



Sold Bullied Mate (Badlands Wolves #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My bully Alpha rejected me. Now, he buys my plus-size curves and knocks me up.

I was the outcast Omega of the pack, bullied and laughed at for my premonitions.

He was my brother's best friend and the future Alpha. He rejected me publicly.

Now my new pack is selling me off to punish me....and he's my new owner.

I'm shackled and trembling, sold off for a low price to anyone who wants me in heat.

He catches my scent and coldly wins the bidding battle.

He takes me back to the small town of my youth, to the wounds he caused.

He says I'm coming home with him, that I have no choice but to follow him.

I know my heat is coming. I know I can't protect myself from him.

I can't control my body when he gets close, tearing open my wounds one by one.

I can't control my mouth when he kisses it, taking everything I have.

He owns my plus-size curves. He owns my pregnant belly.

Will my bully Alpha claim our little family?

The Wolves of the Badlands are cruel, tough, and possessive. You think you can escape them, but they drag you back everytime. Because they will heal you, protect you, and own you the way only a mate can.

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With my face this close to the coffee maker, I can feel the heat of the liquid against my face, feel the steam from the water curling around my cheeks. The smell is rich, wrapping around my head and lifting the weight of exhaustion for a few seconds.

I'm holding my mug under the nozzle, catching those first few drops—the strongest, and by my estimation, most caffeinated—when I feel a presence behind me.

“Morning, Emin,” I say, without turning around. Even without his scent, I would recognize him from the sound of his shoes on the floor alone. Without looking, I know he's leaning against the doorway to the kitchen, arms crossed, eyes narrowed on me as I quickly swap out my mug for the coffee pot.

“You know,” Emin says as I turn around. “I'm starting to think you're abusing your privileges.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose with two fingers, then take a sip of the coffee, letting the warmth of it pool in my stomach. I picture it spreading through my veins, waking my body.

According to the pack doctor, caffeine doesn't affect us the same way it does humans. I desperately hope that's wrong.

“If a lousy cup of coffee is all I get for my services,” I grumble, “maybe I'm the one being abused.”

Emin laughs and peels away from the door, following me as I walk down the hall. In this early morning light, his reddish-golden hair glints in the light. It's not something

I'd normally notice, but it sticks in my mind, reminding me of another person with the exact same hair, how hers fell to her shoulders, how she would tuck it behind her ear.

"What are you thinking about?" Emin asks, catching me in the thought, and I push it away quickly.

"That's classified," I grunt, gesturing for him to go ahead of me when we reach the door. Emin is tall, but half an inch shorter than I, much to his chagrin—and strong, his body more lithe than mine, but still bulky from our afternoons in the gym together. He slides through the door, and I turn as I follow him to keep from bumping my coffee on the door frame.

When we walk into the meeting room together, several other members of the council are already here. Not all packs choose to assemble a council, but I find it helps to keep the peace. Makes people feel heard, even if we all know I have the final say on every matter.

The room smells of new carpet and icing—my eyes dart to the box of donuts on the table, lid open, already missing a few. No doubt the work of Janice, the receptionist and overall manager of the pack hall.

"Good morning, Dorian."

Kellen Argent—Emin's father—sits closest to the head of the table, his folder of notes already in front of him. He's the kind of man who acts like he wants urgency—to finish the meeting, to move on with things—but is usually the one talking for far too long, not realizing he's the very reason our meetings take more time than they should.

"Good morning, Kellen." As I pass him, I notice that his hair is fully gray now, every

trace of the red-gold color he shares with his children gone. My stomach tightens, once again, at the thought, and I stop at the head of the table, take a deep breath, and clear my head.

More and more lately, it's been harder for me to keep my mind off the mistakes I made in the past. If I had more time, more energy, if my entire being wasn't taken up with caring for this pack, I might try to fix the problem. Find her, make amends.

But I don't have the luxury of time or energy. And that becomes even more apparent when Claire, one of our few casting shifters, clears her throat and looks nervously in my direction.

She is not usually in attendance at these meetings. The casters only come around when there's something wrong.

"Are we ready to begin, Dorian?" she asks, pushing her curly black hair over her ears. "It's rather urgent."

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Since taking over leadership of the pack, I've had to fend off one disaster after another. The drought five years ago, then the flood, a sort of divine comedy at my efforts, taking and giving back in excess. We've survived it all as a pack. Surely, we can survive this, too.

But that doesn't stop my entire body from going into high alert, primed to hear the worst.

"It appears," she stops, clears her throat, and puts her fist to her mouth. "That the stores of Amanzite are lower than previously thought."

My gaze darts immediately to Emin, who sits up taller in his chair, his hand immediately going to the small, dark stone set in the chain around his neck—a stone

that matches one found on each of us, worn differently depending on the shifter.

Mine is more elaborate, smaller pieces set into a watch around my left wrist. A gift from my grandfather on the night of my first shift. Most shifters in the pack are lucky enough to inherit a piece made for holding Amanzite.

Every shifter is required, for their first shift, to experience what it's like without the stone, without the imbued magic from the casters. With Amanzite, shifting is near painless, and the magic awards us certain benefits, such as our clothes reappearing when we return to human form; it allows us telepathy, to communicate fully through the pack's mental link.

Without Amanzite, shifting is a bone-crunching, painful process that leaves you weak and shaken. With no magic to bolster us, we can't communicate beyond our bodies in the wolf form. It's the use of the stone and of the magic that puts us at our strongest. That allows us to defend our territories.

Every pack in this area uses Amanzite—or another stone—to the same degree. If we go without it, we are suddenly and completely vulnerable on the south and west territory lines.

“Was there a problem with the inventory management?” My voice is slow, deliberate, and I force myself to soften the tone. I've been told, on more than one occasion, that I can be abrasive without realizing it. Despite my frustration with Claire, it's clear she understands the situation this puts us in.

“I ... I suppose so.” Claire audibly swallows, pushes her hair behind her ears, and holds her hands out in front of her. “We're prepared to work harder—around the clock—to recast on a new supply, but that's the thing—we need more. Ideally, as soon as we can possibly get it.”

“Our trader from the Lighttails isn’t coming for another six months, at least,” Kellen’s voice rises, deep and concerned, and I hold a hand up to him.

“We are talking to Claire,” I say, without looking at him, but knowing that his concern is warranted. I feel the stone around my wrist pulsing, as if in response to my anger. “Are there any other sources you know of to obtain Amanzite?”

“Other than the trader?” she squeaks, and I realize there’s no way she’ll know—her job is to imbue the stones with magic, not to source them.

“The market,” a voice from the end of the table sounds, and I look up to see Leta Parkes sitting with her arms crossed, her dark eyes fixed on me. The newest addition to the council, she seldom speaks. But Kellen often doesn’t like her input.

“The ... market?” Kellen repeats, looking baffled.

But I know exactly what she means.

“The market in Grayhide territory,” I clarify, noting how Kellen stiffens immediately to my left. Grayhide territory is a sore subject for more reasons than one, and I’m attuned to the way he shifts in his chair, gently trying to clear his throat.

As alpha, I’m already more sensitive to the way my pack members feel. Often, I know what they think and want before they do, though whether that’s through plain observation or the bond, I couldn’t say.

And right now, Kellen is thinking about his daughter, and the likelihood that she’s in Grayhide territory right now. His discomfort over our rival pack entering into the conversation seems obvious enough that the others around the table likely pick up on it, too.

Emin has the same reaction, but manages to hide it better, focusing on the subject at hand.

“I doubt any of us have been to the dark market in Grayhide territory,” Emin says. “It would be incredibly dangerous. For a mission like this, we would need weeks to prepare.”

Standing, I clear my throat, heart beating a little too robustly in my chest.

“I’ll go.”

Emin’s gaze snaps to me, but I ignore it. A number of emotions are written over his face—surprise, confusion, reluctance.

“When is this market?” I direct my question to Leta.

“Tomorrow night,” she says. “It always takes place at night. We have the rough coordinates here, but I can send you the other information we have about it.”

“Claire, I’ll need a scent-blocker,” I say, turning to the caster, eyes scanning over her. There are bags under her eyes, and her hands shake as she hides them under the table. The casters are already at capacity with the work they’re doing.

I’ll see to it that she has a rest after this. But for now, there’s nothing we can do.

“I’ll have it prepared right away.”

After calling the council to a close, I stand, moving to head to my place and prepare my things. If I’m moving through Grayhide territory to make it to this market, it’s likely going to take me a full day to cover the distance I need.

“Dorian.”

Emin stops me with a hand on my shoulder. He is the only alpha in this pack that I would ever permit to touch me, and he knows it.

When I turn to him, the look in his eyes is as plain a plea as I’ve ever seen. A reflection of the past, an acknowledgment of where I’m about to go, and the implications of this mission.

“I know,” I say, clasping my hand over his for just a moment, before I turn to go. “I know, Emin.”

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The kitchen in the alpha's house is a dream, even if the rest of the job isn't. It gleams, every surface polished by the cleaners. A sparkling chandelier hangs over the butcher block counter, and the fridge is always bursting with fresh ingredients. The alpha even had an herb garden installed upon my request.

Now, I close my fingers around a sprig of rosemary, sliding down the stalk and watching as the needles of the herb fall into the bowl. I'm making another batch of herb-infused butter, which I'll use throughout the week in dishes for the alpha and his family.

Humming under my breath, I finish mixing the butter, roll it into a log, and wrap it up in waxy brown paper. Just as I'm sliding it into the fridge, the timer on the oven lets out a little ding , and I turn, pulling the roast out, lips pulling up at the corners when I see that it's come out perfectly, the vegetables around the meat glistening, caramelized, a poke to the center of the roast showing it's tender, but fully cooked.

After prepping the plates, I take a breath and prepare for the part of this job I like the least—interacting with the alpha.

I roll the food into the dining room on a little metal cart, stopping when I realize there are three fewer people in the room than I expected. Instead of the alpha, his wife, and his two children, it's just him, sitting alone at the head of the table, his boots kicked up on the fine linen, a scowl dug deep into his features.

“Kira!” he calls the moment he sees me, his deep voice booming through the room. I fight hard not to flinch—he doesn't take kindly to negative reactions.

“Sir.” When I approach him with the cart, I cast my eyes downward. It’s an automatic reaction—to be an omega in the presence of an alpha is to constantly feel the pressure of obedience in the back of your mind. Even if I didn’t have the natural instinct, I’d never look him in the eye.

I’m lucky enough that his pack agreed to take me in. Despite the less-than-perfect situation, the last thing I want to do is jeopardize my position. Give him a reason to cast me out.

“Mrs. Blacklock is out this evening with the kids,” he says, waving his hand dismissively over the cart when he sees the additional servings.

“Sorry, I didn’t know.”

When I lean over him to set his plate down, I don’t miss the way he leans in, breathing. It makes my body shake, as I know already that my heat is on the horizon, my scent changing already to indicate as much.

As I’m pulling back, ready to return to the kitchen and beyond grateful that his cleaning staff will take care of the rest, he grabs my wrist, halting me.

“Stay.” It’s a command, and my body has already stopped moving in compliance with it. “Let’s not put all this food to waste. Set yourself a seat here.”

I swallow through the lump in my throat. Sitting here, eating dinner with him, is the last thing I want to do. But Jarred Blacklock is not an alpha you want to defy.

“Of course,” I choke out, picking up one of the plates, removing the cloche, and carefully sitting next to him. I’m wearing a dress today, and I suddenly wish I’d gone for anything else, hating the way the hem draws up as I sit, getting dangerously close to my knees.

Jarred slices through the roast and I glance over at his plate, secretly pleased that the inside is exactly how I wanted it—slightly red, tender, juicy, but cooked through. Hands shaking slightly, I raise my knife and fork, slicing through the meat.

I've made this at home, tested the recipe, but this is the first time I'll get to try something I've made for the Blacklocks at their home, in their fancy kitchen, with the organic ingredients and Japanese knives.

“So,” he says, talking through the meat in his mouth. “Tell me about your little premonitions this week, Kira.”

Shame, hot and thick, pools through me at the sound of his words. Little premonitions .

Nobody has ever truly believed that I have my gift. Sometimes, the constant skepticism over it has even made me question it. Clairaudience. The ability to hear things when I'm not present, to hear things, sounds, sentences that haven't been spoken yet. A form of telling the future.

“Well?” Jarred is holding a carrot on his fork, staring at me intently, and I catch something dangerous glinting behind his dark eyes.

Objectively, he's a handsome man. Most alphas—and especially pack leaders—are. With his sharp cheekbones, dark hair, and roman nose, you can't argue that he's ugly.

But there's something about him that makes him repulsive to me. The way his gaze moves over my body. How he picks at his teeth with his knife, the way his boots track through this house—he never stops to thank or think about the maids on their hands and knees, wiping away the mud before he can turn around and accuse them of not keeping a clean house.

It's in the way he talks to his pack members, filling up the room with his presence, never allowing another voice to break in.

Something in the back of my mind reminds me, rather unhelpfully, that there's another reason I find this man, and all others, repulsive. It has nothing to do with them, and everything to do with the fact that my body has already decided there's only one man on this planet it wants.

Roughly, I push the thought from my head before the grief and despair can follow. That chapter of my life is already closed, firmly shut against the past. Thinking about it just makes me feel like I'm losing my mind.

"Sorry." My cheeks flush further when I realize he's been waiting, impatience etching into lines on his forehead. "Uh—one came to me last night."

"Oh," he says, tone salacious, joking. "Do tell."

Clearing my throat, eyes locked firmly on the food I no longer want to eat, I mutter, "It was a man's voice. He was angry, and he said: It's gone. It's all gone."

"Hmm," Jarred says, mock thoughtful. "Perhaps a man who's gambled too much?"

"Perhaps," I agree, quietly, twisting my fork in my hand and forcing myself to take another bite when I feel his gaze on me, heavy. I wish, more than anything, that one of the cleaning staff would come in, just so I wouldn't be alone with him in this massive room.

"Well," Jarred lets out a satisfied burp, leans back in his chair, and crosses his hands over his stomach, his eyes settling on me with a predatory glint. "What's for dessert, then?"

I stare down at the pancake in the pan in front of me. No matter how much my cooking skills improve, I always cave and flip it too early. Reaching over to the other side of the stove, I jostle the bananas bubbling merrily in a foam of caramel, mouth already watering at the thought of laying them over the pancakes, pairing the whole thing with a salted caramel latte and an ice-cold glass of water.

When I'm plating up the food—pancakes saved from my impatience, thankfully—I glance down and realize the hem on my apron is fraying. I should repair it, but my mind is already racing with ideas for a brand new apron. What fabric do I have again?

I crack open the window and sit at the table. There's some left over from the nightgown I'm wearing, but would it be enough to make an apron? The silky material would be better suited for something else, like a scrunchie or a pillowcase.

A bird chirps, and when I look through the window, I see one landing on the scraggly tree just outside my window. Beyond the tree and the bird is the vast, dry landscape, a sea of red and brown. The sun washes over it, bright and unfiltered, and for the first time in a long time, I feel a flicker of joy at the bottom of my heart.

This place might not be perfect, but it's mine.

And it's with that full irony that the first knock on the door comes, quick and sharp, sending that flicker of joy back into the darkest, most secret parts of me.

When I open the door, one of Jerrod's right-hand men is standing there, his huge, bulky frame filling the doorway, a scowl on his face.

"Kira." He looks me up and down, even more disgust than usual on his face. He's tall and bald, his biceps straining against the fabric of his shirt, pale blue veins popping

out, making me sick when I glance at them.

“What—”

Without preamble or justification, he reaches out, grabs me by the arm, and starts to drag me to his car. He may not be the alpha—the leader of the pack—but he is an alpha, and my body complies with his directives, not fighting against me as he throws me into the passenger seat of his vehicle.

Before he slams the door, he leans in close, his breath rank and hot against my cheek.

“You really fucked up this time, bitch.”

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Hood pulled up over my head, I maneuver through the crowd of beings all milling about the market and vying for the products they want. My scent blocker is working perfectly, but even if it wasn't, the variety of creatures and scents here might just do a decent job of covering for me.

Vampires, sirens, ghouls, and casters float past me, their scents overwhelming and powerful. I have never seen so many at-odds species together in one place, but it seems we're all willing to put our differences aside if it means getting our hands on something we want.

We've been aware of the dark market in Grayhide territory for years, but I never could have imagined this. Acres and acres of trading, stalls, shady deals in the even darker areas, magi-lights and torches barely lighting the path between each vendor.

The members of my pack are firmly prohibited from entering this territory without permission, as it's far too dangerous, and we can't risk prodding the Grayhides. I don't know if they would go so far as to take a captive, but I also don't want to find out.

To my left, a woman with a deep voice advertises the variety of fish swimming in tanks, some of them blinking with light, others glowing gently. In one of the tanks, bubbles roll through to the top, the fish swimming around hot to the touch, heating the water.

As I walk, I think of Emin finding me just before I left, arms crossed as usual, staring at me as I packed a light bag. My plan was to take my truck to the boundary line and cross the rest of the way on foot.

“I don’t think you should go alone,” he said, eyes following me as I smeared the scent-blocking cream over my pulse points.

“Noted.”

“We can’t risk you, Dorian.” Emin took a step toward me, eyes flashing, surely thinking about the power vacuum left the last time an alpha died suddenly. My grandfather fought to the death to take that place and made it his top priority to prepare me for the role, promising the pack that there would be no more brutal fighting for power. “You need someone at your back.”

“I can’t risk you , Emin,” I said, and what I really meant was that I couldn’t risk bringing him into Grayhide territory with me, couldn’t risk his eyes straying from the mission as he thought about the past. Emin is also my right-hand man, the only shifter in our pack capable of running things and putting out fires in my absence. So, I straightened, looked him in the eyes, and said, “And that is final.”

He hesitated, swaying back on his heels, looking like he wanted to say more, but ultimately respecting my leadership. After a beat passed, I returned to my bag, and he said, voice low, “You and I both know there was no inventory management problem, Dorian.”

I paused halfway through zipping my bag.

Emin was right, of course. A few weeks ago, we had enough Amanzite to cover the pack for the next year. Now, we have just enough left for the month. If that.

That kind of deficit doesn’t happen from poor management. It happens from theft. And, according to Emin, none of the security posts around our weapons house noticed anything. Nobody in, nobody out.

“Yes. We’ll just have to deal with it when I get back.”

Someone found a way to steal our Amanzite, and that understanding only raises more questions. Who, why, and how—but I don’t have time to think about that right now. I have to tackle one problem at a time, and right now, the most important thing is getting more Amanzite into the hands of our casters.

Now, I twist around a group of fairies, careful not to get their dust on me, and head in the direction of a stand I know might have the materials we’re looking for. Leta filled me in on this trader, from the coastline, likely selling stolen goods, and from her reports, a very nervous man.

I approach him, staring at another customer with hard eyes until they take the hint and move away, leaving me and the trader alone.

“Amanzite,” I say, voice only barely above a whisper. The last thing I need is for the others at this market to hear what I’m asking for. It will be a dead giveaway of me being a shifter, and might raise questions about my apparent lack of a scent.

The trader’s eyes widen, and though it’s nearly imperceptible, I catch him shifting to the right, hand twitching ever so slightly toward a chest hidden under his table.

“Don’t got any,” he says, voice rough, face sun-burnt and nearly like leather.

I lean in closer, until my face is an inch from his, and I smell his body odor, his scent, his fear.

“Why don’t you look again.”

His eyes flick to the chest under the table, and I give him a grin. My goal is that the grin conveys what I’m feeling—I’m taking the Amanzite, whether he sells it to me or

not.

