you contact her? ”

“Sure, but all I am focusing on is that I get to call her Aunty.”

Lady Fen paused and then burst out laughing. “ You are interesting. I still want your aunts to make you something appropriate for either form. Can you come into the city? ”

She looked at Atil. “Can we come into the city?”

“Yes. My SUV is here.”

“Lady Fen, we can come in. Where are we going?”

There was a chuckle. “ I will send you the address and meet you there.”

“Okay. We will be there—” She looked at Atil.

“Twenty minutes. We also need to go for dinner.”



She looked at the reddening light. “Oh. Right. Lady Fen, we will go to the address, and then we will head out to dinner somewhere. I will take suggestions.”

She heard a chuckle. “ I have a few. You are four? ”

“We are four. Maybe five if Lyric is still around.”

“ Very well. I will meet you at the shop. Goodbye. ”

The call ended. “Well, I guess we are heading out for clothing and dinner. Let me call Lyric, and we can get out of here.”

She made the call and gave Lyric the information. After a moment of silence, Win asked, “Did you want to come to the shop today?”

“ Uh, sure. When and where?”

“I will send you the text, and we are getting there in the next twenty minutes.”

Atil took the hint, and a moment later, a vehicle roared to life outside.

“Okay, we are heading out. I am sending you the address.”

Lyric asked, “ How was mating day?”

“I wish I didn’t wear jeans.”

Laughter spilled through the phone, and she said her goodbyes.

Wellyn put his hands on her shoulders and steered her out of the house to where a very tall SUV was waiting for them.

Draven held the door for her and helped her in, then went around the vehicle to get in his own seat. Wellyn was up front, and they were on their way.

Draven took her hand and ran his fingers across her palm. He smiled. “Busy day for you.”

“Yeah, when I sleep, I am going to go down like a felled tree.”

Wellyn murmured, “Eventually.”

“Right.” Her nose brought her the scent of the leather seats and the men around her.

Draven smiled. “Sense of smell is back?”

“Yeah. And taste. I am not gonna say that I can taste the difference between you three yet, but I can definitely pick you out in a dark room.”

They all laughed.

She was pretty sure that her sense of taste would improve over time.

They drove into the city, and she grinned as she knew what kind of disapproval her clothing was going to bring. She was looking forward to it. Acceptance was neither requested nor required.

She entered the shop and smiled at the women. “Hello, Lady Fen has asked that I show up here.”

The women looked at her, at her guys behind her, and then at a photo on their phones. “You are Win?”

She wrinkled her nose and grinned. “Yes. I am both short and tall. Depending on the need of the moment.”

The ladies stared and closed their mouths with a snap. “So, you get this tall?”

“Yes, but I like these jeans and am fond of this shirt, and both forms need clothing. I worked a daily blue-collar job, and my wardrobe has precisely one dress to use when I photograph events.”

She smiled, and Lady Fen came in from the back room. “Win! Excellent. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. A little tired.”

Lady Fen looked at the men behind her and raised her brows. “A little?”

Win smiled. “A little.”

Fen patted her cheek. She looked at the two ladies and began to rap out orders on what she wanted her great-granddaughter to wear.

After sending the ladies scurrying, Fen said, “Now, gentlemen, what would you like your mate to wear on an evening out?”

The guys thought about it, and Win smiled when Draven said, “Silk. Lots of silk that moves when she moves.”

Wellyn shrugged. “Leather.”

Atil grinned. “As little as possible.”

Win smiled. “A camera.”

Lady Fen snorted. “Just a moment.”

Fen wandered off with her phone, and Win looked at Atil. “Really?”

He shrugged. “Honesty is the best policy.”

She snorted. The two aunties pushed out racks of clothing and then eyed her. “Come with us.”

She smiled sweetly. “Lady Win.”

The women blinked. “Come with us, Lady Win.”

She grinned and followed them to the changing area. The next hour was one outfit after another, and the guys got the vote because Win didn’t care.

When Lady Fen returned, she sat on a comfortable couch and waited with a slight smile. She put in her vote for the dresses and shoes. Win felt weird dressing all fancy, but she knew her running shoes were waiting.

She twirled in a few of the flared dresses and laughed when the ladies presented her with stockings and garters. The next time she twirled, all three of her guys leaned forward.

Win put her hands on her hips. “Ya’ll have issues.”

Wellyn sipped his tiny cup of tea and shrugged. “We have all been given an enthralling hobby. Adding layers of surprise is just fun.”

There was an arrival at the door, and Win froze. “Oh. Darn.”

Alexi was there with Nikolai and Alita, and Alexi was carrying a camera bag.

Alexi smiled at Win, and she saw the genuine warmth in his eyes. “Win, I was told this was for Lady Fen’s great-granddaughter.”

“Um, that would be me. They tested my blood after certain events. There was plenty of it around.”

Nikolai’s dragon appeared in his eyes, and he inclined his head. She blushed and nodded. “Yeah, thanks again.”

Alita looked between her mate and Win. “She was the one?”

Win shrugged. “I get taller.”

Alexi walked up to her. She started to blush hot pink.

Her guys were amused.

“Lady Fen asked for this to be selected for you. There is an extra battery and memory cards.” He extended the camera bag.

“Um. Thank you. I am really sorry you had to go out of your way.”

He smiled. “You look good with white hair and mercury eyes.”

She felt her skin get darker. “Um, yeah. Contacts and hair dye did a lot of work.”

Alita was looking at her and started to smile. “Oh. Win. You—”

Niko's dragon must have finished a download, and Niko shuddered. "Oh, well, that is funny."

Win slumped her shoulders. "Not particularly. Circumstances are circumstances."

Alexi frowned. "What am I missing?"

Win blurted out, "I have a crush on you. There. Done. Now folks can stop giggling about it."

She nodded formally. "Thank you for selecting the camera. I won't take up any more of your time. And feel free to change directions if you see me at events."

One of the aunties took pity on her. "Lady Win, let's try some of the other dresses."

She kept her head down and went back to the dressing room.

The next dress was a wrap and several inches too short for her, but it was a standard dress for going shopping, cocktails, or whatever else didn't need formal wear.

She turned from side to side and remained in the change area until she heard the front door open and close. She stepped out and found the alpha, beta, and omega seated to one side, Lyric grinning at her and her own glamour of elves looking at her with kind expressions. They could feel how hard that was for her.

She flapped her arms. "The dress is a little short."

The aunties were staring with wide eyes.

Draven held up his hand, and there was a tablet. "I think she would be good in something like this."

The auntie stared, looked at her, and nodded. “We can do that. Colours?”

Her three said, “Black, grey, and white.”

Win smiled at the auntie. “Colours by body weight.”

The woman blinked and smiled slowly. “Lady Win, are your ears pierced?”

“Yup. Six in each side.”

“Can you return to the back so I can take measurements?”

“Sure.” She returned to the back of the changing area, and another auntie came in with some lovely fabric over her arm.

“Your alpha gave us permission to dress you in traditional clothing. It will be short, but I think it will be comfortable.”

“Well, it isn’t like I am not going to stand out anyway.”

She smiled, and the auntie helped her put on the wrap with the wide band of embroidery, the wide sleeves, and a wide sash. The lower portion ended just above her knees, but it covered everything if she bent over.

The auntie then sat her down and piled her hair on her head, wrapping the link braid up and over the mass to hold it in place. Earrings were pressed into her ears. A chain linked to one that swung to the side of her ear and made her smile. Ticklish.

When she went out again, she took her sneakers and put them on while the women shook their heads in amusement. “Like I need to be taller.”

Dressed and glittering, she walked out, and appreciation shone in her guys' eyes. Lady Fen's eyes teared up, and her hand was on her chest. She quickly straightened and took a picture.

"Where did Lyric go?"

"Her measurements were taken, and she is off to meet my son." She smiled. "Two omegas in the family on the same day. We are blessed."

There was a click to her left, and Alexi had a camera focused on her. She turned bubble gum pink again, and he smiled and took another picture.

She exhaled. "So, if you guys want to make fun of me, can you get it over with?"

Niko, Alita, and Alexi looked at her in surprise.

Alita asked, "Why would they do that?"

"I dunno. The last time I had a crush on someone, I was a teenager. That was the protocol for unwanted advances."