A moment later, I'm tucking the bag of stones into my inside jacket pocket. It's not enough—that's obvious. I brought over two million in currency, and I've spent less than a quarter on the Amanzite.

It's when I'm turning away from the stall, getting ready to get the hell out of the market, that I catch the scent.

Warm, sweet, with the most subtle hint of spice. Like snickerdoodles baking in the oven, the warm rice pudding from the vendor on Main Street. A scoop of cinnamon ice cream on the hottest summer day.

My body moves without directive from my brain, pushing through the crowd, following the scent, something like hunger working through my veins. Controlling, compulsive. It's a call like any other need—something I can't ignore. Something I'm readily giving in to, letting it direct me deeper and deeper into the market until the scent gets so strong that it's nearly in front of me.

And there she is.

Kira Argent.

I haven't seen her in five years. Somehow, she looks exactly the same, but still different. Her golden-red hair is longer, curling over her chest, her skin pale and smooth. I can see the parts of her body where baby fat has shifted, giving way to curves, the soft arch of her hips more dramatic, her chest full.

"Fuck." I don't realize I've said it out loud until the person next to me turns and glances, their darting lizard-like eyes cutting through me. The next expletive, I manage to keep in my head. I don't need the other shoppers at this market to pay any

extra attention to me.

My eyes return to her, and I realize I've missed several vitally important details.

She stands on the stage in nothing but a tiny blue silk slip that clings to her body. A slit up the thigh reveals more of that creamy skin, and I feel a kernel of lust lodge itself in my chest, an undeniable urge to sink my teeth into that flesh.

To trail my tongue over her, pick up her scent, taste her. Claim her.

Memories flash through my head—Kira, in her school uniform, looking up at me with fearful eyes. Emin at my side, taunting her. The day she was cast out of the pack.

“This is a treat you don't want to miss, folks,” the man on the stage says, swinging his arm out toward Kira, whose eyes are cast decidedly downward. “Omega is soon to go into heat. Think of it as a bulk purchase.”

He lets out a loud, snotty laugh, and my fingers tighten into fists at my sides. When I see a blush stain Kira's cheeks, I want to stalk up to the stage and take this man out, hold his face to the floor with my boot, and make him apologize through his weeping to her.

I want to prostrate him, rip his heart out while she watches.

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I shake the urges from my head. I'm in Grayhide territory, and the last thing I need is to risk the Amanzite I've already gotten my hands on.

“Starting at fifty thousand,” the man says, looking out into the crowd, waiting for someone to make a bid.

The best thing now is to leave. If I were thinking only of the pack, I'd turn on my heel, push through this crowd, and forget all about Kira Argent. Forget all about the auctioneer, the fact that she's somehow landed herself here, for sale.

But I'm not thinking of the pack.

"I'll do fifty." Someone to the left of the crowd raises his paddle, laughing loudly. "Someone's gotta do it."

I should leave. This is not my fight—in fact, not even my own money in my pocket. This money belongs to the pack, and I'll have to replenish it from my own treasury if I use it.

When I look up, I catch Kira's eyes. While Emin has brown eyes, unremarkable in every way, his sister's are like lightning, gleams of gold in the heavy, flickering light from the lamps and torches around us. Like two flames dancing ahead of me.

And I realize she's looking right at me, recognition widening her eyes.

"Fifty-one," I hear myself say, and then for good measure, I add, "Looks like she'll make a good servant."

When I return my gaze to hers, I see something all too familiar there.

Pure, unadulterated hatred.

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Chills break out over my skin, and not just because I'm wearing practically nothing up here on this stage. Around me, torches and lamps flicker, casting the crowd in shadows and making them look even more sinister. Cool air breezes through, indicative of the harsh desert night.

And Dorian Fields is in the crowd, staring at me. He might be mostly hidden by the hood of that cloak, but I would recognize him anywhere. Those eyes, dark blue like nothing I've ever seen, the shading of stubble on his jaw, that particular movement in his face.

Everything about him is black and blue. The thick hair on his arms, the locks falling over his forehead. Even from here, I can see a snaking tattoo around his collar, peeking out above his shirt.

"Looks like she'll make a good servant."

The tone of his voice is too familiar—the way it trailed after me down the school hallways, taunting and jovial. My brother is joining in. The humiliation, how I'd walk as fast as I could to get away from them, but my legs were just so short. Not easy to get away.

I hate how seeing him makes me feel seventeen again. Even with all the work I've done, finding and building a life that makes me happy.

Or at least, that made me happy.

For the millionth time since opening the door to Jerrod's crony, my mind runs

through what happened to me. He, hauling me up to Jerrod's ridiculous, pueblo-style mansion on the outskirts of Badlands. Through the window, I watched as the massive gates creaked open, letting us through.

Grabbed again, I was dragged into the main hall, where Jarred was pacing back and forth, practically foaming at the mouth. The moment we walked in, he walked over to me, snarled, and hit me so hard across the face I blacked out for a moment.

The others in the room—his friends, cronies, elders in the community—at least had the presence to look ashamed, uncomfortable. Back in my old pack, we'd heard stories of abusive alphas, men and women with power who just shouldn't have had it. Those who would light up with the gleeful joy of hurting another.

Shocked, and holding my cheek, I looked up at him, hating the tears that sprang to my eyes.

"Where. Is. It?" he ground out, spit flying from his mouth, the fury so palpable I could choke on it. In the huge front hall, his voice echoed.

"What—" I didn't even manage to get a word out before he was grabbing me by the shoulders, shaking me hard. Demanding to know what happened to the pack's supply of precious stones, gems.

As a non-shifter, I'm aware of the stones. I know that they're important to the shifters, but the specifics are hazy. I took history, science, but never the shifter-specific courses, designed to show them how to use their abilities. Teaching them about the process.

I'd see them sometimes, heading out to the scrubby trees behind the school, knowing they were going out there to shift. To learn about hunting in those forms. Only once did I catch a glimpse of a student in his wolf form.

Dorian, a flash of onyx past the window, his blue, blue eyes meeting mine through the window, before turning away, his body disappearing into the brush.

It was just another way I was left out at school. An anomaly. Except because I claimed my gift, spoke of it, the other non-shifters wanted nothing to do with me, either.

But Jarred didn't care that I'd have no use for them as a non-shifter. He grilled me, asking who I sold them to, how I got someone inside his house. In doing so, he revealed that his basement was the holding spot for the stones, and I almost pointed out that it could be his fault, loose-lipped even now.

I didn't say anything, and had no idea what happened to them, of course. But what I'd told him the night before, my premonition, hearing it's gone, it's all gone, convinced him that I was messing with him, that I knew something about the theft that was going to occur.

For him, and everyone else, it would make much more sense for me to organize a theft against my pack and alpha than to genuinely have a gift.

When I couldn't provide them with any information—because I had none to give—Jarred turned on his heel, brought his mouth close to my ear, and spat, “Well, if you aren't going to tell us where to find the stones, I guess you're just going to have to pay for them yourself, Kira.”

Now, the auctioneer booms, “We've got fifty-one! Any other bids?”

Someone across the crowd calls out. The bids are mixed with jeering, scathing comments about my body. Of course I was hauled off in this nightgown, not allowed to change into something different. When I sewed it, adding the cheeky little slit, I'd admired it in the mirror, thinking nobody else would ever see it. If I were the only

one, it would be a treat for myself. To feel good, powerful, sexy.

But now, standing in it, my body on display, I just feel exposed. Dirty. If my hands weren't cuffed in front of me, I'd tug on the hem, cover my thighs.

I remember sitting in front of the sewing machine, lovingly making it. The excitement of wearing it for the first time. My mind conjures the image of my little sewing nook in my house, all the fabric I thrifted and hunted for. By now, Jarred has probably let anyone in the pack pick through it, or auctioned that off, too.

Grief calls in my throat for my little house. The homemade syrups in the fridge, the herbs on the windowsill. All the curtains I sewed, the work I did to build a place for myself and make it home.

"Fifty-two!" the auctioneer points across the crowd to someone else holding up their hand. "Going at fifty-two."

To my shock, Dorian holds his hand up lazily, like he can't be bothered, and says, "Fine. Guess I'll do fifty-three."

My heart beats so hard in my chest, I wonder if they can see it, all the people staring up at me, the way it's shaking my entire body, like it's trying to reach right through my rib cage. What's worse—being sold to some random in this crowd, or going with Dorian?

Gaze traveling over the crowd, I take in the different species, the shifting eyes, the blatant hunger in some of the stares. These are the very same men who would spit at me, call me disgusting, all while thinly veiling their lust for my body.

"Other bids?" the auctioneer looks giddily around, almost like he's disappointed that there won't be more fighting. "Going, going—"

I suck in a breath, eyes finally landing on Dorian again. He's staring up at me, face passive, slack. It doesn't make any sense—why buy me when I was once a part of his pack, and cast out? Why bring me back when it was obvious nobody wanted me there?

My mind turns over his comment about having a servant. Dorian was a bully in high school—cruel, sometimes viciously so. But he never touched me. I was very aware of the fact that our skin never came in contact, that no matter how mean he was, it was always verbal.

So what would he do with me now? Surely he wouldn't actually take me in as a servant. And, given my low standing as an omega—completely unwanted, thanks to the incident—why would he want to be seen with me?

It's possible that Dorian could be even worse than I remember. My cheek stings with the memory of Jerrod's hand across my face, and I feel a flash of dread through my body.

Leaving the pack doesn't mean I know nothing of what's happening over there. News travels, which means I know that Dorian fulfilled his grandfather's wish and took over as the alpha leader of the pack. I know that Emin is on the council with him.

But what I don't know is what the hell Dorian wants with me. What he's doing at this market, in Grayhide territory. If Jarred found out—if any of the shifters from the Grayhide pack found out—Dorian would be ripped to shreds. Even the most powerful shifter couldn't take on dozens of other shifters at once, and I've seen how Jarred and his men treat trespassers.

With the bad blood between the packs, and the chaos it would cause if Jarred killed their alpha, Dorian being here is a huge risk. And yet, here he is.

The auctioneer's loud voice next to my ear cuts me off, and he runs a finger down the side of my arm, eliciting yet another shift as he calls out, “—gone! Sold to this gentleman in the hood. Fifty-three thousand. Please bring your payment forward.”

I watch Dorian push through the crowd, blood turning to ice in my veins.

Whether I want to or not, I'm going home.

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Trees and cacti fly past on either side of the road. Further out in the distance, animals pause, watching the truck as we speed past, their eyes glinting from the headlights in the inky black night.

Kira sits in the passenger seat, wrapped in my cloak, refusing to look at me.

This entire fucking car is drowned in her scent—sweet and spicy—and it's driving me wild. I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white, bite my tongue, anything to keep from reaching over and touching her.

I'd forgotten how strong the urge was. The carnal, pulling lust toward her. It tortured me throughout high school. A memory flashes through my mind—Kira, showing up to school, not realizing she was going into heat. Apparently, nobody in her family—her mother and father, both betas, Emin an alpha—had bothered to tell her the omega cycle.

What the scent of her would do to the alphas.

More importantly, what the scent of her would do to her mate.

That word rings through my head, and along with it comes the image of her face, stricken and twisted, the day I publicly rejected her. No matter what I do for the rest of my life, I will never be rid of that expression, hanging in the back of my mind.

If I examine the memory, I can list out all the reasons I had to do it. First, Kira didn't come from a very high family in the pack to start. Then, around the time all the rest of us were coming to school, proud with the boastful stories of our first shifts, Kira was

noticeably silent.

Things only got worse when she started talking about her gift, whispering to herself in class. Then there was the incident—her certainty that her premonition was right. How she'd managed to convince the council to listen to her. How badly everything had gone after that day.

And how I'd rejected her publicly. While we didn't officially cast her out of the pack, she wasn't seen again after that, slipping away quietly. Later, once I was firmly in power, Leta informed me quietly of news that she'd been seen in Grayhide territory.

The Grayhides—known for abusing their omegas. Known for the recently appointed alpha, who was too wrapped up in his own ego to take proper care of his pack.

Now, Kira shifts in her seat, and it sends a new wave of her scent through the cab. She was shivering and clearly uncomfortable in her nightgown, that little slip that clung to her body, but I gave her my cloak for my own sake, unsure of what I might do if my eyes caught on her nipples pressing against the fabric one more time.

“Kira,” I try again, voice low like she's a skittish animal I might scare off. I notice the way she shivers when I speak, and it causes my own shiver in return. My body is hyperattuned to hers, even more so than with the rest of my pack.

I can practically feel her heartbeat. Right now, it skips along, a staccato, a tiny little beat against the inside of her chest.

There are so many questions I should ask, so many things I'd like to know. But the question that sticks in my head has everything to do with the darkening bruise on her cheek, the scabbed-over dash where she was clearly bleeding.

Somebody hit her. And every cell in my body needs to know who it was, so I can end

them. Make sure they never have the opportunity to touch her, hurt her, again.

“What happened to your cheek?” I finally grind out, surprised when she actually glances in my direction. Our eyes only meet for half a second, but in that time, she manages to communicate a lot through her look.

Most of which is I hate you .

I slow the car, making the final turn into town, and try to loosen up my grip on the steering wheel. If Skylar was here, she might know how to handle this. My sister was always better at talking than me.

Our town appears on the edge of the horizon, shimmering like a mirage. Except it's real. I don't know what Kira feels when she sees it—I imagine it's nothing good, given her history with the place—but each time I return home after traveling, I have the deepest, most certain sense of belonging. Something deep in my chest, buried in my torso, clicking into place.

“Stop.”

It's the first time she's spoken since I instructed the auctioneer to release her from the cuffs holding her wrists together. He'd hesitated, asking if I knew how to handle her, and the look I'd given him was enough to make him shut up and take them off.

I could see that her wrists were red, raw from the metal rubbing on them. For a second, I'd almost reached out to touch her, but kept myself from doing it. Best not to tempt fate any more than we already have.

Her voice comes again, drawing me away from the thought.

“ Stop .”

Because I don't like taking orders, and it's not in my instinct to follow them, I don't stop. But I do turn my head, looking at her as we cross the Badlands boundary and the speed limit decreases.

"I said stop ," she says, voice rising as she purposefully avoids looking at me, her little hands balled into fists on her lap. Once again, my fingers ache with the urge to reach out and touch her, but I don't. I keep my hands to myself.

"Kira, I'm not stopping . What's your plan? Just get out and wander in the desert?"

"Are you going to keep me as a servant?" Her voice shakes, fragile and weak. I remember my comments are the auction—that must be where this is coming from, but surely she knows that was just a ploy. A way to make sure the price on her head didn't go too high.

I rear my head back, blinking at her. Sure, there might be some packs that still do backwards things like keeping people as property, but she knows we're not like that.

Or maybe she doesn't know.

Trying to soften my voice, I say tightly, "No. Of course I'm not."

"So, let me go, then," she says, raising her chin defiantly, and I catch sight of those copper eyes again, flashing in the light from the dash. "If you're not planning on ... keeping me. Then let me go."

I've never seen her like this, so sure of herself. Back in high school, she never—not once—stood up to us when we bullied her. Just the thought of it socks me in the throat with guilt, how ruthless Emin was to her. How ruthless we both were, all of us older guys.

“You won’t be safe, Kira—”

“I’m more than capable of handling my own safety,” she clips out, already undoing her seatbelt. “Let me out of this car.”

I stare at her, struck by how beautiful she is, even like this. Hair wild, eyes sharp, jaw pulled tight. What I want more than anything is to unravel her, pull her apart, see what she’s like without all those defenses up around her.

Kira wants me to stop the truck. She wants to get out of it, here on the very edge of town, just past the hardware store and farms. And it looks like she’s not going to take no for an answer.

I could just compel her, use my authority as an alpha to keep her in this car. But I want to show her that I’m someone new—that I’m not the same dick from high school. That I don’t want to cause her any more pain.

So, although it’s the last thing I want to do, and I’m already concerned for her safety, even before she opens the door, I do it.

I slow down, put my flashers on, and pull over to the side of the road. Kira hesitates for a moment, like she also wasn’t expecting me to do it. We’re just inside the city bounds now, and when she jumps out of the truck, her feet land firmly in my territory.

She turns, hand on the door of the truck. We’re suspended like that for a moment, her looking at me, low-lit from the light of the truck and a streetlight down the road. My eyes travel over her, pleading with her to get back in this truck.

But I won’t make her.

Finally, she jerks, like remembering where she is. A moment later, she slams the truck door and turns, waking quickly down a residential street, taking the first left, her arms crossed over her front protectively, like she's walking through a blizzard, rather than a cool desert night.

The moment she's out of my sight, my entire body pulses like a wound throbbing. I climb back into the truck, turn off the headlights, turn the ignition, and turn down the street.

I know where she's going; first, because she's easy for me to read, every thought playing out on her face, and second, because there's nowhere else for Kira Argent to go in this town.

She's going back to the house she and Emin grew up in, to see her parents. Maybe she's forgotten what it was like when she left, but I'm almost certain they are not going to welcome her with open arms.

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I keep my head down as I walk along the familiar road, but even without looking, I know exactly what passes by on either side. The Grimmer family house, that large bush in the corner of their yard that we came to use as a marker for our street—brown and dry eleven months out of the year, but flowering intensely for the entire month of July, the fragrant scent of it settling over half the neighborhood, sweet, sticky, and alluring.

It's dead right now, though. A moment later, I walk by the Barnett house. I was friends with another Omega girl growing up, but as I got older and started insisting I had a gift, they pulled away, parents offering up reasons why we couldn't play together until finally, as a pre-teen, her mother looked me up and down and said, "Will you ever get the hint?"

My mind flashes with memories of all the other kids on this block, how each of them had their first shift. A few, at first, then an avalanche. And when the dust settled, I was left sitting there, alone and on the outside.

A streetlight flickers gently as I walk past. Down the road, a dog barks, then goes silent.

And then, all at once, it's in front of me. The crack in the sidewalk, you'd have to maneuver around with your bike. The rock lawn, so we wouldn't have to deal with the upkeep of grass. Aloe plants in the front yard, the faint smell of the lemon tree still holding on in the back.

Our house. My childhood home, a kind of modern adobe style, with large, rounded windows and a covered entrance area. Cool brown stone and dark wood accents,

warm, golden light spilling from the windows, so rich and palpable I feel like I could reach out and touch it, run my hand through it like water.

I'm on the front stoop, the strange feeling of being an outsider in my own home washing over me. To my left, a lizard skitters along the wall. Insects sing, and a gentle, fresh breeze pushes through, ruffling the edges of Dorian's cloak, which I pull tighter around myself.

Maybe if I opened the door smelling like Dorian, it could help to sway them in my direction. But he smelled of nothing tonight—his scent so noticeably missing that it made me sick.

Nausea roils in my stomach as I stare at the blue door in front of me, smell the scent of garlic and onion leaking through the door. So Dad made spaghetti.

Shaking, I raise my hand and knock on the front door.

After everything that happened, I know they won't be thrilled to see me. The incident, which I don't want to think about in too much detail, gave them almost no choice. I was already a low-standing omega. When I left, it was likely a relief to them.

But I'm here now, and I'm still their daughter.

We still had good times—family game nights, birthday parties. My parents, while not perfect, love me. I know they do.

When the door opens, it lets the light and smells of cooking flood out onto the stoop, and I get caught in it for a moment, my focus drifting to the chipped tiles of the floor in the entryway, the same as ever.

If I was a cartoon, I might float on the current of light, warmth, and the smell of dinner right inside, folded into the life I once had.