Lady Fen ignored everything and asked, "Can you go to dinner like that?" She paused. "Please?"

Win looked at her three. "Will you guys promise to keep this skirt from riding up?"

Wellyn got up and walked to her, sliding his hand down her backside while she glared at him. "Absolutely not."

"I can and will destroy you if I need to, and then it will just be me, Atil, and Draven." She chuckled. "Or I will pull your magic and leave you as a motorcycle-building



alpha fella.”

He grinned. “You aren’t really mad. I am checking for it.”

Niko was staring. “You were the elf drenched in blood.”

“Yup.”

“He just told me who you were. What you were. He really is...”

She held her hand up. “And no, I am not going to do that, and if I find out he was encouraged, I will fill him with enough energy to turn him into an alpha who can break rocks. And you will have to deal with that.”

Alexi paused. “Are you talking about me?”

“Yup. The dragon wants to make a bridge between our groupings, and you are the way. Having elves to call on helps him when it comes to dealing with other groups for territory. Or... other dragons.”

She looked at him and smiled. “And by telling you, I have dispersed any interest that you had, so it is no longer an issue.”

The dragon stood and hissed, “Lady, please.”

“No. I am my glamour’s conduit to power. It is unfair to make Alexi the same.”

Alita paused. “Alexi, how do you feel about this?”

He paused. “I like Win. Well, not this one. The small one. This one is stunning, but Win and I get along. We can talk about photos, and her work capturing souls is

amazing. She smiled shyly at me as we talked, and I believed we could have evolved more than friendship.”

Win smiled. “Coulda, shoulda, woulda. Didn’t.” She looked at Lady Fen. “Where did you recommend for dinner?”

“Hynura. The banquet room has been reserved, and your family is waiting to greet you. Niko, your gathering is invited as well. You helped bring her to us.”

Alexi frowned. “What?”

Lady Fen smiled. “I believe that Win described it as a dragon fire bukkake.”

Niko blurted out a laugh, and Alita’s eyes widened. Alexi clenched his eyes shut. “Am I picturing that right?”

Niko nodded. “That is what it looked like, but Erik just had wings, no scales.”

Alexi froze. “That image of her. Why is she wearing my tattoo?”

Niko paused, understanding crossed his face, and then started laughing.

Win went hot pink and put her face in her hands. “This day just doesn’t get better.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Win watched Lyric chatting to her father. It was a great distraction from the teary couple who kept comparing her face to an image on their phones.

Lady Fen sighed and leaned over to speak to her. “My son and his wife were grieving Jia. Those are happy tears, but they are having a hard time expressing it. To learn that she has a mate and is living happily on an island somewhere hurts them.”

“They have other children. Two alphas and a beta,” Win muttered.

“Yes, I am aware. But the loss of Jia hurt them. Meeting you was a step toward recovery.”

“Well, everyone saved on holiday and birthday gifts.” She smiled. “Look on the bright side.”

Fen sighed. “You and Lyric are the first omegas my family has produced in my direct bloodline.”

“Oh. That. Right.”

“Do you have plans for children?”

Atil leaned forward. “Win has some old business to attend to. After that, we will discuss the next generation.”

Lady Fen spluttered, “But you will go into heat.”

“When I want to. I have been able to control it for over a decade. I have business to settle with the Stronghold Elite. It’s time.”

Lady Fen paused. “What are you going to do?”

“What is necessary. Break some walls and get the girls out of there. The Elite will need to take care of themselves. If they take one more girl, we will take her back.”

Lady Fen blinked. “You are going against the Elite?”

“They are going against us, so... yes.”

Fen grabbed her hand. “You can’t put yourself at risk. You are the only child Jia has.”

“I am not at risk. I am...” Win racked her mind and found the word. “Xian. I can be damaged but not killed.”

Lady Fen gasped, and the room got silent.

Win looked at her. “What do you think this body is for? I am not the only one. Lyric is one, Atil, Wellyn, and Draven are as well. What do you think the Elite are?”

Fen paused, and her eyes widened. “I hadn’t really put that together. Oh, so when they take the young women who manifest Elite characteristics—”

“They treat them to keep them from turning into this. They keep them as betas with lovely hair and small bodies and no power. I have come into my power. The scent of an adult female heat drives them insane.”

Lady Fen was served by two of her mates, and Atil and Wellyn served Win.

Fen said softly, “How do you know that?”

“They took me when I was seventeen. I escaped and ended up in a hospital and left months after I entered. I wore those scars for over a decade on my smaller form until two days ago.” She smiled as they ate. “That is how I know Nikolai.”

Lady Fen looked over at the dragon’s table. “How do you know Alexi?”

“When I was a child, I was on a field trip, and there was another trip with older kids from a different school. I think we were there for some kind of science display.”

Fen asked, “What kind?”

“We were watching an eclipse. I drew a picture of the red sun with the empty centre. I got lost on the way back from the restroom, and someone helped me, so I gave him the picture.”

Fen smiled. “It was Alexi?”

“I suppose so. He’s in a linked partnership. I have to just breathe through the pain and let that urge go.”

Fen frowned. “Pain?”

“Yes. I know it’s ridiculous. I am a fucking giant, after all. I would run the other way if I saw this in the mirror. It is too complicated.”

She prodded at her plate and felt like an idiot. Part of her had been convinced that they would be together. Now, reality was smacking her in the head, and she felt like a fucking toddler.

Lyric looked at her and frowned.

Wellyn said, "Come for a walk with me."

She looked at him and nodded. He helped her out of her chair, and they left the dining room and walked to the roof space. He stopped and turned her toward him, stroking her back. "Why don't you demand him?"

"People aren't things to be demanded. The Elite demanded me, and I fought hard. I am not going to trap anyone in a similar situation. I also don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, especially his."

She pressed her forehead against his chest. "He doesn't even know me. There is no reason for him to understand."

The door to the roof swung closed softly. Alexi's voice said gently, "Explain it to me then. Why do Niko's memories have my tattoo on you?"

"Because I drew it, and when you helped me back to my group at the eclipse trip, I gave that drawing of the eclipse to you."

He stared. "No way."

"Yes way." She looked at Alexi from the comfortable place in Wellyn's arms. Niko and Alita were behind him.

Alexi stared at her and blinked. "There you are. Black hair, pony tails on either side of your head, huge dark brown eyes, and a small birthmark on the hand that you were using to draw. You were wearing black high tops there as well."

She blinked. "Um, I like to be comfortable."

“As for the other, I don’t know you, but Niko’s dragon is keen to have a connection.”

Her heart sank. “I am not buying you or even renting you.”

Alexi blinked and smiled. “Oh, that isn’t it. I can’t seek out another connection unless he agrees. He agrees. You are good with me and Niko and Alita?”

“Of course. They are your den.”

“But would you like to go on a date?”

She paused. “What?”

“Your smaller form so that I can feel like a big man, but yes.”

She chuckled. “Sure. Lady Fen got me a bunch of clothes. The rest of my stuff is at Lyric’s. You have already seen my one dress.”

He laughed. “Just the one?”

“Yeah. It was all I needed.”

“Well, would you go on a date with me?”

“Because your dragon wants it?”

“No, because he allows it, and Niko allows it, and Alita asks me what the hell is wrong with me.”

“What do you want?”

“To go for walks with you, taking photos of brooks and rocks and seeing how you see them and how I see them and comparing.”

She leaned back from Wellyn. “That sounds like fun.”

He smiled and stroked her cheek. “Your life has been particularly short on fun. Go on the date.”

“You know what is going to happen.”

“Yes, and his dragon is all for it.”

Alexi paused. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I can make you an alpha or a delta. If I were you, I would pick delta. Just as tall and strong as an alpha but a better temperament and no knot.”

Alexi blinked. “You can do that?”

“Sure, I just have to do one teensy thing at the Stronghold. I should get that out of the way in a few weeks.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“I know, but if you want a physical upgrade, I can do it. Hell, I can even give you a beast, and Alita can ride you around.”

He stared at her. “You have that power?”

“Not yet. No. I will get it after my next visit to the Stronghold.”



“What?”