But this isn't a TV show, and my mother stands there, five years older, but looking mostly the same—her eyes wide, her lips parted slightly in surprise. Rather than take me all in, scan me up and down like she used to when I was a teenager, she just stares into my eyes, like she's worried I might be a shapeshifter, some conman in the vague shape of her daughter.

“Kira?” she whispers, and in the next moment, she's glancing over her shoulder, crossing her arms over her chest, and stepping out onto the stoop with me, forcing me to take a step back from the door, angling her body like I might try to slip past her, push my way inside.

Her long gray hair rests against her chest, which is covered in one of her vests. Right now, it's a paisley pattern, the pinks and yellows swirling. Inappropriately cheerful compared to the look on her drawn face.

Things are complicated between us, but I can't deny the deep, primal urge inside me. The little girl who just wants her mom.

“Mom, I—”

She glances up and down the street. “What are you doing here?”

The words sink like stones in my stomach. “There's—well, I need a place to stay. There was a problem with my other pack—”

“You left another pack?” she asks, dropping her voice so it's practically inaudible. The disappointment there, coupled with a complete lack of surprise, makes me feel sick.

“Well, that’s not exactly what—”

“I’m sorry, love,” she whispers, taking another step and forcing me out of the illumination of the porch light. Her perfume—light, like white tea and rose—washes over me, hitting with a sense of homesickness so strong it makes me physically sway. When her eyes meet mine, they’re pitying, but not broken. “Can you lower your voice? I don’t want your father to hear. This will be very upsetting for him.”

For the briefest moment, I feel a flash of anger, strong and sure, and I want to scream at her, This is upsetting for me ! I want to tell her that hours ago, I was standing on a stage in front of dozens of people, shivering in the cold, feeling lower than I ever have.

“I’m going to get back on my feet,” I insist, knowing I can’t stay here. “I just need somewhere to stay in the meantime, so I can—”

She’s already shaking her head. “Kira, I love you. You know that—but there’s nothing we can do. It’s out of our hands, and you know we can’t jeopardize your father’s place in this pack. He and Emin have been working night and day to improve our standing after ... what happened.”

I stand numbly for a second, the mention of my brother instantly conjuring images of us in this house. Playing in the front yard, acting like normal siblings before we became teenagers, and he became best friends with Dorian, and the two of them turned on me so suddenly and completely it was world-shattering.

At one point in my life, I had an older brother who would protect me from anything. Who truly cared about me and just wanted me to be happy. Then, maybe because of pack politics or just because that’s what happens to boys when they grow up, he hated me.

“Mom.” Now I’m the one dropping my voice, looking up and meeting her eyes. Eyes that are like mine, but also not hers, more stable, a sure brown instead of the colors constantly shifting in my own, like I don’t know who I am. “Please. I have nowhere else to go.”

She stares at me for a long moment, expression shifting quickly. For a second, I think she might actually relent and allow me inside, but there’s a sound from inside the house.

“Mhairi?” My dad’s voice. Low and inquisitive, serious as always. “Who is it? Dinner is ready.”

Mom takes a step back, head shaking again as she looks at me. Regret and guilt are there, but another emotion takes center stage, so bright on her features that taking it in is like staring at an oncoming comet.

Shame.

“I’m sorry , Kira,” she whispers, taking another step back, easing away from me and into the life she’s built in my absence. “We just can’t . I love you. Try and stay safe, okay? And—”

“ Mhairi ?” His voice is getting closer, and I don’t miss the flash of panic on my mother’s face as she whirls around, slides inside the house, and flicks off the outside light without giving me so much as a backward glance.

So, that’s it then. They want nothing to do with me.

A sob rips from my throat as I turn and hurry back to the street, certainly not wanting my mother to glance out and see me still standing there, waiting for her love.

After all this time, I'd at least kept in my mind that my parents would be there for me, if I really needed them. Leaving was for me—I couldn't stand the ridicule, didn't want to see what kind of punishment the council might pass down to me—but also for them.

My parents have always prized their place in this pack more than anything. My father, scraping tooth and nail to find a place near the leader, among the other alphas. They've always wanted to rise through the ranks.

Having an omega daughter might have helped with that if I was conventionally attractive.

My feet are heavy and awkward as I stumble down the street, heading back for the main road that will take me out of town. I don't know what my plan is—my heat is coming soon. I'll be vulnerable if I'm out on the road, hitchhiking, and I don't even want to think about what could happen to me if I come across the wrong alphas.

But I have no other choice.

Another thought rips through me—what really would have helped would have been mating with the leader of a pack. Dorian's face flashes through my mind, his features twisted with hate, his words from years ago filtering back to me.

“You are not my mate, Kira. And if you ever say something so blatantly false again, I'll kill you myself.”

A shiver runs over the backs of my arms, tears already running down my face, thoughts racing through my mind. But everything comes to a sudden, halting stop when I turn the corner and run face-first into a towering man.

Fear rises in me—it's already happening—but then I realize it's Dorian, and he's

drawing back from me, careful not to touch my skin, his eyes skipping up and down my body before finally landing on my tear-stained cheeks.

“Alright then,” he says, taking a step back and opening the passenger side door of his truck, the soft ding-ding from the cab spilling out into the night. “Get in.”

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“No.”

Kira Argent is so damn stubborn, she actually crosses her arms over her chest and takes a step back, shaking her head like a disobedient child.

“Kira,” I say, watching the way her name from my mouth makes her body react. Once again, I think about it—just commanding her to get in this fucking car. Watching as she obeys, because nature will make her.

I’m tired as hell, ready to go to bed, and already spent from the absolute torture of keeping my hands to myself for the entire ride back into town. I have next to no patience left for her right now, and the last thing I want is for one of my pack members to come by, questioning what the hell I’m doing in the middle of the night, standing in the road, arguing with this woman.

Worst of all, they’ll wonder, very specifically, what I’m doing with this woman.

“Why did you even bring me here?” she chokes, taking a step back, and I realize her chest is shaking with sobs, tears running down her face, fat and heavy. “What was—what was the point of spending all that money? It’s really worth it to you, just to torture me?”

“No,” I grunt, raising my hands. “If you would just—”

“I get that you’re mad at me,” she says, gasping for air between words, face pained as though remembering what happened. My mind is a whirlwind, thoughts going by too fast for me to pluck one out and present it. “But I just—it wasn’t on purpose, Dorian,

I genuinely thought—”

“Kira,” I growl, hand tightening on the truck door, eyes casting to the ground. We have a lot to talk about. I’ve already forgiven her for what happened. I already know that it wasn’t her fault.

And I already believe she was telling the truth about her gift.

We need to talk through all this shit, but the last place I want to do it is in the middle of the road, in the middle of the night, with that thin cloak covering up a little silk slip that makes my mind go fuzzy with lust.

She actually stops, her lips still parted as she breathes hard, and I picture what it would be like to step toward her, drag my thumb over that bottom lip. Breathe her in, haul her body to mine.

If I thought high school was torture, seeing her now is far, far worse. Her body matured, begging to be touched.

“Kira,” I repeat, eyes on hers. I am not influencing her, not using my command as an alpha and the leader of this pack, but just hoping regular old intimidation might work in this case. “You have nobody else in Badlands. You can walk house-to-house, knock on every door, and every single person will turn you away. I am standing here, offering for you to come home with me. It’s my place, or sleep outside.”

She stands very still, eyes watery as she stares at me. Time stretches out between us.

I know I’m being an ass, but I don’t want to have this conversation here. Every instinct in my body is already on high alert because my mate stands here, barely clothed, in the middle of the night.

Kira, more than anything else right now, is vulnerable. And I can't deal with talking to her about this stuff until she's safe, tucked away, and I know she's not going to run off.

After my throat goes dry and my fingers have damn near dug through the door of my truck, she sucks in a breath, looks left and right—as though double-checking that there is absolutely nobody else who can save her—and lets out the breath again.

“Fine.”

With that, she stalks forward, careful to stay far away from me, and hauls herself up into my truck. I take a breath, giving myself a moment to recover from the sudden rush of her scent before shutting the truck door, rounding the side, and climbing back into the driver's seat.

Kira may hate me, but at least I have her. And now that I'm taking her home, I'm not sure I'm ever going to want to let her go.

I punch the key code in at my place, scan my thumbprint, and wait for the door to unlock.

“Wow,” Kira mutters, “paranoid, much?”

She's pushing past me and into the foyer before I even have a chance to laugh. It's a reminder of the Kira she used to be, the little girl who would speak her mind around any alpha, never mind the consequences.

The moment I close the door behind me, though, her expression clouds, and she stands on the rug stiffly, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. My gaze travels the

length of her once more, from her slightly wild hair to the slippers on her feet, once again catching on the bruise blooming over her cheek.

Her scent is so strong it's already washing through the room, heady and thick. Clearing my throat, I say, "Uh, do you want to take a shower?"

She looks at me in surprise for a moment, like she actually thought I might have just thrown her in the basement like this.

"Yes," she finally says, "but I don't have anything to change into."

"I'll call Ash."

She looks confused until understanding dawns, and she nods once, apparently remembering my sister. "Where—?"

"Upstairs, first door on the right. Towels and stuff in the closet. Use whatever you need."

Kira still looks unsure, like she thinks the floor might drop out from under her at any moment. I reach over and grip the back of the couch until my knuckles turn white—it's going to be a lot harder than I thought, being around her like this.

"Okay." Her voice is quiet, and I hear the sound of her moving up the staircase, and then the door to the bathroom closing, the lock popping definitively. I'm glad it helps her to feel safe.

Rather than let myself think about her undressing, the water running over her smooth, pale skin, I clear my throat and pull my phone from my pocket, dialing Ash.

"What the fuck do you want?" she snaps, the only person in this pack who would

dare to speak to me like that. My sister, Ash, also an alpha, but with zero interest in leadership. “It’s the middle of the fucking night, Duckie.”

I could groan at the old nickname, but I keep it in. I need her help, and if I piss her off, she might just hang up on me.

“I need some clothes, Ash.”

There’s a long moment of silence before she says, “Have you finally lost it—am I right? It’s one in the morning, and you’re calling me about clothes?”

Of course she’s not just going to do what I ask without an explanation—I should have known better than to expect that. So I sigh, gather myself, and detail the situation to her. I start at the meeting with the council—leave out the part about the theft—and work up to now, with Kira in my bathroom, undressing, needing some clothes to wear.

“Oh- kay ,” Ash finally says, blowing out a breath. “Not gonna lie, Duckie, I’m not exactly sure what the hell you’re doing here. You just ... decided to buy her? On a whim? What kind of evil fucker sells someone at an auction, anyway? And I’m fuzzy on the details, but didn’t she kill Gramps?”

That sentence runs a pick into my heart, and it takes me a second to breathe around it. I don’t blame Ash for saying that—it’s what I thought for a long time. Convinced myself of it. And Ash wasn’t even there to witness it firsthand.

But he was old, and we’d all begged him not to run into the fight. What happened with Kira was unfortunate. Bad timing. Not murder.

“No,” I grunt. “She didn’t. Can you bring clothes or not?”

With a stuttering sigh, Ash relents. “Fine. I’ll be there in five minutes. Turn on the outside light so I don’t break my fucking neck.”

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“Well, good, looks like we have the same body type.”

I nearly jump out of my skin the moment I open the bathroom door and find a woman standing outside the bathroom, clothes draped over her arm. She has the same facial features as Dorian, the same inky black hair, but hers is longer, hanging above her shoulders, and highlighted with streaks of silver.

There’s a little nose ring nestled in her right nostril, and tattoos snake up and down her arms. She closes one eye as she looks at me, and despite the fact that I know she’s not checking me out, I blush.

Ash said we have the same body type, but she is gorgeous , with an hourglass figure and strong thighs stretching out from the hem of her athletic shorts. It’s the middle of the night, but somehow her eyes aren’t tired, and her hair doesn’t look a mess.

“Come on,” Ash says, as though I haven’t just been standing here, speechless. “I’ll show you to the guest room.”

There’s something odd about the way she’s talking to me, reserved and slightly friendly, like she’s not sure what she thinks about me. Ash wasn’t there for the incident all those years ago, but I have no doubt that she might blame me, too.

“I—” I start, my voice coming out hoarse, but she holds her hand up, shaking her head and pushing open the door to a room.

“Don’t wanna hear it,” she grunts, in a remarkably similar fashion to Dorian. “Not tonight. I’m way too fucking tired, and I figure Dorian has to know what he’s doing,

right? That's why Gramps chose him for the leadership spot?"

I'm stunned silent—at the easy mention of their grandfather, and the strange way Ash talks about that leadership role. This pack has never had a female leader, and the thought never even occurred to me that it could be her over Dorian.

We're silent as she sets all the clothes on the bed—sweatpants, T-shirts, one dress, a pair of shorts, a pair of loose pajamas. None of it is my style, but I'm grateful to cover my body, and Ash pointedly looks away while I slip the pajamas on.

The whiplash of the day hits me. It's the early hours of the morning. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was standing in my kitchen, cooking banana fosters pancakes. Preparing myself for the day, not looking forward to seeing Jarred again, but okay with it. It was my life.

And now—now this is my life. Standing in Dorian's guest room with his sister, putting on her clothes, having lost everything and been humiliated in front of everyone.

"Thank you," I manage to say, gesturing to the clothes, eyes on the floor. It's natural for me to cast my eyes down when talking to an alpha. I realize, with a start, that earlier I was looking Dorian right in the eye, repeatedly, without even thinking about it.

"Sure," Ash says, and I can feel her gaze on me, sweeping up and down my body. "Listen, I have no idea what's going on here, but ... I know things haven't been easy for you. I trust my brother not to be a shit, but in case he is..." She crosses the room, scribbles something down on the paper, and thrusts it in my direction. "My number. Call me if you need to."

My throat grows, and I stare at the chicken scratch writing on the paper under my

nose. How is this possible? I left this pack because I was so unwelcome, so uncomfortable among them, and now here's the granddaughter of the man they say I killed, telling me to call her if I need anything.

"Kira," Ash says, her voice low. "You were just a kid. I get that, now. Seriously. Call me."

With that, she turns and walks out of the room. It takes me several moments before I remember myself, cross the floor, and press the lock into place, hands shaking and mind swimming with confusion over what the hell is going on.

When I wake up, it's to the golden light of afternoon sun streaming in through the windows, catching dust that floats lazily through the air. I blink against the light, stirring in the bed, confused about where I am, until I hear the noise that must have woken me up in the first place.

"Kira," Dorian's voice comes through the door, and my eyes dart to the alarm clock on the nightstand in front of me. It's four in the afternoon— four in the afternoon. How long did I sleep?

His voice comes through, something like worry tinging the edges of it. "Kira, come down and eat something. I know you're awake in there—I can hear you moving."

I get to my feet, my legs wobbly, and realize I'm thirsty more than anything. After a moment, I manage to croak, "Coming. Just give me a second in the bathroom."

He lingers for a moment, the wood in the hallway creaking under his feet, then I hear him turn and walk away. I wait a few minutes before unlocking and slowly opening the door, my heart thudding in my chest as I look left and right, like I'm crossing a

freeway, before darting into the bathroom across the hall.

I've been in Dorian's custody for nearly a full day now, and I still have no more answers about why he bought me at that auction. At first, I thought it would be for some vicious retribution, some continuation of how he treated me when we were kids.

But last night, Ash was so nice to me. She wouldn't be nice to me if I was purchased for some nefarious reason, right?

In the bathroom, I find a toothbrush still in the package, along with a grocery sack stretched to the max with various bottles. I pull them out one by one, my incredulity growing with each. A shampoo for curls, for dry hair, for dandruff. Four different body washes, one unscented. Razors, face wash, face cream, lotion—it's like someone walked into a CVS and picked products at random.

Popping the toothbrush out of the package, I add toothpaste and scrub. When my mouth is clean, I wash under my arms and generally freshen up before choosing the spray deodorant and liberally applying it.

It's silly, but for some reason, I want to look nice. No matter how much I chastise myself in the mirror, I'm still braiding my hair over one shoulder, sniffing myself to make sure I smell good.

Back in the guest room, I pull on a pair of jeans that hug my curves so thoroughly you'd think they were built right onto my body. One of Ash's cropped, boxy band tees hangs from my shoulder, and I realize that though this isn't my personal style, she was right—we have the same body type, and her clothes fit me like a glove.

When I finally walk down into the dining room, Dorian is sitting at the head of the table, his fingers laced together, gaze unfocused. With a start, eyes locking on the

serving dish and two plates set at the table, I realize he's waiting for me.

Something strange filters through my chest, and I move slowly into the room, taking shallow breaths. His head snaps up to me, his pupils dilating wide before normalizing. He clears his throat and pulls the lid from the microwaveable container in front of me.

The smell hits me at once—it's chili from the can.

If this was a different situation, I'd laugh. Of course, a single guy, living in a house this big, with a beautiful dining room, would eat something as pitiful as canned chili for dinner.

But it's not a different situation, and all this does is remind me of all the fresh produce in my fridge at home. No, not home. My old house, with my little herb garden and the light twinkling in through the windows, dancing through the crystals I hung from the curtains. The grief and loss hit me all at once, and nausea rises in my throat as I stare at the canned chili, watching Dorian spoon it into the bowl for me.

"Crackers?" he asks, and I shake my head numbly.

He clears his throat again, takes a bite, then glances over at me. "Aren't you going to eat?"

I blink at the chili, afraid that if I open my mouth, I might not be able to say anything. Dorian shifts in his chair, takes a deep breath like he's trying to control himself, and says, "Kira, you need to eat."

"I—" Pressing my lips together, I frown at the bowl, the beans and tiny, sand-like chunks of beef. I could make a real chili—pick the peppers myself, dry them, and powder them like I did at home. Rehydrate the beans instead of adding them from a

can, maybe do a mix of beef and bison for better texture. I'd cook it lovingly, all day long, and serve it with warm cornbread, drizzled with honey.

"You haven't had anything all day." When I look up, Dorian is gripping his fork in his hand, the knuckles turning white. "Are you trying to starve yourself?"

Without thinking, I'm standing from my chair, heart thudding, little spots crowding my vision. Memories from high school—him and his friends, commenting on my body, on my weight. Emin is either joining in or standing by and doing nothing about it.

My own mother, serving me at dinner, sliding me a tiny portion compared to everyone else.

"You got your father's build," she'd tutted, not caring that he had a beer belly and was asking for seconds. With a little shrug, she acted like nothing could be done. "So we need to cut back on your calories."

"Kira—" Dorian is standing, something like fury and urgency suspended on his face. "Sit down. We need to talk—"

He takes a step toward me and I shake my head, stepping back so quickly I nearly trip over myself. "Don't touch me," I hiss, which seems to stop him in his tracks, his mouth dropping open, like that reality was never on the table.

Of course it's not—he rejected me. He's never going to touch me.

My body is swirling with so many emotions, not helped at all by the confusing, tugging onset of heat deep in my core, so I do the one thing I actually know how to do. I turn, moving quickly, racing up the steps until I'm back in the guest room.

When the door shuts behind me, I reach back and lock it.

I have no idea what Dorian actually wants with me, or what's going on here. But I do know one thing—I need to get the fuck out of this town.

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I have not seen Kira since dinner last night, when I royally fucked every last thing up. From the moment she sat down, I had the sense that I'd done something wrong, and it was like everything out of my mouth only made her more uncomfortable, until she finally ran from the room.

My body thrums with worry. She hasn't had anything to eat since I got her from the market. An hour ago, before everyone arrived, I left a plate of food at her door, knocked, and hurried away.