“Magic is magic. The dragons were strong enough to scatter and hold onto their power. Those who lost their energy surrendered it to the world until there were alphas strong enough to contain it again. That time is now. The huge wave of exceptional alphas is localized here because here is where the original gathering of the elves was. The Stronghold was the archive and study area. That is where magic was honed and developed.” She glanced at Wellyn. “It is also where it blew up in their faces.”

Wellyn smiled. “It did.”

Alexi paused and slowly raised his camera. “Sorry. Can’t help it.”

He took a picture of her and Wellyn.

Alexi smiled softly. “So, you kick ass, and then we have a date?”

“Yeah. Unless we bump into people while I am photographing a wedding in the meantime.”

He grinned. “Going to use the new camera?”

“Of course. And my second best one for my second shooter.” She smiled.

He blinked. “Second shooter?”

She mirrored herself and put her other self next to him. “Hello.”

He looked at her in surprise. She had used her beta form and was waving at him. “Are you okay?”

“What? How?”

“This is one of the things I learned to do. I am not really in two places at the same time. I have a portal under my feet and am moving rapidly between them. So, both are me, but I can shoot all parts of a wedding at the right time.”

He slowly grinned. “I did wonder how that worked.”

She extended her hand. “Just like that.”

He took her hand. Where she thought he would clasp it in a handshake, he lifted it to his lips. She blinked. “Um. Thanks? The reciprocation leaves my mindboggling.”

He grinned and placed a kiss on her palm. Both of her shivered, and Wellyn laughed.

When he let go of her hand, she bobbed a curtsy and returned to one body.

Alexi was smiling and a little smug. She looked at him and didn’t know what to say.

She cuddled up against Wellyn, and he obligingly wrapped his arms around her.

Alexi took a photo. “I thought she was tall, but now I see. She’s just right.”

Wellyn grinned. “She is.”

She sighed. “Okay, I have pulled myself together. I want to go and talk to Olly.”

“Excellent. Benjiro is my trainer.”

Nikolai asked, “Can he choose any beast?”

“Of course. Even a dragon, but that will take a few decades to develop fully.”

“If he chooses dragon, will you bear him a child?”

“Whoa. So far, we are talking about going for walks. My guys might want to put a bid in in case my uterus opens for business. If Alita is willing, I can give her one of my eggs, and he can father one with her.”

Alita blinked.

“Oh, that is a conversation for a much later date. I am not trying to force Alexi to become my lover. I just need him for some reason that has been with me since I was little.”

She took in a deep breath and released it. “Right. An issue for another day.”

She smiled. “Sorry for the fuss. The last few days have been a little much. I am going to go back and talk about hitting things.” She nodded, “Please excuse me.”

She made a run for it.

\* \* \* \*

Wellyn looked at the three who remained with him. “She felt the draw when she was small and did what children do when they like someone. She gave you a picture.”

Alexi smiled. “That picture is what made me want to take pictures. To capture the moments that faded otherwise. Niko helped me achieve that, but she started the burn.”

Wellyn chuckled. “I think you are just supposed to be in each others’ lives for now.

What do you think, dragon?"

Niko's eyes blazed. "They make pretty babies."

Wellyn understood with a clap of recognition that he kept from Win. "You want female dragons."

Alita stared. "I thought they only had boys."

Wellyn smiled as the dragon's eyes glowed. "The born dragons only have males. Alexi would not be a born dragon. He would be made and changed in whatever shape Win or Alexi wanted."

Alexi said, "So, she wasn't joking? She can really change me into an alpha?"

"Yes, but as she said, delta would be better for you. Still fertile, still large and strong, but you would retain the focus to take your photographs."

Alexi blinked. "I need to do some research."

"Look into dragons that wouldn't alter your images or melt your cameras."

Niko said, "I will help with the research."

Alita said, "I like Alexi the way he is."

Wellyn said, "I believe Alexi may be frustrated at being surrounded by extraordinary alphas and not being one of them. Love and affection are wonderful, but feeling equal is amazing. We are equal to Win. She is equal to us. She can do what we can't, and we can do what she can't."

Niko snorted. "I made my own omega."

Alita elbowed him sharply. "You didn't make me. You tailored me. There was healing in the process, but aside from extra space internally, I am the same omega I was born to be before your son was born."

The dragon sighed. "Sorry, princess."

"Yeah, you had better be."

Alexi sighed. "I have to do some research. This is a possibility that has never occurred to me before. The dragon made me more compatible for him, but that was at Alita's request."

Wellyn smiled. "You don't have to transform, but a few meetings with her will settle what you are to each other. I believe that it might be friends, but she is tangled in a mating frenzy, and sorting social situations is likely difficult."

Alita sighed. "I will talk to her."

Wellyn smiled as Alexi's omega headed down to the banquet room.

\* \* \* \*

Alita looked around and found Win sitting with Olly and laughing brightly. Olly had a relaxed expression on her face, which was rare. The woman was usually on guard.

Alita walked over and said, "May I join you?"

Olly smiled. "Please. Have a seat."

Win looked at her. "I am so sorry about that. I don't know what is driving me, but Alexi is important, and he needs an upgrade."

Alita chuckled. "The dragon used to call him the useless beta. He offered him an alteration to please me, not Alexi. Alexi just wanted to be more useful to Niko."

"Right. Would it make it better if I said I don't want to borrow him, I just need him bulked up a little?"

"For you?"

"To contain the magic that is going to reside in him. There are a handful of suitable receivers for the extra energy that is going to appear. I guess you could say he's a test case?" She shrugged.

"Hm. Why did you ask me and Niko?"

"You are his omega; Niko is his alpha. I wasn't just going to turn him into something else without making sure you were aware and approved. He's marked, so I didn't want to mess with that, but he's had dragon fire, so he can contain more than a beta who starts from scratch." She rubbed her forehead. "I like him and don't want him exploding."

Alita's eyes went wide. "What?"

"If he fights the change, the power will win," Win muttered. "That is why I am being urged to begin a friendship with him. I have affection for him, but I don't know what kind it is."

Olly's mouth was open. "You can make an alpha?"

“Yeah, three or four of us can. Or a delta. I would really recommend delta.”

Alita frowned. “I don’t know what a delta is.”

“It was like I said upstairs. All the size, none of the knot or bad temper. They don’t go into rut either.” She shrugged. “But they can father children.”

“So, you would like to carry Alexi’s child?”

The idea was startling. “No. Not at all. I don’t understand this compulsion.”

Olly smiled. “Seeing him wasn’t a mate response.”

“No, it was standard attraction. He’s pretty, and he takes photos, and I love photography, so he is like... a buddy, I guess. I was in my small form, and guys are a little more accepting of me crushing on them when I am small.” She gestured to her torso. “This doesn’t say sweet and cuddly if you aren’t my mates.”

“I wonder what Luna’s Elite would make of this.” Alita shook her head.

“Could you give me Luna’s number? I need to talk to her.”

Alita paused. “I will ask her first. Just a moment.”

A moment later, Luna answered, and Alita handed the number over.

Win smiled. “Thank you. I have to make a few calls. Olly, show Alita the pictures of the babies beating up their dad.”

Alita grinned, brought up images of her son, and began talking with Olly.

\* \* \* \*

Win spoke to Luna and said, “If your Elite have any friends, any good guys at the Stronghold, and if any of them want to get their mates and escape, they shouldn’t wait any longer.”

“ Who are you, and what do you know?”

“You know the elf with the school bus? That was me. I was the bloody one, and I am tired of women who look like us being terrified to go outside, to live, to have kids, to find love. I am tired of it, and those like me want to live free. So, freedom is what we will have. If this goes smoothly, no one dies, but there will be change, and it will be sudden.”

“ How long do they have? ”

“More than a week, less than a month.”

“ Right. ”

“Oh, and if your son’s dragon tries anything with my little sister before she continues her education and gets a degree, I am going to be very irritated.”

“ Oh, you are Cori’s sister? ”

“Yes.”

“ I was there when you ladies showed up. ”

“Oh, sorry. I was a little distracted at the time.”



“ It’s understandable. I would like to have a family dinner so I can meet her. ”

“Sure, as soon as I finish this project.”

“ Wonderful. Erik is an excellent cook. ”

“Well, that is a point in his favour. Warn them we are coming. We want to make sure that it all goes well.”