I have no idea what she likes, so I just took my own snacks down from the cabinets—beef jerky, nuts, some dried fruit. My hands clench into fists when I think about it, and I have to stop myself from going up the stairs, checking to see if she's even brought the tray inside.

“Dorian, what a pleasant surprise,” Kellen says when I open the door and let him in.

Pleasant for him, but not for me. I hate having other people in my home, in the home that once belonged to my grandfather. With the exception of Emin, none of them have even been out here before.

But I'm not leaving Kira here alone. I have the feeling that the moment I pulled out of the driveway this morning, she would've hatched an escape plan, and I'd be forced to track her down, make sure she's okay. I am not keeping her captive, but I know that she doesn't have anyone else.

And I know her heat is coming soon. An omega on her own, packless and without a mate, without a friend at her side? The thought of it makes the hair on the back of my

neck bristle, angry and ready to fight someone.

“Come in,” I manage to say, gesturing for Kellen to come inside. I don’t want him to know Kira is here yet, so I used some of the scent blocker from Claire and spread it through my home, masking her scent the best I could.

I can still smell it. I think I’ve always smelled it, since the day she left, but that could be because, as the alpha leader, my senses are stronger.

It could also be because Kira is my mate.

Kellen is talking, but I can hardly pay attention. I push thoughts of her away and try to focus on him instead, try to ignore the fact that my mate is somewhere above me, likely completely ignoring the food I’ve left outside her door.

After that, the rest of the council people arrive and gather around in my living room. I don’t offer refreshments or make small talk. I just walk to the front of the room, cross my arms, let out a breath, and start the meeting.

“As I’m sure you can see from my presence at this meeting, I made it to the market in Grayhide territory,” I say, wondering if they can see the exhaustion I feel plain on my face. “I arrived at night, cloaked and with the scent blocker on, and I have no reason to believe anyone at the market discovered my true identity.”

“Did you find Amanzite?” Claire asks. She’s perched on the very edge of a chair, her hands clasped together, looking wan. Nodding at her, I turn, walk into my study. Open the safe on the wall, pull out the rocks, and walk back into the room.

When I set the small bag down on the table, the color drains from her face.

“This is all you were able to get?” Kellen whispers, also looking like he might be

sick.

“I kept my eyes open all night. There was only one vendor, and this was all the supply he had. When I pressed him for more information, he said, in no uncertain terms, that he’d stolen this himself, and so didn’t have a concrete lead on if or when he would get more.”

“Stolen goods,” Kellen mutters, looking to the ceiling. “Great.”

I understand the sentiment—the victim of this theft might go looking for their stash, and if they’re any good, it might lead them right to us. But we’re too vulnerable without the stones. It’s a risk we have to take.

“Do we have any other ideas for getting Amanzite?” Claire asks, her voice a squeak, her eyes red around the rims when she looks up at me. “Sir, this isn’t—”

There’s a knock at the door, then it swings open, and Emin comes strolling in. Despite being ten minutes late, he doesn’t look hurried, only slightly abashed as he walks into the living room and drops down into one of the armchairs.

“Sorry about that,” he says, laughing and running a hand through his hair. “I was—”

He pauses, his body going completely still, his eyes flying to mine. The air around us goes tense, and I understand the moment he’s smelled it.

His sister. Somehow, he caught the scent before his father did. As my right-hand, his senses might be stronger. Or, as the kid who played with her for his entire childhood, he might just be more attuned to the smell of her.

No matter what the reason, Emin sits up straight in his chair, and before I can signal to him with my facial expressions not to say a thing, his eyes are darting to the

ceiling, his mouth opening in shock.

“Is Kira here?”

The council goes silent, all dozen or so eyes turning to me. Claire and Leta, who are both younger than Emin and I, look somewhat confused, their brows wrinkling, like they’re trying to recall where they know that name from.

Kellen speaks first. “Don’t be daft, Emin. Of course she’s not here, right, sir?”

When Kellen’s eyes shift to me, I know that I could lie. Compel him to believe me. Perhaps I could do that to everyone in this room, with the exception of Emin.

But those would not be the actions of the leader my grandfather raised me to be. Giving in to temptation, using your powers against those you are meant to work with—both things he warned me against.

Nobody is immune to the pull of alpha abilities. But the strongest can keep their morals about them while doing the best for their packs.

Standing taller, I let out a breath, look at each of them, and admit, “Yes. She is here.”

Kellen gasps. Emin, for the first time in my life, wears an expression I can’t decipher. Claire and Leta glance at one another, eyebrows raised. The others don’t dare murmur, but share their own looks, their own understanding of what’s going on here.

“But...” Kellen finally manages, blustering a bit, his hands flying, eyes darting around the room as though he’s looking for a reason, “... why?”

I take a moment to try and figure out what to say. I can’t tell them the truth—because Kira is, and always will be, my mate. No matter the declarations I made as an

eighteen-year-old. No matter how long she's been gone, my body yearns for her, and her alone.

Telling them that I regret my cruelty to her, that I want to make up for all the things I've done, all the pain I have caused her—it isn't the right thing. And besides, it's not them I need to tell. It's Kira.

So, finally, I settle on the one thing that might actually make strategic sense. Something that could explain why, despite our pack's history with this woman, I would make the choice to purchase her at the market.

"Because," I say, raising my chin, using my most authoritative tone. "I believe she does have a gift and that she could be of great use to our pack."

"What?" Kellen practically laughs, bringing his hand to his forehead and pushing back what meager hair he still has. "No, sir, we've already seen proof that—"

Kellen thinks the incident years ago was proof that Kira was lying. I think it's just proof that she didn't understand her gift. That she was a teenager, jumping to conclusions because she was young and inexperienced.

"Kira wasn't doing it on purpose," Emin says softly. "She just ... I think she wanted to fit in. She didn't understand what lying might do."

"She was not—" Kellen turns to his son, clearly frustrated. "Kira is a liar, Emin. We've known this for years, and her behavior led to the death of an"—he lowers his voice, glancing at me in deference—"alpha."

"My grandfather was eighty years old when he died," I interrupt. "And we all told him not to engage. Kira is not a liar—she is clairaudience, and will be a huge asset to this pack if I can convince her to stay."

“Sir, this is just—” Kellen starts, at the same time two other council members start to speak. Some of them start to murmur among themselves, and the noise volume, along with the borderline disrespect from Kellen Argent, is really starting to piss me off.

Especially given the fact that I don’t even want to be standing here right now. I want to be upstairs, talking to Kira, apologizing.

The word bursts out of me before I know that it’s happening.

“ Enough !”

Without meaning to, I’ve compelled them, invoking the power I have as alpha, and every single person in the room falls completely and utterly silent, their bodies still, their heads bowed to me. I’m breathing hard, trying to reel myself in.

In a barely controlled, breathy voice, I say, “This meeting is adjourned. You are not to share any of the information you have learned today with the other pack members until I give explicit consent, understand?”

Nods go around the room.

“We’re done here,” I say, and when nobody moves, I sigh. “You can all go.”

They rise quickly, filtering out like the building is on fire. The last one to go is Emin, who pauses, looking me in the eye and putting his hand on my shoulder.

There’s something in his eye that tells me he knows this is about more than her gift, but he doesn’t press it, just squeezes once, nods, and continues on his way out the door.

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My heart is beating so hard it rocks my entire body. I can practically feel the blood, thick and hot, running through my veins.

I'm standing at the top of the stairs, hands shaking, still reeling from what I've just heard. I came out here to eavesdrop, to try and figure out how I can get out of this house without him noticing, but now I'm rendered still, unable to move from the shock.

Dorian defended me to the council. He defended me to my father, to my brother—but why? I remember all those years ago, when I'd turned to him, pleading with him as the new alpha after the death of his grandfather.

I'd let slip what I'd known for a long time—that he was my mate.

Once again, his furious face, twisted with rage, appears in my mind's eye.

“You are not my mate, Kira. And if you ever say something so blatantly false again, I'll kill you myself.”

It was that night that I left, crying so hard I couldn't see as I packed my bag and climbed from the room in my window. I missed high school graduation, missed Dorian's official acceptance as alpha of the pack.

I'm fairly sure my brother and parents heard me leaving that night, and they did nothing to stop me. Emin was more than furious with me, I knew. According to everyone in the pack, it was my actions and mine alone that led to the death of Dorian's grandfather.

My insistence that my premonition was right, leading all our fighters to the northern borders when the attack occurred on the west.

So why is he defending me now? What's changed his mind?

My entire body jerks when I hear the front door shut and Dorian sigh, the floorboards creaking as he walks. He's coming toward me—toward the stairs. Holding my breath, I stand and dance across the floor the same way I came, carefully avoiding the ones I've heard creak in the past, and slipping into my room.

As he does, my mind wars with itself, reminding me of every jeering taunt. The bullying from him started when we were still kids, hovering somewhere between middle school and junior high. The time he pushed me off my bike, and claimed he didn't. The time he and Emin dropped water balloons on my head from the tree house I wasn't allowed in.

In the hallways at school, finding little notes in my locker, heart fluttering, only to open them and find messages like psych , and are you really that dumb?, and nobody wants to talk to you, bitch.

A moment later, I hear him pass by my door, his footsteps soft against the ground. My heart hammers uncontrollably as I wonder if he's going to stop, to knock, to say something to me about this whole thing.

Dorian defended me. I'm still trying to process.

But he doesn't come to my room. He continues down the hallway, to what I assume must be his room, because a moment later, I hear it shut behind him, the distinct sound of a heavy body lowering into a bed.

And then, five minutes later, as though I'm in the room with him, I can hear his

heavy, steady breathing.

Dorian is asleep. Dorian defended me to the council, then climbed the steps and went to sleep. Mind whirring, heart pounding, I glance to the left, to the tray with the beef jerky and nuts, where I'd only picked off some of the dried fruit before giving up.

I don't want dried fruit. I want a meal, something wholesome and good.

And, deep down, I know that this urge is coming from my impending heat. Before it comes, I always want to cook, to clean and prepare my house.

Back in my old pack, I'd lock the doors and windows, line the windowsills with essential oils to try and disguise my scent, and spend the week with my toys, good food, and a mountain of pillows.

It's inconvenient, but at least it only happens every three months. I'd heard of some omegas going through it monthly, and I can't even imagine how they get anything done. Especially those who are mated to alphas.

My body starts to move, carrying me down the stairs and to the kitchen, heart racing. Will he hear me? Will he come down? But no—somehow, I can still hear the even, steady pace of his breaths. How his heart has slowed in his sleep.

When I open the fridge, he doesn't stir, but my mouth drops open.

Inside the fridge, there is a half gallon of skim milk, a half-finished container of plain yogurt, a carton of eggs, and a few condiments—ketchup, sriracha, brown mustard—and that's it. He has no vegetables or fruits, no ingredients.

"What the hell?" I mutter under my breath, surprised when a little laugh bubbles out of me. I should have known—Dorian Fields, practically raised by his grandfather,

probably thinks cooking a meal is a waste of time. It's far more practical for him to fuel his body using plain, boring foods.

When I move into the dining room, I notice a small silver laptop sitting on the kitchen counter. My mind starts to work—is there any way...?

A moment later, I'm sitting down, opening it up. There's a plain background, no files, nothing to indicate this even belongs to someone. It looks exactly the way it would if you tried it out in the store.

Tapping around on it, I manage to log into a grocery delivery service, and plug in the numbers for my credit card—the one lost in my wallet somewhere, back home. Time passes quickly as I load up the cart, no longer worried about paying my own expenses.

I've been saving up for a long time, keeping my expenses down, taking the meager pay from Jarred, and squirreling most of it away. Now, I decide that I'll dip into it, for the sake of making a delicious, intentional meal.

After placing the order, I move into the kitchen, taking stock of what he has. Not much—a few pans, a single spatula. But I can make do with this. It will be like one of those cooking challenge shows, where a chef has to make the entire meal with a whisk.

While I'm waiting on the order, I sneak upstairs and slip on the dress Ash gave me, feeling more comfortable when I do. This is how I dress at home when I cook—I only wish I had an apron to wear.

I move into the bathroom, brushing through my hair carefully, then tying it back so it won't be in the way. For the first time since being taken from my home, I stop, looking at myself in the mirror.

My cheeks are flushed, my eyes bright. I am excited to make something again.

And, I have to admit, excited to see what Dorian thinks of it.

I intercept the grocery delivery person before they can even pull into the drive. It's just a beta, but I don't want the scent waking Dorian and ruining the surprise. I take the goods and carry them inside, the hem of my dress swishing against my knees as I go.

Once in the kitchen, I carefully and lovingly wash the herbs and vegetables before storing them in the fridge. I stack the little brown parcels of meat neatly, separating them by type. As a treat, I pop open a bottle of rosé, find a glass, and pour a drink for myself while I cook.

For the past two days, I've felt trapped. Alone and frustrated.

But now, picking up my knife and starting to slice through an onion, I feel something else settle over me. Something like contentment, happiness.

Almost, almost something close to the feeling of being at home.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I'd be lying if I said I had no idea what made me so exhausted that I could fall into my bed and pass out for four hours in the middle of the day.

I do know—the stress of going to the market, of what's happening with the Amanzite. The fact that since bringing Kira back to my place, I haven't been able to get a single second of solid sleep. Lying here in my bed, knowing she was just across the hall from me, was pure torture.

And not just that, but this bone-deep sense that I needed to protect her. Knowing that she wasn't next to me had me feeling like I needed to be awake, listening for every sound, every creak, to make sure she was okay.

But you can only stay awake for so long before your body just forces you to crash.

Now, I pry my eyes open, still feeling tired but not quite as exhausted, and look around the room. The sun is setting outside, and there's the strangest smell in the air.

Like onions, peppers. Something savory and rich.

My stomach growls and I force myself to sit up, shaking my head and running a hand through my hair. Am I dreaming still? I don't remember much of my grandmother before she died, but I'm pretty sure this house has never smelled this good. Not even when she was alive and cooking for us.

Slowly, I stumble to the hall, limbs still waking up.

Walking down the stairs and into the kitchen is like entering one of the sun-drenched

scenes in a movie, when the protagonist is remembering the bliss his life once was.

Except this isn't a memory, or a dream, I realize. Kira Argent is actually standing in front of my stove, humming lightly to herself as she stirs something in a pan. The kitchen is rich with the scent of whatever it is that she's making, all spice and meat, the heady, thick scent of cheese.

She must be wearing Ash's dress, because I know she has no other clothes, but there's no way this dress could ever look like this on my sister.

The top is like a tank top, with thicker straps, dropping low on her back to reveal her skin. The waist cinches in, hugging her curves and showing off her ass, and the hem swishes just above her knees. When she turns to look at me, I catch a line of buttons down the front of the dress, and I itch to undo them, to slide the fabric from her skin.

"Oh," she says, and then, she does something I haven't seen from her since she got here. In fact, I haven't seen it since before we got to high school, back before when we were still kids.

Kira smiles at me.

"You're up," she says, tilting her head. "Must have been one heck of a nap."

I blink at her, throat feeling too swollen to talk. This has to be a dream, but it feels so real, and I can feel the steam from whatever she's cooking, bubbling away on the stove.

When I look to the left, I can see a tidy stack of brown paper sacks, smoothed out. After a second, I catch something on the sacks that I really don't like—another man's scent.

Looking back at her, I growl, “Was someone else here?”

“Delivery guy,” she says simply, grabbing a plate from the cabinet and setting it gently on the counter. When she looks back at me, there’s something close to a twinkle in her eye. “I stopped him at the end of the drive so it wouldn’t wake you up.”

I frown. “You carried the groceries in yourself?”

To my surprise, she laughs as she scoops various things from various pots onto the plates. “Wow, no pleasing you, huh?”

A warm flush moves over my cheeks, and I realize I’m still grappling with whether or not this is real.

Kira Argent, in my kitchen. Cooking for me. Wearing that dress. Smiling at me.

It’s a moment in which I realize I’m getting something I never really knew I wanted, or at least could never put a name to—I want her here.

My mate. Like this, in my home.

And it’s more than the fact that she’s cooking for me, more than how amazing it smells and the fact that I haven’t had a home-cooked meal in ages.

It’s the way her eyes are lit up, how she moves competently between the stove and the plate. The swift motion of her hand as she slides what I assume is cilantro from a sprig, actually garnishing the dish before bringing it to me.

The pride in the actions. My mate, in my house, doing something that brings her genuine happiness.

Kira sets the plate down in front of me, eyes expectant. I look down at it—a bed of seasoned rice topped with seared flank steak, then a heap of peppers and onions, steam still rising up into the air. Rivulets of white cheese stream down the sides of the food, like lava from a volcano.

“Kira,” I say, voice hoarse as I look back up at her again. “This looks great.”

She continues to stare at me expectantly.

“Oh—” I pick up a fork, realizing she wants to watch me take the first bite. I scoop up some of the food, blow on it for a second, then slide the bite into my mouth.

The intense way her eyes are on me as I chew is almost too much. My body thrums with pleasure—at the food itself, at the fact that she cooked it for me—and I have to resist the urge to stand and take her in my arms.

The vegetables are soft and somehow still fresh, the bright cilantro balancing with the rich cheese. The steak is tender and well-seasoned, and the slightest spice burns pleasantly at the back of my tongue.

“It’s great, Kira,” I manage to say, after swallowing.

“Yeah?” she asks, and for half a second, I think I might actually lose control of myself. The scent of her, her eyes on my lips, her hips in that dress—it’s almost, almost too much.

Then she turns away, and I manage to get myself under control, keeping my ass firmly in my seat. I haven’t even gotten the opportunity to apologize to her for everything—there’s no way she’s going to welcome an advance from me right now, even if she’s extended this olive branch through her cooking.

A second later, I look up in surprise at the sound of a plate gently clinking against the table across from me. Slowly, surely, Kira folds herself into the seat, reaching for a bottle of rosé to the side and topping the two wine glasses in front of us up.

“Thank you,” I say, voice rough.

“You’re welcome.” Once again, she smiles at me, then her eyes dart to the wine glass. “Do you like rosé?”

“I am not picky,” I say, laughing and picking up the glass. “That’s one thing you’ll learn about me, Kira.”

That sentence hangs in the air, and for a moment, I almost pull it back. Why would I say that? When we haven’t talked through anything yet? To imply that she’s going to be getting to know me better?

“That’s good,” she says, not missing a beat. “Because I like to cook a lot of different cuisines. Picky eaters are my pet peeve.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Good to know. Speaking of cooking—how did you get the groceries delivered?”

“I have my credit card number memorized,” she shrugs, like it’s not a big deal, but I see something pass over her expression. Something like grief. “All my things are back at my place—it’s not like they let me pack. I don’t even have a phone.”

“We’ll get you a new one,” I say, sitting up, realizing I’m an ass for not even thinking of it. “You need to replace the stuff in your wallet, too?”

She stares into her glass for a moment, and when she speaks again, her voice is slightly choked. “Yeah. But the wallet and stuff—that’s not even the worst part. I like

to sew, and all my fabric, my antique sewing machine—it's like all this stuff I thrifted and fixed up. My herb garden, stuff I grew myself, you know? It's not so easy to replace.”

I watch her as she shrugs again, clearly trying to act like it doesn't matter to her.

But it does. I glance around the table, looking at the magic she's made tonight. She deserves to have every single thing back that she's built for herself.

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Dorian shifts in his seat and glances up at me, alternating between wolfing down his food and looking like he's trying to slow himself down.

"There's a lot more," I offer, a blush crawling up my cheeks at the look she gives me. "I just mean, if you want seconds."

"I will," he says, reaching for his drink again. After a long sip, he sets his glass down, looks at his food, clears his throat. I realize that, since he lives alone, he's probably used to eating alone. "So, have you always liked cooking?"

I bite my tongue for a second. There's no way for us to skate around the reality of what happened, so I just tackle it head-on.

"No," I say, slowly. "I started cooking when I went to the Grayhide pack. I couldn't really afford anything—I was working custodial staff at this motel in town—so I started experimenting with what I had. Growing my own vegetables and herbs, trying to make something that tasted good with what little I could afford."

To my surprise, Dorian is nodding, something almost near regret on his face.

"I checked out cookbooks from the library, learned more about the basics from cooking shows on cable. Then, I was able to get the hotel to move me to the kitchen. That's when—"

I cut off, thinking about the day Jarred came in for a meal, the moment his eyes landed on me. The door to the kitchen had swung open, revealing me, pan in my hand, and I'd glanced up, locking gazes with him.

Less than ten minutes later, I had the job cooking for him and his family.

You can't say no to the alpha, and even though it didn't pay much, it did pay more than the hotel. At that point, I was so used to the process of making a bad situation better that I just took it in stride, ignoring the way his gaze lingered on me, how he'd pop into the kitchen to watch me as I worked.

"That's when what?" Dorian asks now, he looks in his eye, making me feel like he might know where this is going, just from the tone of my voice.

I force my hand to relax on the fork I'm holding. Nothing actually happened with Jarred—except for the way he hit me on that final day with the Grayhides—but the waiting, the constant dread of when he would come around, that was almost worse.

"That's when I was invited to come and cook for the alpha leader of the pack," I say, forcing a laugh to lighten the sound of my voice. Weakly, I gesture around the kitchen. "Looks like it's what I do best."

"Kira," Dorian says, not laughing, his gaze finding my cheek. I realize the bruise is still there and raise my fingertips to it. It takes him a moment, and I realize he's put his fork down and is gripping the edge of the table tightly. "Did the Grayhide alpha do that to you?"

Silence falls around us. I don't see how it's important—it's not like Dorian can do anything about it. He's not going to war with another pack because they abused an omega. That would require a lot of manpower and would never be sustainable.

Too much time passes. He's asked me a question, and I can't answer it. I don't even want to talk about it, don't want to remember that day. I close my eyes, waiting for Dorian to explode, to demand that I tell him.

Instead, he just lets out a weary sigh.

“Okay,” he says softly. “Alright. We don’t have to talk about it right now.”

My eyes fly open, meeting his, and I wonder if he can see the surprise on my face. He shifts in his seat again, clears his throat, and speaks.

“Kira, I want you to know that I’m sorry for what I did to you in high school.”

It feels like I float up out of my body. How many times over the years have I dreamed of this moment—Dorian apologizing for the bullying? The tormenting? The eventual phrase that led me to run away from the pack altogether?

Another long silence passes, and he speaks again. This is more than I’ve ever heard him talk at one time.

“I was a stupid kid, under the pressure of being the alpha—and I didn’t really understand what that meant back then. Thought it was all about power. But punching down isn’t a good look. It just means you’re afraid you can’t hold your own if you keep your gaze level.”

That last part sounds like something he might have heard from his grandpa. My chest twists again when I think about the incident, about Dorian’s howl of pain when he realized his grandpa was gone.

“I’m sorry too,” I say, realizing too late that tears are coming to my eyes. “I didn’t know what I was doing back then. And I was so, so convinced that I was right—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Dorian grunts, shaking his head. “We were all just kids. The adults in that situation should have known better than to punish you for that mistake. And what I said...”

He shakes his head, glancing away from me, and I'm surprised when I realize the look on his face is shame. As it always does, that moment comes back to mind, as clear as the day it happened.

"You are not my mate, Kira. And if you ever say something so blatantly false again, I'll kill you myself."

Dorian pulls me from the memory before it can go further, his voice hard. "It was cruel and pointless. You didn't deserve to be treated that way, Kira, and I'm sorry."

I feel completely paralyzed, stuck in my seat.

For a long time, I oscillated on what I wanted from him. Sometimes, I wanted to hurt him, to push him away and make him feel as tortured as I did. Other times, I just wanted to end the yearning, the endless heat alone and in agony without him. I just wanted to hear him say that he wanted me as his mate, that he'd made a mistake.

That's not what he's saying now.

He's not saying it wasn't true, or that he wants me as his mate now. He's just saying it was a cruel way to go about rejecting me, which is true.

Another, slighter rejection pangs in my chest.

"Thank you," I finally manage to force out, but it's too much with the way that he's looking at me. Realizing my plate is empty, I stand, hurriedly taking it to the sink.

Sometimes, cleaning up is the time I enjoy the most after a meal. The chance to sit quietly with my thoughts, wash away messes, and reset the kitchen for the next day. It's a chance to care for my things—my pans, utensils. Another pang of grief hits me at losing the heavy Dutch oven I thrifted.

I'm thinking about it, nestled in its cabinet at my house, when I feel Dorian approach me.

I turn back against the counter and look at him.

"Kira," he says, voice cracking. "Are you crying?"

At that moment, I feel the tears running down my cheeks and swipe at them, letting out a quick, embarrassed laugh.

"Sorry," I say, voice quiet, "my heat is coming, and that always makes me emotional—"

Dorian's throat bobs, and I find myself staring at the movement, the way I can feel his heat with how close he is to me, his scent, spicy and clean, something between pine and eucalyptus, softened by his animal heat.

I didn't realize how much I missed it, how odd it was not to smell it on him, until it finally came back. He must have been blocking his scent to get into the Grayhide territory, to go to that market without anyone realizing who he was.

"Kira."

The sound of my name on his lips is so desperate, so wanting, that it nearly breaks the resolve inside me. Half an inch, and our bodies would be pressed together.

But his words from earlier come rushing back to me—what he said was cruel and pointless, but not a mistake.

Sucking in a breath, I step away from him, leaving the half-washed plate in the sink.

“Wait—” Dorian says, voice hoarse as he reaches for me, but I slide out of the way just in time, feeling the phantom of his touch as his hand nearly grazes my arm.

“Sorry,” I lie, “I’m not feeling well—I’m going to lie down.”

With that, I turn on my heel and race up the stairs, not stopping until the door is behind my back and firmly locked. My core pulses with heat, need licking up the inside of my thighs, everything in my body begging me to open this door and go to him, to put aside my pride and plead with him to satisfy this primal, aching want.

But I won’t. I can’t. Dorian Fields rejected me, and I’m not about to throw myself at him like I don’t understand that fact.

As I flip the light off and head for the bed, I can’t ignore the thought that keeps running through my head—if it was this hard to resist him today, what is going to happen when I go into heat?

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The kitchen is dark by the time I'm able to get control of myself, sure in the knowledge that if I move, I won't go after Kira, follow her up the stairs. Take her how I want.

I need more of her. The hunger is rooted deep inside me, as primal as thirst or exhaustion. If this is what resisting her is like now, it's going to be nearly impossible when she goes into heat.

The thought of that sends me reeling again, and I have to grip the counter tightly, knuckles turning white, to stay rooted in my spot.

"I can't stay in here," I mutter, the words just for myself. Kira can't hear me, but the sound of my voice out loud helps to shake me out of my daze. Turning, I push through the screen door at the back of the house and out into the periwinkle blush of dusk.

The cool air hits my face and arms, further shaking me out of the lust. This is what I need. In fact, what would be best right now is a whole fucking pool of ice water, something to freeze any heat or wanting out of my body, but I don't have access to that.

So, instead, I shift.

Touching my hand to the watch on my wrist, I feel the Amanzite set there start to heat, the power shifting and channeling into me as I transform.

Without this stone, I'd feel the excruciating pain of my bones sliding against one

another, ligaments stretching to the point of breaking before resetting and shifting, accommodating the new body.

I have, like all other shifters, done that once. To have a connection to what it was like for our ancestors, and to better understand the importance of caring for the Amanzite. And I have no desire to ever do it again.

The second my transition is complete, relatively painless with help from the magic, my paws are against the scrubby grass and racing toward the woods at the back of my house.

I've been to the northern territories, seen the towering, moist forests in their lands. But that's not what our woodlands look like—our trees are closer to the ground, our brush wiry and strong, able to withstand the long, dry heat. And if you run carelessly, you might just find yourself with a cactus stuck to your paw or fur.

But I know this land like the back of my hand. It's where I shifted for the first time, where I ran and hunted with my grandfather, where I wandered and explored as a kid. I know where the trees curve and fall away, leading to a secluded clearing. I know where the scraggly rock cliff is, a place where a waterfall would be in any other territory.

As I run, finding a rabbit to chase, my thoughts wander, as they always seem to, back to Kira. The sight of her like that, standing at the stove, made it so obvious. That the thing I've been missing is her. The soft curve of her hips, the way she'd turned her head to look at me, little tendrils of her red-golden hair coming loose from its updo.

My mind flashes back to what she was like as a teenager—a little rounder, less sure of herself, clothes baggy and unflattering, like a larger T-shirt would conceal the fact that she had curves. The boys and I weren't the only ones to pick on her—girls could be ruthless.

Especially the first time she came to school in heat, the scent of her rolling off like steam from the mountains, pooling around the classroom.

Every alpha in that room gritted their teeth, staring straight ahead. It was a faux pas for omegas to come to school in their heat. Apparently, Kira didn't understand what was happening to her. Nobody had taught her.

Finally, our teacher, a beta, noticing the way we were all acting, turned and snapped at Kira, her face twisted in disgust.

"For heaven's sake, Kira," she'd said, only a drop of pity in her tone. "Go to the nurse."

If I'm honest with myself, I'd known she was my mate long before that. I was just afraid to put a name to it, to identify it within myself. I had no problem being with girls in high school, but as time wore on, I found it harder and harder to be interested in them.

They were always too skinny, too blonde, had a scent that was sharp and pungent to my nose.

My body yearned for someone softer, someone with curls and round cheeks. A body to sink into fully, hips I could palm, an ass I could squeeze.

Without warning, my grandfather's voice filters into my memories, reminding me of the guiding force in my life back then.

"It is our duty to ensure there's no more bloodshed, that this pack will not have to experience another pointless power vacuum. You must convince all the members of this pack that you're the best candidate for alpha leader, that there's no reason to fight over it. You can serve them well. We'll ensure you can."

My training was physical, of course. Learning to fight, shift mid-air, leverage my advantages in both my wolf and physical form. But it was also mental, learning about the history of the pack, understanding the dynamics of leadership. Grandpa had me in classes every weekend, learning with other mid-tier managers.

Now, I understand bookkeeping, inventory management. Being the alpha leader of a pack is a lot about relationships, good leadership. But it's also about resource management. Making sure the shifters under my care have food and shelter. That they have no reason to question my choices.

I turn the corner and come to a stop, catching my breath as I look out over the valley, the vast swath of land that holds our western border, the reaches between our territory and the Grayhides'. My eyes follow the snaking path of the road that Kira and I took on the way in, and I snag on the exact hazy spot in the distance that our boundary lies.

With my sharp eyesight, I can also make out the warriors out there, patrolling just inside the border, making sure nobody goes in or out. I assigned more of them after returning from Grayhide territory with Kira, in case I was recognized or followed.

So far, there's no risk to our boundaries. Just the problem of finding more Amanzite.

As I turn around and head back toward the house, my thoughts shift back from the Amanzite problem to the issue that's much more in my face—Kira, in my house, likely asleep by now. A single door between me and her, and the growing urge inside me to take her the way a mate should.

But I know that even with the dinner she's made me tonight, I have a lot to make up for. Starting in high school with the bullying, cresting with the day my grandfather died and I rejected her publicly. Including even the night I got her from the market, the tone I used. It might have been necessary, but it still hurt her.

I never want to hurt her again. And I know I need to try and repair things before I approach the topic of our mating bond. The mating bond that I increasingly want to strengthen, nurture. Cherish.

Eventually, I'll present this to her. Maybe she'll reject me in turn—she would have every right to—but I'm going to do this right.

Show her that I'm not the person I used to be. That I'm deserving of her now, and that I'll spend the rest of my life proving that.

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“ Kira ,” Dorian says, his breath ragged with want, his breath fanning over my cheeks. When I look up at him, I can feel the heat of his body, the press of him against my hips through our clothing.

The next three words make my core pool with heat, throbbing for him.

“I need you,” he rasps, dropping his forehead so it rests against mine. It’s the first time our skin has touched, no barrier between us, and the shock of it through my body is nearly enough to push me over the edge, to make me orgasm right then and there.

“Kira.”

This time, his voice is less sultry, cleaner, and pulled back. I blink up at him, but now he’s across the room, arms crossed. There’s a knocking sound, and he says, “Good morning.”

I sit up, breathing hard and looking around. Once again, there’s the shock of not knowing where I am, until I remember—Dorian’s house. In his guest room. The room is quiet, the windows open to let in a cool, early morning breeze. Just outside the window, little flowers bloom in the planter box, and sheer white curtains shimmer in the gilded light.

My entire body shakes as I rise from the bed, my socked feet hitting the wooden floor and sending a shock through me. That dream felt so real, and I can tell I’m wet from it. For some reason, that reality makes my cheeks warm, a rush of embarrassment flushing my chest.

Ridiculous. To be having sex dreams about a man who publicly rejected me years ago, and has made no indication that he wants me now.

But, if I'm being honest with myself, this is not the first sex dream I've had about Dorian Fields. This happens frequently, and much more so every three months, when my heat comes. In fact, a dream about Dorian is a solid indicator that I only have a few days before it sets in completely.

The dreams used to be of us in high school—that was the last I knew of him. But the Dorian in my dream last night was the man he is now, his thick biceps, the stubble over his jaw and neck, the new, dark look in his eyes.

Shuffling across the floor, I cross to the door and crack it open, peering out.

At my feet is a wooden tray. On a small plate is a variety of fresh fruit, nicely cut. There's a glass of what appears to be orange juice, and a latte that's exactly the shade of brown I like. Carefully, I lean down and pick it up, bringing it into my room.

In the center is a note.

Kira, come down when you're ready. Surprise for you. Dorian.

I run my thumb over the note, then quickly throw on some of Ash's clothes—a pair of jean shorts and a ribbed black tank top. I sip on the latte as I brush through my hair, then dart across the hallway to finish getting ready.

When I come down the stairs, I hear another voice and pause, trying to figure out who it could be. Dorian doesn't seem like the kind of guy who likes to have people over to his house, so it's odd that he's brought someone now.

"Kira," Dorian says, surprising me by appearing in the foyer. I don't miss the way his

eyes rake up and down my figure, ending on my foot, still hovering over the last step. His throat bobs, and he looks away for a moment before returning his gaze to me. “Come on, I’d like to formally introduce you.”

We cross into the kitchen, and for some reason, the very first thing I notice is that the mess I left last night—all the food, dishes, and leftovers—are clean. The counters gleam. Even the little splatter I accidentally made on the backsplash is gone.

Dorian cleaned. And he cleaned thoroughly.

I ignore the warmth in my chest at that knowledge and turn, eyes landing on the woman sitting at the table. She’s older, wrapped in what looks like a hand-knitted shawl, and looking up at me through her glasses with wide, watery eyes. Her gray hair is pushed back from her head with a thin pink headband, and when she reaches her hand up to me to shake mine, the bangles on her wrist clank merrily.

“You’re a psychic,” I say, voice nearing something like awe.

“That I am,” she smiles, her lips thin and wide. “Good memory on you.”

Of course I know who she is—a woman in the pack with a gift. The psychic that everyone believed, because her predictions had never been wrong. She was old when I was in high school, but she must be ancient now.

Maybe the difference—the reason everyone believed her—is that she’s not an omega, like me. A beta. Automatically higher on the food chain.

Without meaning to, my eyes dart to Dorian, who stands in the doorway, watching the exchange. The only way for me to improve my standing in the pack as an omega was to attach myself to a high-standing alpha. But that was obviously never going to happen—at least, according to my mother—with the way I presented myself.

By that, she meant the size and shape of my body.

When Dorian speaks again, it pushes those thoughts from my mind.

“Kira, I’d like you to meet Beth. She’s a psychometrist.”

I blink. That sounds like something you’d learn to do in math class. I itch to ask what that means, but I don’t want to give away the fact that I’m woefully unprepared for this meeting.

“I gain information through objects,” Beth offers, tipping her chin up to me. “When I touch certain objects—especially those with personal meaning—I feel their energy. Depending on the object, I’ll be able to see its history, makeup, emotion.”

“Wow,” the word slips out of me before I realize how it makes me sound like a fangirl.

“So,” Beth tilts her head at me. “Dorian tells me you have a gift of your own?”

It hits me so suddenly and completely that I don’t have time to stop it—I begin to sob.

“Kira—” Dorian pushes off the door jamb, coming toward me just before I cover my eyes with my palms, sucking in a deep breath, trying to curb the intense wave of relief that’s coursing through my body.

When a hand touches me, I jerk, knowing immediately that it’s not him. Beth wraps me in her arms, rubbing her hand into my back, soothing me.

“That’s alright, darling,” she says into my ear, her voice so calm it makes my breathing level. “I know this feeling—ride it out, love.”

I stand like that for a long time, with Beth murmuring to me, until I'm finally able to suck in a breath and let out a shaky laugh.

"Sorry," I croak, and she hands me a glass of water. After taking a sip, I look up, startling. "Where did Dorian go?"

Beth shrugs, pulls out a chair at the table. "We won't need him for this. I told him to go attend to whatever pressing matters I'm sure he has on his mind."

Nodding, I wrap my hands around the glass of water in front of me and settle into the seat across from her. We sit quietly for a moment, then I raise my chin and look at her.

"So, what do we do?"

"Let's explore your gift first. Tell me about your experiences. When was the first time you experienced it?"

I swallow, staring at the surface of the water and how it shifts, rocking back and forth ever so slightly in the cup.

"It's hard to say," I land on, finally. "I'd get headaches and hear things in my mind. The thing is that it happened sometimes when I was a kid, and I just thought that was something that happened to everyone. Hearing voices in your head."

I pause, closing my eyes and letting the memories come to me. Beth reaches across the table and offers me her hand, and I take it.

"The first time I realized something odd was happening was in sixth grade. I was sitting at the table, and I'd just decided to put off my math homework. Then my math teacher's voice popped in my head, and I could hear him saying, clear as day, ‘

Happy Wednesday—time for a pop quiz !””

Everything comes back to me—the smell of the dining room, the feel of the pencil in my hand. I’d heard his voice in my head and it convinced me to study, do the math homework, and the extra questions. Emin was out in the yard, playing with Dorian and the other boys, and I was inside, working hard on the homework.

That night, he’d cuffed me on the back of the head and called me a little fucking nerd while the other boys laughs chugged water and piled back outside.

“Wednesday morning, the next day, I aced the pop quiz. I heard him say those exact words, in the exact tone: Happy Wednesday—time for a pop quiz . That’s when I started to realize something was going on.”

“Very interesting,” Beth says, nodding, and another wave of relief pours through me. She believes me. She’s an expert in this—a psychic herself—and she isn’t questioning my experience. “What it sounds like, to me, Kira, is that you’re a clairaudient.”

It feels like the word hangs between us, palpable and real over the table.

“Clairaudient,” I repeat, voice rough.

“Yes.” She pauses, looks at me, and considers. “I’m well aware of what happened with Harris Fields.”

Dorian’s grandfather. That whole day flashes through my mind, lightning quick, and I push it away, like I always do.

“Here’s the thing, Kira,” Beth goes on, voice impossibly gentle. “Without any training, without understanding your gift, it’s obvious that you’d make a mistake like

that.”