“ I will pass the message along as quickly as I can. ”

“They are with you, aren’t they?” Win grinned.

“ No comment .”

Win chuckled. “Well, have to get to the next call so that Cori’s safety is assured. If there is one thing I don’t pull punches over, it’s my sister.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:29 am*

Wren watched the moment she had waited for playing out in the projection. A few interested parties were watching, as well as a dozen Elite omegas portalled into the Stronghold, and the women were transported a moment later.

Another of the omegas headed to the prison for the dark Elite, and she sent them back in time so that they could catch up to their ladies immediately after the Stronghold came down. No one would know about it because the remaining women were casting a spell on the bedrock of the Stronghold while others turned the remaining Elite alphas into simple alphas with no magic. A traumatic moment for the Elite was happening, and no one knew about it.

Wren sighed and rubbed the back of her neck.

Poppy appeared next to her. “All tight. The ladies are with the queen, and the ten children that we located are there as well. So, fifty-five souls nice and safe, women and children.”

“Only fifty-five?” Wren was shocked.

“Yes. That is why their attacks are more aggressive. No women over thirty-nine. They were feeding them to the fissures.”

“Count on the downgrades?”

“Three hundred seventy-three.”

“And the dark ones?”

“Loose, ten years back in time and should be knocking on the queen’s door any time now.”

“Where are the others?”

“Those with mates are home. Those without are working out or going for a nocturnal run, hoping someone makes a move. We consumed a lot of energy.”

Wren had to ask. “Did he get loose?”

“Ten years back like the others.”

Wren nodded and glanced at her front door.

“I told him to give you a few hours. He’ll be here at midnight.”

Wren smiled. “Good. Now we can work on the shadow mages.”

Poppy looked at her. “You’ve got balls, Wren.”

“That’s why I favour skirts.”

“Hah. Are you good? I can stay overnight.”

“No, don’t you have work in the morning?”

“I always have work in the morning.”

Wren looked at her tall, pale friend. “You still have the book?”

“Definitely; hidden where no one can find it.” Poppy put her hands on her hips; her men’s sweats looked strangely in place on her.

“So, what is this week of work holding for you?”

“You know. Dodging the attempt at conscription to that stupid survival show.”

Wren looked at her. “I think you would be an easy winner.”

“Yeah, but I would have to do the whole thing as my beta self. I am mousy enough to slip under the radar if the others are halfway decent. The problem is that Sityr Games is very alpha heavy, and two of the four betas who work there are pregnant. That leaves me and one other. The rules say that it has to be two alphas to one beta, and any females have to get preg tested because of what has happened on other games.”

Wren snorted. “Well, you aren’t in any danger, right?”

“Nope. Win made sure that I am locked down and won’t attract any strays.” She smiled. “You are good?”

Wren turned and hugged Poppy. “I am finally good. If they come back now, I have people around who can help.”

“Yup. And he is on the way, and he’s not going to take lightly to anyone coming near you.”

Wren smiled. “Do you remember my name?”

“Yes, I remember your name. You trusted me with it, and I have it.” Poppy smiled and returned the hug. “Doe is settled, and you need to be next.”

“You are in there as well.”

“I like being on my own. I don’t know how long she can delay my heats, but as long as Win is willing to hold it back, I am going to enjoy myself.”

“And all you have to do is keep your beta face the only one the public sees.”

“Yeah. That too.” Poppy smiled. “Good thing I have practice.”

Wren smiled. “Congratulations on very neatly bringing down the Stronghold.”

“Thanks for helping.”

“You got me closer to my goal, and I have reinforcements coming. That is the best news I have had in years.”

“Just call if you need anything.” Poppy touched her cheek. “I am always listening.”

Wren grinned. “I am going to hold you to that.”

“I want you to.” Poppy shrank down into the baggy sweats and grinned. “Off I go.”

Wren watched her friend leave the house and felt the warm ward she had left behind. She always felt better after a chat with Poppy, but she knew her friend was not going to escape the show. She had spent a lot of effort getting her into the line of fire.

She made a pot of coffee and baked some cookies. After years of waiting, her other half was arriving. She wanted to make a good impression. It was key to keeping her from jumping into his arms again.

A lady needed restraint, after all.