“It is?”

“Of course,” she nods. “Your gift isn’t just limited to premonitions of the future—you can also hear from the past. From spirits long passed. The gift of listening includes that of hearing energies, and emotions, too—when you touch someone, you can listen to their inner workings, almost like a mechanic starting up an engine, ears pricking at the sound of an errant belt.”

My heart is skipping in my chest, and things start to fall into place. I can hear from the past. From spirits long passed. I haven’t been wrong ; I just didn’t understand the context of where it was coming from.

“Why don’t you try now?” Beth asks, squeezing my hand.

“Try...?”

“Look inside yourself. See if you can look under my hood, Kira.”

“You’d ... really let me do that?”

Beth laughs. “Well, you’re my only protégé. And there’s no better time for you to start learning about your gift than now.”

There’s the strangest feeling inside me, like something finally clicking into place. Feeling like I might just cry again, I close my eyes, squeeze her hand, and try, for the first time in my life, to use my gift on purpose.

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“We’re almost finished imbuing the supply of Amanzite you found for us,” Claire says, her hands shaking as she sets them on the table. “But many shifters in the pack are already requesting their replacements. The patrolling shifters go through the magic faster than others, and with the supply we currently have...”

“Should we go back to the market?” Kellen asks, his brow furrowed as he turns to look at me. “To obtain more?”

My mind is only half in this meeting. The other half is stuck firmly in my kitchen, watching as Kira broke into sobs at the simple gesture of someone believing her. It fucking devastated me, somewhere inside, to realize the pain it had been causing her all this time.

To be denied that part of herself. To feel like nobody understood who she really was, or didn’t care to know.

“No,” Leta says, leaning forward and shaking her head. “My contacts in the territory say there have been some stirrings with the Grayhides. We’re not sure what the exact agitation is, but it seems the alpha leader has been on a warpath. It’s not wise to send anyone—and especially not Dorian—back into that territory.”

“I’m not certain that, even if I did go, we would be able to get Amanzite there,” I admit. “The vendor I got it from seemed to be telling the truth when he said he couldn’t get any more.”

There’s a moment of silence as we all sit with what this means—the lack of Amanzite. Without it, our shifters won’t be able to move freely back and forth

between their forms. There won't be the protection of magic. Beyond just avoiding the pain of the transition, there are a hundred other ways the stones assist us in our way of life.

Things we've all started to take for granted.

Pacing back and forth in front of the long table, I try to think. This is exactly what my grandfather was trying to prepare me for. Being a good leader isn't just about taking credit when things go right. It's about facing problems head-on and finding solutions.

His voice comes to me, "We won't be able to go over all the possible problems you could face in the future, Dorian. But what we can do is talk about what to do, a system of steps you can take to ensure you find a solution."

In my mind's eye, I can see him sitting across from me at the table. Breakfast was never just breakfast with Gramps—it was always an opportunity to talk about my future. Being the alpha leader and being a good one. Doing right by the pack. Ensuring I'd be capable of helping us move forward, avoid the primitive fight-to-the-death style of electing a new leader packs inevitably fall into without strong options.

"What's the most important thing to remember when it comes to facing problems in the future?"

"I may lead alone," I'd said, almost like a recitation. "But I'm within the pack, too."

"Which means?"

"Draw from them. Never try to solve a problem myself—we are stronger as a unit, and that's why the pack system exists in the first place."

"Exactly."

Now, my eyes drift to the window, taking in the scenery. Outside, the day is starting to get hot, the sun high overhead. A lizard scampers from a large red rock and into the shade.

I haven't sat down for this meeting—it doesn't feel right, like I need to be on my feet for this. Like I might need to take action at any moment.

“Right now,” I start, feeling their eyes shift to me. “We need to brainstorm. No bad ideas—everyone, let's think about what we can do to get our hands on more Amanzite.”

“I don't think we should count out the market,” Kellen says, and Leta narrows her eyes at him, but I just nod.

“Alright, Kellen, I will take that idea into consideration. What else do we have?”

“We could send out scouts over our own land again,” Claire offers, spreading out her palms. She is not a usual member of these meetings, but her presence is starting to become more familiar. Unfortunately for her, the fact that she hasn't been present through the years means she doesn't understand the extent to which we've already done this.

It's enough that allocating more resources to it most certainly wouldn't yield results.

Instead of saying all this, and discouraging her from speaking up again, I nod, glancing at the others—mostly Kellen—to ensure they keep their mouths shut.

“That's a good thought, Claire. Let's keep thinking.”

“There's always the Llewellyn pack,” Leta says, tapping her pen against the table. The Llewellyn pack, a rare matriarchal pack to our north. Not exactly enemies, not

exactly allies. Wolves that we coexist peacefully with. “We could reach out and negotiate some sort of deal with them.”

“If we do that,” I say, turning to look at her, “we’re going to need information beforehand on what they need. A bargaining chip. See what you can find out, Leta.”

“On it,” she says, scribbling furiously in her notebook.

“Other ideas?” I let my gaze wander over the shifters in this room. I’d like to think I’ve ensured they all know they can speak up, that they feel emboldened to share their ideas with me. We need it now more than ever.

None of them speaks, but I feel something bubbling from the corner of the table. I turn to look at Claire, who’s sitting quietly, but her eyes are focused on the table, moving side to side, like she’s processing. Thinking.

Being attuned to them is helpful, and when I lean into that feeling, I can sense the way her mind is racing, how her heart beats fast.

She has an idea, but she’s fearful of sharing it. Likely from the way Kellen looked at her the last time she offered an idea.

When I clear my throat, the rest of them look at me, but she’s still looking at the table, her fingers drumming against her thigh, deep in thought.

“Claire?” I prompt, hoping I’m managing to keep my tone gentle. The last thing I want to do is bark at her. She startles still, her cheeks flushing scarlet when she looks up from her spot at the table.

“Sorry,” she says, letting out a breathy laugh and looking around the table. “I was—”

“We’d love to hear what you’re thinking.” I place my hands on the table, lean forward to show interest. “You have the most experience with Amanzite, and it’s obvious you’re very smart.”

“Oh,” she blushes, pushing her hair over her shoulder and avoiding my gaze. “Thank you—I—I—”

I’m patient, waiting for her to collect her thoughts.

“I was just thinking,” she lets out a sigh, then raises her chin and meets my eyes. “There’s fabrication magic. Usually we use it to create very simple things, but I was wondering if, with enough magic and planning, we could—”

“Synthetic Amanzite,” I breathe, realizing what she’s saying. If we could create it ourselves, with no reliance on traders or other packs, that would be the ideal situation. “What do you think, Claire? What would you need to be able to do that?”

“We’re already stretched a little thin, just imbuing the rocks,” she admits, chewing on her lip. “But we could...”

She trails off, and it’s clear she’s not sure where to go with that sentence.

“We could pull from the younger casters,” Emin offers, leaning back in his chair and meeting Claire’s eyes. “Would that work? They won’t have the training, but you could use their power. Teach them a crash course.”

“How many younger casters do we have?” Claire breathes, eyes darting around the table.

“By my estimations,” a woman at the end of the table says, tapping through her iPad. “At least a dozen, juniors and seniors in high school.”

With this information out in the open, they all turn to look at me.

There's no doubt that pulling kids from their classrooms, turning them to the labor that is casting, is not ideal. But right now, we have no other choice.

"How many from just the seniors?" I ask, flicking my eyes up to our numbers woman.

She glances down. "Five."

"Alright." I take a breath, look at them all. "Pull them for half days. Confer with their teachers about their most important classes—let's try to get them out for things like study hall. Speak with their families about other obligations. Some of them might be babysitting after school—let's get everything taken care of, and I want all of them compensated exactly the same as our casters."

Everyone is nodding, writing, figuring out their parts in this plan.

"Claire," I turn to her. "Get those five learning to imbue with what you have left, then pull your best casters to work on this generative casting. I want daily reports from you on how it's coming."

Looking at Leta, I say, "Get me that information about the Llewellyn as soon as you can. Until we have more information about the generative casting, we'll pursue that avenue."

"Sounds good," Leta nods, and I pause, breathing hard, looking around the room.

"Anything else?" I ask, my mind already pulling back to Kira, to the plan I have for myself right after this meeting.

When nobody answers, I dismiss them.

“Hey, man,” Emin circles the table as the room is clearing out, pulling me to the side. He clears his throat, looks down at the floor, then back at me. “Kira still at your place?”

I cross my arms. “Yeah. She is.”

“Cool.” He clears his throat again, glancing around. The only person left is Claire, standing on the other side of the room, obviously waiting to talk to me. Emin rubs his hand over the back of his neck and says, “Any chance I could come by and see her?”

It’s not what I was expecting, but when he says it, it makes sense. He’s felt guilty since the day she left, and even more so when we learned she was in Grayhide territory.

“I’ll ask her,” I say, which seems to surprise him. “I’m cool with it, but...”

“Yeah.” Emin nods, takes a step back. “Makes sense. Just, uh, let me know? Yeah?”

I give him a nod back, then he turns and leaves the room. Claire lingers for another moment before approaching me carefully.

“You asked for this?”

When she holds her hand out, I nod and take the little pot from her. I’m going to need it for what I’m planning to do next.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

Time passes so quickly while talking to Beth that I don't look up or register the hours that have gone by until we hear the clanging of something coming through the back door on the other side of the house. There's the roar of Dorian's truck, backing along the drive, then the opening and shutting of the door.

He's carrying something in.

"Well," Beth says, also looking surprised at the time, glancing out the window to find the sun setting. "I'd better get home and feed my cats. But I'd love to come back and keep working with you on this—you're a natural, Kira."

The praise makes warmth rise to my cheeks. I follow her to the door and say goodbye, then turn and make my way back through the house, following the sound of the noise until I turn the corner, find myself in the doorway to a spare room, and my mouth drops open.

"Dorian?"

He looks up from where he's kneeling, having just set my sewing machine onto its table. My heart thuds in my chest, and I'm blinking rapidly, trying to take in what I'm looking at. Trying to make sense of it.

It's my stuff—my fabrics, lined up along the wall. My little containers of buttons and zippers, a rainbow of material and bobbles.

And my pink vintage sewing machine, right in the middle of it all. When I see it, I remember the day I found it, the way it lit my heart up with joy when nothing else

had. How I'd dropped all my savings on it, taken it to get serviced, cared for it like it was my child. The little stickers around the sides, and how I'd slowly learned how to make clothes, slowly learned to shape them to my body in a way that made me feel good about myself.

Dorian is still looking at me, features drenched in worry, like he thinks I might be upset about this.

"How..." I take a breath, fight through the happy tears pressing up behind my eyes. "How did you do this, Dorian?"

"It was easy to find your place," he says. "Smelled like you. It was a bit of a mess, like they'd searched through it, but your stuff was still there. I just loaded it up in my truck and left."

I blink at him. "But..."

How could he possibly have gotten in and out of enemy territory without them smelling him? Seeing him? And why risk all that, just to get my things for me?

"No more questions," he says, taking a step closer to me, throat moving. "Are you ... happy?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I breathe out, and the tears finally come, streaming down my cheeks. He laughs in surprise at the profanity, hovering so close to me that a single breath might push us together. "This is—this is amazing, Dorian. Thank you."

We stand like that for a moment, some invisible force field between us, like two opposing magnets that couldn't touch if they tried.

Then, all at once, I feel my walls crumbling down, and I move forward, pushing through the paper-thin boundary between us. Swaying so our chests touch, I wrap my arms around him, and finally, finally feel it.

The brush of his skin against mine. The inside of my wrist on the back of his neck, shivering, electric, making my entire body react like I've just touched a live wire.

Dorian reacts immediately, reaching his hands around and anchoring them on the small of my back, drawing me closer, tugging my hips forward until our bodies are flush from neck to knee.

I feel every spot where our bare skin touches—the pads of his fingers grazing under my T-shirt and dragging over the skin above my hip. My fingertips against his scalp. The place where our shirts have ridden up, and our stomachs are deliciously touching.

“Kira.” The way he says my name is straight from my dream, the intonation, the ragged, raw quality to his voice, and it sends a shudder from the top of my head down to my feet, a full-body shake, waking up all my nerves and senses.

He says my name like a prayer. Like an invocation. As if he's on his knees, begging for his life.

“Dorian,” I whisper back, and that seems to shatter whatever reserve he had left. He drags his hands up my body roughly, then slides his hands over my neck, his fingers under my ears. His thumbs graze my jaw and he tips my head back to bring his lips to mine.

The second our lips touch, I open my mouth to him, and he's walking me backwards, growling against my lips, sliding his tongue against mine just as my back hits the wall.

“Dorian—” I gasp his name, but it’s swallowed by his mouth against mine. He covers me completely, one of his hands grasping both of my wrists and pinning them to the wall above me, the other resting so lightly against my neck that I only feel its touch when I swallow.

Given our history and how cruel he used to be to me, this should put me on edge. But all it does is send a flood of aching, desperate heat down between my legs. All it does is make me whimper against him, something so freeing and easy about having another person take full control of your body.

The way he’s holding me is like I could let go completely, and he would be there, supporting me. He’s at once firm and gentle, an invisible and constant force.

His mouth slants over mine, his hand tightening around my lips, one of his thighs slipping up between my legs and applying delicious pressure. I’m already wet from my heat coming, and the perpetual state of being around him, wanting him.

Finally touching him feels like the first breath of fresh air when you break through the surface of the water. It feels like survival, like realizing you’ve been going without something necessary to your very existence.

I’m leaning into him, trapped against the wall and freer than I’ve ever been. When he drops my hands, I raise them, hungry to feel more of him, but he steps back.

He steps back. Away from me. Cutting off the touch.

My brain hadn’t processed it as an option. Our connection, to me, felt like electricity through a live wire, connecting us, latching on and not letting us go once we started to touch.

But he heaves in a deep, shuddering breath and stands a few feet from me, his body

shaking, like he's desperately trying to regain control of himself.

My chest is heaving, skin tingling from his absence.

Then, the shame sets in, hot and sticky, climbing through my stomach and sticking to the bottom of my throat.

I threw myself at him, kissed him, and it's clearly not what he wants. I know the biology of how things work—he's an alpha. And my mate, no less. Which means it's going to be a lot harder for him to stay away from me.

Even if he knows, in his logical brain, that it's not what he wants.

I'm so humiliated I could burst into tears at this reality—that the kiss I've been waiting for, dreaming about, was a moment of weakness for him. An unwanted moment.

"Kira," he finally manages to say, his hand to his mouth. When he drags his gaze up to mine, it's tortured. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No," I choke. "You don't have to apologize, Dorian."

I open my mouth to say more, to say my own apology for throwing myself at him like that, but nothing comes out. Dorian looks at me, and I look at the ground.

We stand like that quietly for ten long minutes, until finally, he sucks in a breath and opens his mouth to say something. I'm expecting him to say it's time for me to go, that he'll have to figure out somewhere else for me to stay, but instead, he says something I never would have guessed.

"Your brother asked about you."

I blink stupidly. “Emin?”

What a thing to say—I obviously only have one brother. But the sudden change of topic, and the fact that Emin would ask about me, feels so sudden and strange that I’m not sure what to say.

“Yes, Emin,” Dorian laughs, thrusting a hand into his hair and meeting my eyes. “He stopped me after the meeting today and asked me about how you’re doing.”

“I ... can’t believe it.”

“We’ve both grown up quite a bit, Kira.”

I blink at him again, just barely managing to stop myself from saying something like I can see that .

“He’d like to see you,” Dorian continues. “And I’m willing to let him come over, if that’s what you want.”

When I try to swallow, I feel like I might choke. My brother, Emin, wants to see me. And Dorian is using this as a way to steer us away from the reality that we just kissed, and he wishes we hadn’t.

“Okay,” I hear myself say, though I haven’t really thought it through. The entire situation feels weird, but there’s something deep in my gut—a whole, constant missing of my family—that pulls me in the direction of saying yes to seeing Emin.

Dorian looks stiff, uncomfortable, and for some reason, I find myself thinking Emin might be a good buffer between us. So I shift my weight from one foot to the other, clear my throat, and ask, “Can we do it tonight?”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I'm lucky my grandfather built this home with good, reliable hardwood flooring. If this was cheap laminate, I surely would have worn a groove in the wood from all the pacing.

My bedroom is washed in the deep purple of twilight, and Kira is downstairs in the kitchen, cooking something that smells amazing—sweet and zingy, savory and mouth-watering—but I'm holed up in here.

I'll wait until Emin arrives to go downstairs, because I'm not sure I can trust myself around her until we have him between us.

As I pace, I think about the look on her face when I pulled back, how she'd stared after me with those huge pupils, her fingers stretching and curling at her sides. It took every ounce of my strength to keep from stepping back into her.

But I know, from the fact that her scent is swirling through this house, pooling thick and heady, that she's going into her heat soon. And her behavior—kissing me, pressing her body to mine—is likely just the result of that.

After everything I've done to Kira Argent, I will not take advantage of her. Not when I've brought her into my home, and not when I haven't done enough to apologize. To atone. For the bullying, for the night I rejected her.

Part of me demands that I go and do it now—just get it all out in the open.

I've said the words already, but it doesn't feel like enough. And I haven't told her the truth—that I want her as my mate. Partly, it's because I'm terrified she's going to

reject me, and partly because it just doesn't feel like the right time. Not with her brother coming to dinner.

It has never felt like the right time. Not when I first saw her at the market, and not now. But I need to gather the courage to do it soon, because my self-control is waning fast, and her heat is coming. Fear congests in my throat as I wonder, for the thousandth time, if I'll be able to control myself.

If Kira rejects me, if she still wants nothing to do with me even after an apology? Even after I admit to her that I want her as my mate, then what?

I'll have to shift, go into the woods. Stay there until her heat is over, until it's safe to come into the house. And even then, there's just the mere fact of her existing to make me feel out of control.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a quick, uncertain knock at the front door.

Emin .

Feet reacting before my brain, I'm in the hallway and making my way down the steps, toward the front door. I am not going to let Kira be the one to answer—if Emin wants to come over here and apologize for what he's done, it's going to be completely on her terms.

The house is filled with various scents—Kira's the strongest, then the cooking, so when I catch Emin's scent from outside, I'm not that concerned that it's slightly different. Being around Kira going into heat, is likely scrambling my senses.

When I open the door, the first thing I see is Emin's face. I'd expected him to look nervous, maybe contrite, but instead, he looks downright terrified.

“I’m sorry,” he says, voice low. “I tried to tell them—”

At first, I don’t understand what he’s getting at, but then I realize he is not alone. His mother and father come to stand behind him on the porch, Mhairi Argent holding a glass pan and peering happily at me.

“Dorian,” she says brightly. “We were so excited to hear that—”

“Absolutely not,” I growl, the words coming out of me fast and low, the anger rising in my stomach like a tidal wave. I played my own part in Kira’s leaving our pack years ago, but so did her parents. And they turned her away when she showed back up, needing a place to stay after a traumatic event, so many years later.

It’s no secret to me—and to everyone else—that the Argents have been clawing their way up in the standing in this pack since before my grandfather was the alpha leader. But to sacrifice their own daughter—to let her leave the pack and not worry over her wellbeing—for the sake of their standing?

It makes me sick. And when I have children of my own, I would never treat them like that.

“What’s—”

Kira appears beside me, and I shift slightly so our arms don’t touch. I’m not sure I could handle it, don’t know if I wouldn’t just slam the door in the Argents’ faces and grab her, carry her up the stairs, take her the way my body is pleading me to.

“Mom,” Kira says, and the way she says it guts me. The hurt of a daughter, the pain of a little girl, staring people in the face who abandoned her in her moment of need. “Dad.”

“Kira,” Kellen says, and to my surprise, his voice breaks, too. Despite his firm stance that she’s a liar, that my grandfather’s death rests firmly on her shoulders, he’s here, staring at her like he’s seen a ghost. “Gods, it’s good to see you.”

“What are you guys doing here?” she asks, voice small.

I know what they’re doing here, and Emin does too, judging by the look on his face. They were ready to write off their daughter before, when they thought her reputation couldn’t fall any lower.

But they also know that she is still my mate, despite the way I rejected her. And I brought her back from that market, have been keeping her in my home. It doesn’t take a genius to realize I don’t blame her for my grandfather’s death.

A week in the alpha leader’s house is an honor no other person in this pack has received, and that makes Kira something special.

And now that she’s something special, it appears her parents are here to make sure they attach their names to her again, grab a ride on the way up.

Emin meets my eyes, and there’s something specifically pleading there I don’t understand. For a moment, I wish we were shifted, in our wolf forms, because then he would be able to tell me without saying a thing.

“We came for supper,” Mrs. Argent finally says, and then, holding up the dish in her hands, “And hopefully, dessert.”

My muscles tense, and I grab the door, ready to tell them to get lost, but when I look at Kira, there’s something else in her expression.

I expect her to hate them, to see the way they’re taking advantage of her and tell them

to get lost. And surely she does know who they are and what they prioritize. I was there the night they turned her away, and she had to come home with me.

But there's something else in her gaze.

Forgiveness.

At first, it makes me furious that she would ever think about forgiving these people, after everything they've done to her. Then, in a moment of startling clarity, I realize that I, too, am asking for her forgiveness, and it would make me a hypocrite to turn them away now.

I bite my tongue and look at her parents, paying attention to the ways in which I'm attuned to them, trying to figure out if they're truly sorry, and here to make amends, or if this is just a ploy for recognition.

When I can't find a clear answer, I look back at Kira, and the way she gazes at me makes her request clear: Let them stay.

"Fine," I grunt out, stepping back and opening up the door, watching as the three of them step into my home, standing near my mate, taking their shoes off, and looking around.

"I'm sorry," Emin says, hanging back as Mrs. Argent starts talking to Kira animatedly. "They ambushed me, followed me here in their own car. I have no idea how they even—"

I hold my hand up, eyes locked on Kira, who is smiling up at her father.

"Seems like she wants them here," I say, voice low, rough. "That's enough for me. But they are on thin fucking ice, Argent."

“Heard,” he says, just as Kira’s voice comes from the direction of the dining room.

“Come on, you two,” she calls, sounding far happier than she was just a moment ago.

“Dinner is served!”

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If I block out the part of my brain that remembers everything, I can almost pretend like I'm living in a different reality. One where Dorian accepts me as his mate. One in which I'm living with him, and my family is over to visit, and it's for no other reason than because they love me, and we like to be around one another.

The glow from the fireplace is lovely, casting warm light across the room, and steam rises up from the dishes of bulgogi beef and rice I've prepared. Little bowls line the middle of the table with flash-pickled cucumbers, kimchi I ordered premade from the store, and japchae.

Except I can't block out that part of my brain, and it reminds me again that none of that is real. That my parents, sitting opposite Dorian and me, turned me away at my lowest point. Closed their eyes when I snuck out that night, never asked after me, even after they surely must have known I was in Grayhide territory.

My brother sits on our other side, looking down at his plate. Of course, he looks different. Older, but still the same. Same hair as me, still messily sitting on top of his head like he's just run his hand through it.

The brother who joined in on my bullying, who taunted me, left mean notes in my locker, constantly whispered about my body, and acted like we weren't siblings in school.

And Dorian. Who has been nothing but kind to me since I came back into his life, but still doesn't want me as his mate. Dorian, who is gripping his fork so tightly his knuckles are white, and I worry he might bend the metal with the force of his hold.

“This is just wonderful,” Mom says, covering her mouth with her hand and laughing gently, the twinkling sound of it just what I remember. “When did you learn to cook like this, Kir?”

The words come out before I can think about them, “Oh, I learned after I left. I was actually cooking for the Grayhide alpha leader, to make money.”

Silence falls over the room, and I realize that by bringing up the past, I’ve shattered the happy family illusion for everyone else, too.

“Sorry,” when I say the word, it comes out somewhere halfway between a laugh and a whisper.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Dorian snaps, and I feel his gaze flicking up to my cheek, where the faintest memory of the bruise still brushes my skin. Every time he sees it, I watch the corners of his eyes go angry.

“Well,” Dad says, wincing, his gaze flicking between Dorian and me. “We’re very aware of the fact that our daughter played a part that day. When the alpha leader—your grandfather—died.”

Dorian is stiff enough beside me that I’m surprised the fork in his hand is still in one piece. Breathing deeply, purposefully, he sets the fork on the table, and when I glance to the side, I realize that it is, indeed, slightly bent.

“I will only talk about this once tonight,” Dorian says, voice low, dangerous. It sends a chill down my back. “Kira was a child when that happened. A child being denied the truth about her gift. This pack failed her—you failed her as parents. Had she been cared for properly, that day never would have happened.”

Silence falls again, and this time, my parents look guilty, sick, slightly bottled. A

flash of satisfaction rolls through me at the knowledge that even if they think differently, they won't dare say it to Dorian's face. And they wouldn't voice it to anyone else, either, or risk betraying their alpha leader.

"I'm sorry," my dad says, also setting down his fork, fixing his gaze first on me, then on Dorian. "You're talking about her gift? Do you mean—"

"Her gift is very real," Dorian snaps. "How much Kira chooses to share of it with you is her own decision now."

"I'm sorry," this time, it's my mom setting her utensils down, and for some reason, though it's silly, I'm slightly offended that it's so easy for everyone to stop eating. I finally nailed the perfect balance between sweet and savory with this bulgogi, and I'm not sure they appreciate that.

She goes on, "Are you—Dorian, what exactly are your intentions with my daughter?"

He practically growls, "Bold of you to call her that, considering you turned her away when she came to you for help."

Dad looks genuinely confused, turning to Mom, and I wonder if she didn't even tell him I showed up that night.

"You rejected her as your mate," my mother says back, matter-of-factly, and Emin sucks in a surprised breath of air beside me.

"Mom," he admonishes.

There are a million reasons for Emin to stop her, to be shocked that she did it. First, because speaking to the alpha leader at all requires a certain level of respect, which she certainly wasn't showing. Second, because mating is deeply personal and private,

the fact that moment between us was public had to do with the fact that Dorian had just lost his grandfather.

Mate rejections always—almost always—happen privately. They're not very common—why would someone want to reject their mate?—but when they do happen, it's not normally public knowledge.

I'm so surprised by her behavior, and so worried about what Dorian might do, that my hand flies out, grabbing the cuff of his sleeve, as though I'd be able to hold him back should he decide to treat my mother the way Jarred treated me.

Instead of pushing me away or lunging for my mother, Dorian twists his hand around until his fingers slip between mine. He squeezes once as he speaks, voice so low it's close to hell.

What is happening ? Is Dorian holding my hand because he's my alpha leader, defending me? As moral support?

Or for some other reason?

"Get out," he says, breathing quickly through his nose, his eyes resolutely on my parents. "I will give you ten seconds to get the fuck out of my home."

My mother, stupidly, looks like she might protest, but Dad is on his feet, grabbing her by the back of the shirt and dragging her away. Her dessert sits, untouched, on the bar behind the dining table. Emin stands as the front door slams, his gaze darting down to where Dorian holds my hand.

Then, his eyes land on me. Dorian's directive wasn't toward Emin, but it's obvious from the anger radiating out from him that he wants to be alone.

That he wants to be alone with me .

“Kira,” Emin says quickly, swallowing and rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “I thought I’d have more time to make a whole speech about this, but Mom fucked that up, so—”

Dorian makes a noise like get on with it that only his best friend would understand.

“I’m sorry for being such a massive dick when we were teenagers. I think I let Mom and Dad get to me, but I should have had your back. And for that, I’m so fucking sorry. I hope, with time, you can come to forgive me.”

My hand slips out of Dorian’s as I stand, choked to tears, and wrap my arms around my brother. The emotions bubbling inside me are familiar to me, intense and amplified from the heat, but they are mine nonetheless, and I squeeze them all into my brother.

Maybe I should make him work for it. Maybe I should take more time to be angry. But I have to admit that I grieved over him a long time ago, and had lost all hope of getting my brother back. It feels like a miracle.

“Thank you,” I whisper, and he wraps his arms around me, holding me tightly for a moment before letting me go, his eyes flitting from me to Dorian, and back again.

Then Emin grabs my hand, squeezes it, and turns, walking out the door. I follow him, smiling when he waves from his car, gets in, and starts to reverse out of the driveway.

The moment he’s gone, there’s the strangest shift in the air, like something firmly locking into place. I think of Dorian, defending me again and again. Being angry at the people who have hurt me most.

He's not the same man I knew. Somehow, he's grown into someone new, someone kind and even-tempered. A good alpha leader. A good man.

“Kira?”

When I turn around to face him, my back against the front door, he's standing in the hall, the stairs rising up to the top landing behind him. He's staring at me, pupils blown wide, and just the sight of him fills me with hot, desperate wanting.

Warmth pools between my legs, slick. Need pulses low in my belly.

I realize, with a start, that my heat has begun.

“Dor—” I try to say his name, to say anything coherent, but it's difficult through the roar of lust in my body. All I can think about is him, his hands, his arms lifting me, getting him inside me to fulfill this ancient, aching sense of emptiness.

But before I can move toward him, ask him to put me out of this misery, he turns on his heels, takes the stairs two at a time, and closes his bedroom door behind him.

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Somehow, stupidly, I think that touching myself might alleviate this feeling inside me. Hand over my pants, I palm my member, shaking with the urges coursing through me. Maybe I can stay here, locked in my room, and jack off until I die.

My body rages, roars to turn around and go back downstairs where that perfectly gorgeous, perfectly supple, perfectly wet, sweet little omega is waiting for me, her hair mussed, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted.

But I can't.

I could smell the moment her heat began, the rush between her legs, the slick, desperate need of that moment, and I knew that if I didn't act, if I didn't get myself out of there, I would take her.

But she was blocking the front door. And I would have had to go past her to get to the back door past the room with her sewing machine.

So instead, I've barricaded myself in this room, but I'm not sure how long I can last like this, knowing she's down in the living room, probably already touching herself, trying to relieve the pressure like me.

I curse under my breath at the image that evokes and jerk my hand to the side in disgust. My body can't be fooled—it doesn't want my fucking hand, it wants my fucking mate. Her legs opened wide for me, her head thrown back.

What my body wants is to be buried so deep inside her pussy that I wouldn't be able to tell where I stopped and she began.

Turning to the window, I force myself to look at the trees. Reaching down, I yank open the window, even though it's cold outside, and feel the cool breeze as it slams against me. I need the fresh air, I need to focus on the feeling of it.

But it does nothing to alleviate the flames licking inside me, growing and compounding, getting hotter with each passing second. Guess that means a cold shower is also not going to work.

I've been around omegas in heat before. In fact, I was there when Kira had her first heat. At school, sitting in the classroom, I thought that was a hard time, difficult to restrain myself. The other alphas in the class had shifted awkwardly, and I knew it was because they wanted her, were turned on by the smell of her, and I wanted to rip them limb from limb.

But none of them had to leave the classroom, like I did. The others didn't report her to the principal, make a scene of it to the administration, get a teacher to force her to leave because he was worried his control might wane.

That was the moment I truly knew that she was my mate, that it would be dangerous to be around her. That it would be dangerous for anyone to find out what she was to me.

Another wave of pure sexual desire floods through me, like someone has hooked me up to an IV bag of pheromones, and I shake with it, my cock jumping painfully in response.

"Fuck, fuck ," I hiss, knowing this is how shifters go crazy—this is why all the folklore humans know surrounding us is of the guy howling at the fucking moon. Because this shit is going to send me over the edge, all this pent up, nervous energy and nothing to do with it.

Because Kira doesn't want me. There's no way I've earned back her trust. If I ask her, I'm not sure she's going to say yes, accept me as her mate.

And I'm also not sure I can handle what that will do to me.

I wage a battle with myself, stalking back and forth across my room, pacing the same length of floor I did earlier. I feel like an addict, knowing it's not right for me, but wanting it— wanting it —so badly I think I might die if I don't get it.

So I pace. Toward the door, toward the window. My window drops straight down two stories into a set of scrubby, wiry bushes. But that might be a better fate than staying inside here all night, rolling around in my misery.

At least if I get out into the woods, shift, I might be able to run some of this off.

I walk toward the window. A rolling surge of lust so strong it nearly rips a sob from my throat courses through me and I turn around, body pulling me toward the door.

Nothing could be worse than this. I have to find a way to make this better. I have to go to her, to touch her.

I need to get my hands on her hips. My mind races through all the ways I could have her. Pull her to the end of the bed, hold her legs as wide as I can get them, pound into her. Flip her over and grab her hips, a handful of her hair in my hand.

Her on top, her in my lap, her in the shower, her on her stomach—there is not a way that I don't want this woman. The only thing my body wants is to get inside her, and I know that's driven by biology, by the need to reproduce, by the fact that she's my mate and our bodies belong together, but I can't explain it away, can't talk myself out of the fantasies, out of the urge to make them real.

I could get her up on the kitchen counter. Haul her into the shower. Take her out on the back porch, facing the woods, and make her fuck me right there surrounded by nature.

And then, I think about the allure of her pretty pink lips wrapped around my dick, those eyes locked on mine as she kneels in front of me, and my vision goes black, body steering me back toward the door.

Maybe I could get away with a kiss, with a graze—no, that's insane, I know that won't work. The moment I see her, I'm going to lose all control.

My hand lands on the doorknob. This is it—I'll go downstairs and take her if she'll have me. If not, I'll call Emin and tell him to chain me up.

Shaking my head, I pull my hand from the doorknob. I'm not calling anyone. The last thing I want right now is anyone—even her own family—around my mate while she's in heat. It's built into my DNA to protect her, to lay my life on the line for her right now.

I've just yanked my hand from the doorknob when a sound cuts through the static in my head, so gentle and soft I almost think I've imagined it.

But then it comes again.

Knocking. Someone is knocking on my bedroom door.

Delirious, stupid, or willfully ignorant, I reach forward and swing it open, body swaying when I see that it's Kira standing on the other side.

Kira, with her golden-red hair, loose and mussed around her shoulders, curls tumbling down haphazardly. Kira's flashing gilded eyes, her flushed cheeks, that

bottom lip that I want to run the pad of my thumb over.

It's her. My mate.

And the smell of her lust is so heady, so potent, that I can practically feel the way she's squeezing her thighs together, feel how wet she is just from her heat, the need that must be coursing through her body just as it's coursing through mine.

Heat and rut. Omega and alpha.

"Please," she rasps, her hands squeezed to fists at her sides, before one rises to the doorframe, like she needs the extra support just to stay on her feet. "Please, Dorian. I need you."

I reach out, wrap my arm around her, and yank her inside my bedroom, bringing my lips crashing against hers.

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Dorian, Dorian, Dorian.

My head repeats the name like a chant. A prayer. Willing him not to disappear the moment I touch him.

And he doesn't.

The moment we come together again, he lets out a groan that morphs into a growl, lifting me up. Acting on instinct, I wrap my legs around him, and that makes the sound coming from his throat even worse, more guttural and desperate.

He walks me over to his dresser and sets me down on top, leaning in, pressing our chests together so we're flush hip to shoulder. We kiss and kiss, hands frantic, tongues sliding together, the beat of the kiss deep inside me, like a song we're playing together, making it up as we go along.

"Kira," he pants, and when he looks at me, his pupils are blown so big it's almost alarming. His scent swims around me, heady and warm, and I could float on it.

His cock presses deliciously between my legs, and I grind against it, wishing I had any of my skirts or dresses, something that would give him easier access than the jean shorts I have on now. He scrapes his hands roughly over my body, as if checking to make sure I'm real, dragging at the hem of my tank top, tugging on the tips of my hair, letting out a noise when his palms sink into the soft flesh of my inner thighs.

"Fucking hells," he rasps, pulling back like it's the last thing he wants to do, like he's willingly cutting off his oxygen supply. "Kira—"

“Here—” I’m reaching down, starting to unbutton my shorts, to shimmy them off my legs, but his hand darts out and he grabs my wrists, looking absolutely choked.

My gaze flies up to his, heart stopping.

“Kira,” he gasps. “I need—I need to make sure that you want this—that it’s not just the heat— fuck —”

“I want this,” I breathe, shaking and sliding my hands up over his shoulders. “I’ve wanted this for longer than I can remember, Dorian. From the day I knew it was something worth wanting, I’ve wanted you.”

Maybe it’s not coherent, but it makes sense. And he seems to get what I’m saying, because he nods, voice low as he says, “Me too, Kira. In high school, it was the worst.”

“Really?”

That takes the breath out of me—he noticed me? He wanted me? Because every time I saw him, he was leveling insults at me, flicking food from across the cafeteria, crossing to the other side of the hallway, claiming I “stunk.”

“Really,” he growls, and then he’s lifting me, walking me effortlessly to his bed. I cinch my ankles together around his waist, but he has no problem carrying me, holding up my weight.

When my head hits the pillow, his hands are everywhere, tugging the ribbed black tank top up over my head.

“ Fuck ,” he hisses, when the shirt is across the room and my cleavage is bare, bra still on. I flush red, and I know it spreads down over my breasts, splotchy, hot. He

traces a finger over the curve of my breast, follows the line down the band, and finally hooks his fingers into the clasp, undoing it with a single flick of his hand.

I let out an embarrassing sound, and an even more embarrassing one when he lowers his head and covers a nipple with his mouth.

“Oh.” My eyes are locked on the place where his lips are touching my skin—not the first time ever, but the first time in this spot, the first time I’m feeling his total devotion, his hunger, his tongue circling my nipple, then rubbing roughly against it, the pressure enough that my back starts to arch.

I’m so wet it’s embarrassing, the scent of the slick, heady in the room. Other than the scent of him, it’s all I can smell, all I can think about. How needy I am, how much I want him to touch me.

He keeps his mouth on me as he reaches down, deftly unbuttoning the jeans he wouldn’t let me touch just moments ago. My legs jerk open as if controlled by invisible wires, and I arch into the touch, though he’s nowhere near where I want him.

Grinning against my breast, he pulls back slightly, breathing hard. I feel the hot fan of his breath over the sensitive skin there, and it makes me shiver. My entire body feels pulled bare, the nerves right up there on the surface, raw.

Everywhere he touches is like he’s at the core of me. I’m a quivering, whimpering mess, and he hasn’t even slid my panties off.

“Kira?” he asks, and I hear the wince in his voice as he asks, “I hate to ask this, but be honest with me. Have you been with an alpha before?”

At this point, I know I should lie. I know that telling the truth just makes me look

desperate, needy. But I can't find it within me to care.

"No," I gasp, letting my head tip back, my eyes closing as he trails his fingers just under the band of my basic cotton underwear. "Nobody else. Only you. Just now."

"Fuck," he buries his face in my neck for a long moment, body shaking like he's trying to gain control of himself. "Okay—that's— fuck ."

I breathe heavily for a long moment, and when my hands start moving up his sides, he grabs them by the wrists, yanking my hands above my head and holding them there.

"You have to be patient, okay?" he breathes, eyes flicking back and forth between mine. With a choked laugh, he says, "I'm barely holding it together here, and we need to—I need to make sure you know—"

He trails off, his eyes skipping back down to my breasts, and I feel that tremor run through his body again. A physical restraint.

"I'd like to fuck you, Kira," he says, eyes rising to mine. "We on the same page about that?"

"Yes," I'm practically sobbing the word, resisting the urge to writhe under him, to grind my hips into his. Any thing to get more pressure down there. I want to cut to the part where he's inside me, but he's looking at me like this is important, so I do my best to listen.

"Okay," he closes his eyes, says, "have you—I'm going to knot, inside you, and it might be painful, okay? For some omegas it is, for some it's not, but I want you to know before you—"

I could laugh if I wasn't so fucking desperate. Voice rough, I give in and grind my hips against him, watching as he sucks in a sharp breath, his hand releasing my wrists and going to my hip, holding me in place.

"I'm well aware of how it works, Dorian," I say, "and if you spend one more second describing it to me, rather than doing it to me, I'm going to—"

He cuts me off by capturing my mouth with his and sliding my panties completely off at the same time. It takes skill, but I'm finally naked. Continuing to kiss me, Dorian only pulls back to get his shirt off, to yank his pants down and toss them to the black depths of the room, where my clothes exist, too.

Once we're both completely bare, he forces my legs open, growling, grinding the palm of his hand against me, watching as my eyes practically roll back in my head.

"Another time," he says, sounding like there's sand in his throat. "I'm going to take my time with you, Kira. Taste every inch of you. But right now—"

I cut him off, reaching down and wrapping my hand around his cock, guiding it best I can toward my entrance. It's thick, nearly filling my hand, and when I pull, he sways forward, eyes shot. I feel the pulse of need there, in his member, and it makes my entire body flush with heat.

He doesn't say anything else, but just grabs my hips, notches his tip in my entrance, and meets my eyes once more before sliding himself in.

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I've been with other women. Of course I have—I needed anything to take my mind off Kira, to lessen the pain of not being with my mate. It never helped, and in fact, usually just made me feel worse.

But being with other women took time. Effort to work myself up. I needed them in lingerie—always redheads—and almost always had to talk myself into being turned on. If I'm being honest, I ended up imagining the woman I was with had more to her, thicker hips, thighs I could sink my teeth into.

And those women always took time to sink into. I'd have to work them loose first, with my fingers, ease inside.

But Kira? Kira takes me like we were made for each other.

I sink inside her with an ease that makes blood pound in my ears. One second, the tip of my cock is notched in her entrance, and the next, I'm fully seated inside her, the warmth of her surrounding me, her walls fluttering around my cock, squeezing and providing pressure without me moving an inch.

I've said it too much, I know, but, running the risk of sounding like a porn star, I say it again: "Fuck."

It's the only thing that makes sense. The only word that can describe the way it feels to be inside her. A description of what's happening, a curse at the way it feels so devastatingly good, a fucking prayer that it won't stop any time soon.

Kira whimpers and rolls her hips against me, and I realize I've paused, sat like this

for far too long. The roll of her hips sends a wave of lust through me so long that I don't realize what I'm doing, but I have her hips in my hands, and I'm pulling out, slamming into her again.

Her breasts roll with the movement, and the sight of it makes me fucking hungry for them. I meant what I said about taking my time next time—touching every part of her. I want to know every curve, every freckle, where she's ticklish, how to drive her mad.

But right now, my reality is focused on the point of contact between us, and creating friction, pressure, already feeling my cock starting to swell inside her. In the past, with betas and other women, it's been an issue.

Not with Kira. I fit inside her snugly, and when I start to grow, she accommodates me. My knot forms readily, bulging inside her until I couldn't pull out even if I wanted to. I continue to move, body taking over control, and Kira lets out a noise of pleasure, arching her back.

When her walls squeeze against me, I come undone, releasing inside her and gasping at the feeling, so right, to have my mate against me like that. Her body under mine. Together, merged.

The pleasure hits a dizzying height and before I know what I'm doing, I've leaned over, grazed my teeth over her neck, and applied the slightest pressure, the urge to bite her nearly making me faint.

“Do it,” she whines, her fingers grasping at my back, and so I do, sinking my teeth into her neck, groaning at how exquisite it is. She gasps at the pain, but I know it quickly melts into pleasure, our bodies writhing together, straddling the line between suffering and delight.

The moment my teeth leave her skin, I'm pulling back, looking at her face. My knot is still inside her, pressing against her pelvic bone, but I'm finished. She's soft beneath me, still gasping for air.

Wordlessly, I maneuver our bodies. I'm still inside her—my knot won't start to release for a while—so we stay flush as I roll us onto our sides, her leg thrown over my hip.

"Here," I say, knowing how gruff my voice is. Her eyes widen when I stretch out, offering my own neck back to her.

"Dorian," she breathes, eyes flicking up to meet mine. "Are you sure?"

I nod, throat bobbing. In fact, I've never wanted anything more than for Kira to claim me back, to mark me with her teeth, to solidify the mating bond we always knew existed between us.

Slowly, tenderly, as though afraid to hurt me, she opens her mouth. When she swipes her tongue over the sensitive skin there, I jerk, my cock twitching inside her, and she groans at the sensation. I have never been closer to another person than I am now, and the pleasure erupts through my body as she bites down, breaking the skin and releasing a flood of hormones through my body.

If we hadn't just finished, I'd be ready to take her now.

Instead, we lay quietly, still hooked at the hip, our new reality settling in. We're mated, and marked to one another, and nobody knows that information besides the two of us. Soon, I'll announce it to the pack, shout from the rooftops that she belongs to me.

But for now, I'm content to stay here in this bed, the two of us cocooned away from

the world.

I don't realize I'm speaking until Kira shifts, her eyes meeting mine.

"I'm sorry about what happened with your parents." My voice is rough, unfinished, and I try to clear my throat, but I fear I'm only making it worse.

She sighs, looking up at the wall above us, breathing deeply for a moment. It's hard for me to keep my eyes off of her body, to keep myself from trailing my fingers over her bare breasts again.

"It's okay," she finally says. "They've kind of ... always been like that."

"I can banish them from the pack," I say, and I'm only half joking. I would do whatever it took to make Kira happy here.

She laughs. "No—that's okay. I know it's weird, and maybe hard to understand but...it's like, no matter how hard it is with them, I still end up wanting them, you know? Especially my mom. When I was a kid, Dad was working all the time and it was just the two of us at home. I know she wanted a career, to do something more meaningful than just raising me, but it wasn't really like that, back then, for women in the pack. Especially the ones with children."

I nod, remembering what it was like before my grandfather took over, and even for many years after. It took a long time to get people to change their minds here.

"I get it," I say, finally, managing to get something out. We should talk more—about her parents, about this entire situation. About the fact that I'm still tucked neatly into her body, and that we've marked each other, placing our first official claim on this mating bond.

But I'm tired, and content, and when her breathing starts to level out, her body relaxing into sleep, I find it far too easy to let myself drift away, too, my mate wrapped safely in my arms.

As I do, my dreams filtering in and out of my mind, I find one word repeating again and again, like a song, a chant. A prayer.

Mine, mine, mine .

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The first thing I notice the next morning is that I'm in Dorian's bed, alone. His side of the mattress, where his body was last night as he pulled me into him, is cold. Nausea rushes through me and I sit up, head spinning, instantly regretting everything we did last night.

It's still very early, the sun only barely coming in through the windows outside. When I glance to the left, I can see it just starting to peek through the mesas in the distance, washing over the red landscape in a golden ooze.

He didn't even wake me up to say goodbye.

It had seemed so obvious last night that it was what we both wanted—and he said it had nothing to do with the heat, that he wanted me, that he had always wanted me—but couldn't that have just been the circumstances talking?

I sit up in his bed and drop my head into my hands, taking deep, shuddering breaths. The only thing worse than never having Dorian would be to have him and lose him. For him to realize it was a mistake.

Or worse, for him to say that it was only sex for him, and nothing more.

My chest pangs with something like preemptive loneliness and I swallow through it, forcing myself to look up and take in the room.

Everything happened so quickly last night that I didn't have a chance to properly see his room, and I do it now, letting my eyes adjust to the light, drinking everything in so I don't have to deal with the reality that I've just woken up alone.

The bed I'm sitting in is at least a king, if not California king. It's dressed with blankets and a duvet, all deep blue tones and gray tartan. Last night was the best night of sleep I've gotten since being here, which might have something to do with the way I sink right into the mattress, the material so soft and welcoming.

At the end of the bed is a small leather settee, and there are two dark oak tables on either side.

Directly opposite the bed is a large dresser, a painting hanging above it, and I realize with a start that the painting is of this town—the mesas rising up in formation, the rich reds and golden oranges, the way the blue and pink clouds contrast with the landscape.

Breathtaking.

The first time since being home that I've really remembered the beauty of this land.

And yet, even staring at the painting isn't enough to calm the stirring in my chest, the deep sense of uneasiness that's hovering around the edges. I think back to that day I spent talking with Beth, and how she'd talked about the warning signs of when the gift might show up.

Eventually, after enough time, I'll be able to use it at will, search for information. But younger psychics usually just get visions or premonitions when they come to them, a circumstance of random chance that's not usually very helpful.

And I'm noticing some of the warning signs now. A slight blurring of my vision around the edges. The very faint sense that I'm floating above myself. Until Beth put them into words, I had never been able to identify them.

I lie back against the pillows and hold my breath, preparing myself for the onslaught

of a premonition, but then something breaks me out of it, so loud and jarring that I jolt up again, breath caught in my throat, trying to figure out what it is.

Some sort of alarm.

The fire alarm.

I might be feeling sorry for myself, but that doesn't mean I want to burn to death in this house, alone. My survival instincts take over and I leap up, grabbing a random shirt from the floor and pulling it over my head.

When I dart out into the hallway, I can see the black smoke hovering on the landing below the stairs, and a burst of adrenaline rolls through me. I can't believe this is actually happening—Dorian's house is on fire.

I take the steps down as quickly as I can, pulling my shirt up over my nose, but then I hear something strange and look to my left, into the kitchen.

And there's Dorian, with the screen door open, coughing and plugging in a fan to blow the smoke out. There he is, looking up at me, his eyes brightening as he does.

He glances quickly to the pan on the stove.

"Sorry," he says, wincing charmingly. "Thought I could make you breakfast. Maybe I should leave the cooking to you, huh?"

And all at once, I feel like a complete idiot. Why, when I first realized he wasn't in the bed with me, did I assume that meant he wanted nothing to do with me? I could have gotten out of bed and come down here, realized he was still here.

Trying to make me breakfast.

“What did you do ?” I laugh, stepping into the kitchen, the tile cool beneath my bare feet. In the pan on the stovetop is something charred and unrecognizable.

“I followed the recipe,” he says, gesturing to his phone on the counter. “But I must have had the heat up too high.”

I laugh and pick the offender up out of the pan with the spatula, listening to the dull clunk as it drops down into the metal again. When I glance to the side, I see the recipe he has pulled up is for French toast.

“Oh my ,” I laugh again, but when I turn around to make a joke about it, his eyes are on me intensely, and his pupils have gone big again. Swallowing, I take a step back, looking him up and down. “What?”

“You’re wearing my shirt,” he says, voice low. Then, a grin spreading over his face, he cocks his head at me. “Are you trying to tell me something, Kira?”

My stomach does a full somersault.

What could I be telling him by wearing his shirt—that I’m his, and his only? That’s always been true, and he should know that. From the moment I was born, I belonged to him. He’s mine, too—even if he didn’t want to admit it.

I know how the bond works. I know that all other women have been ruined for him. Even if he rejects me, that biological attraction won’t end.

His eyes darken, and he moves toward me, stopping when our clothes brush, when his breath fans out over my cheek. The scent of him is all around me, pooling in this room, flooding out from every one of his pores.

And it just makes one thing repeat, over and over in my mind.

Mine, mine, mine.

I'm not sure who moves first. All I know is that one second, I'm standing on my feet, and in the next, I'm off the floor and moving toward the kitchen island. Dorian sets me atop it and for a fraction of a moment, I'm thinking about how unsanitary it is—my bare ass on the granite—but that fizzles out quickly when his knuckle brushes against me, cool and bold.

“Oh,” the word slips out of me, and seems to spur him on, so he runs his fingers up and down my folds, his forehead falling against my shoulder, a muffled groan into my shirt at the feeling of it.

I'm already wet for him—of course I am. My heat makes me perpetually wet, and perpetually horny, but this is the worst it's ever been. Having my mate close makes my body feel electric, alive.

My palms land behind me on the counter as he slides his other hand up my shirt, the heat and pressure of him almost already too much, my orgasm hovering just near the edges, bringing the room apart, the very fabric of this reality—

“Stop,” I gasp the word, realizing what's about to happen, and Dorian stops, though the pained look on his face makes it clear that it's the last thing on this planet that he wants to do.

“What?” he asks, breathless, and when I glance down through the sudden pounding in my head, I can see that he's hard, the size of it pushing out against the material of his pants. “Are you okay? What's wrong?”

“I—” I squeeze my eyes shut, letting my face drop into my hands, the sudden pain of it red-hot and blinding. “It's—it's happening. A premonition.”

“What do you need?” his voice is edging away from pained, but I can still feel the lust there, under the surface. It can not be easy for him to respond to this while I’m in heat, my scent probably making his cock throb.

“Ice pack,” I manage, and the compounding pain in my head coupled with the aching need between my legs is so bittersweet that tears start to run down my cheeks. Dorian disappears for a moment, then returns with the ice pack.

He runs a thumb over my cheek, wiping away the tear, placing the cool compress on my forehead just as everything goes black.

The last thing I hear is his voice, right next to my ear, whispering, “Everything’s going to be okay, Kira. I’m right here.”

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When Kira goes limp in my arms, I carefully adjust her, laying her out on the counter. With shaking hands, I grab the hem of the shirt, pulling it down around her thighs—but it does nothing to curb the desperate, aching animal inside me, whining and howling for her touch.

There are two sides to me right now—the wolf that doesn't understand what's happening, doesn't get why I can't have her in my lap right now— and the logical, alpha leader of the pack, who spoke with Beth the day before about what her premonitions would mean.

“It's just too bad that we caught her so late,” Beth said, before Kira came downstairs. She was shaking her head, eyes cast toward the table. “Usually, psychics can train from a young age, learn to control their gifts better. Without that training, they can be especially painful, and even debilitating.”

Gently, I reposition the ice pack so it's over Kira's forehead and dig into my pocket with my other hand, finding the contact and dialing it.

“Come right away,” I say, en lieu of a greeting. “She's having a premonition.”

“I'll be there in five,” Beth's voice is matter-of-fact.

Any shifter in this pack would respond to me in the same way—if I call, they'll come, no matter the time of day—but Beth is invested in this as much as I am. It's her chance to train another psychic in this pack. Her chance to pass down everything she knows.

Deep down, I know it's slightly my fault that Kira hasn't had the chance to train her gift. I did my fair share of making sure nobody believed her when she said it was happening, and after what happened the night my grandfather died, there wasn't a soul in this pack that would believe a word out of her mouth.

I lean over her, whispering encouraging words into her ear, running my hand down her arm, until there's a gentle knock at the front door.

"Come in!"

A moment later, Beth is there, and the moment her hand touches Kira's forehead, Kira's eyelids flutter open, locking onto the older woman's gaze. My instincts tell me not to leave my mate alone with anyone, but I have to trust Beth for a moment, so I do, darting up the stairs and returning with a pair of Ash's sweatpants a moment later.

"Beth," Kira manages, her eyes locked on the older woman as I pull the pants over her legs, covering her better. Maybe the old woman doesn't care, but the protective mate inside me doesn't want anyone—even an old woman—seeing my mate like this.

"Take a deep breath," Beth says, helping Kira to a sitting position. "Remember the things we talked about."

"Okay."

Hearing the rasp in Kira's voice, I turn to the cabinet, take out a glass, and fill it with water before holding it out to her. She tries to take it, but her hand is shaking too much, so I hold it up to her lips, something warming inside me as I watch her drink greedily.

For the next half an hour, Beth stands in front of Kira, coaching her through the process, murmuring encouragement, and instructing her to stay conscious, hold on to

the words.

I watch in amazement.

Maybe the reason Kira's premonitions were always fragmented, in pieces and without context, is because she never learned to receive them this way. Whole.

Finally, still with her eyes closed, she says, "There's a little boy. And water—I can hear it. The sound of him laughing, playing, maybe scooping up dirt? Then his little feet on the ground, walking, and getting faster. Running."

"Good," Beth says, voice low, "follow it through. Keep listening."

"Splashing," Kira reaches out, her hand tightening on my arm, her nails digging in as her face twists up in pain. "He's crying for help, but I can't hear anyone else. Oh, Gods, I think he's all alone—I think he's going to drown—"

"Now, focus, Kira," Beth says, "feel the sounds. Tell me, are these sounds from spirits?"

Kira pauses, then shakes her head. "No. This is hazy, unclear. Like a future yet to happen, I think."

"Sir," Beth says, her eyes meeting mine in a panic. "If you know of any families living here, near the lake, with a young boy—"

Of course I do. I know every family in this pack, and I can instantly imagine the Tinnings, in their little cabin by the lake. And the mom—what was her name?—I'm pretty sure she had twins about a year ago. Twins that would, just now, be old enough to walk, get away from the cabin, and toward the water.

“Can you hear anything else?” Beth asks, turning back to Kira as I reach for my phone, pulling it from my pocket, dialing Emin.

“No,” Kira chokes, tears running down her face as she shakes her head. “It’s quiet now—just the sound of the water, lapping gently.”

“Really feel the bounds of the premonition, darling,” Beth says, taking both of Kira’s hands in hers. “Can you tell me when—in seconds, minutes, hours—”

“No,” Kira sounds really distressed now, and something inside me wants to snap at Beth to get away from her, even though I know she’s only helping, teaching her to get through this process. “No, I’m sorry—I can’t—”

“Emin?”

As much as I don’t want to, I step away from Kira as she starts to cry so I can hear Emin on the other end of the line.

“Is that Kira?” he asks, alert and on edge. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I need you to go out to the Tinnings. Check on their little boy—go straight to the lake. Call me when you get there and have sights on the kid.”

“Dorian, is Kira crying—?”

“She’s having a premonition. Beth is here to talk her through it. Emin, I need you to focus your ass and get over there, now.”

“Got it.”

The line goes dead, and I can tell he’s hungry for more information about Kira, but

he's just going to have to wait to get it. When I walk back into the kitchen, Kira is slumped into Beth, crying.

"We need to calm her down," Beth says, turning to me. "Her nervous system is overloaded with the experience. Do you have a bath?"

"Upstairs."

"Get her into it, keep the cool compress on her head, her neck. Just keep with her until she calms down."

Beth moves to the side as I scoop Kira into my arms, holding her to my chest.

"Thank you," I say, pausing. "I'll call you if we need anything else."

"Happy to help," Beth says, grabbing her jacket from the back of the door. Kira has her face buried in my chest, but Beth leans over anyway, speaking to her softly. "You did a wonderful job, Kira. You're a very fast learner."

The door shuts behind Beth just as I'm climbing the stairs with Kira in my arms. I step into the main bathroom, and when she can't stay on her feet, I hold her in one arm as I undress her. It's not easy, but she's clinging to me, and I don't have the heart to put her down.

Finally, after her bath is run, she stands on shaking feet and I help her step into the tub. It's plain, hot water, and I make a note to ask Ash about what kind of shit girls like in their baths—I know Ash has a line of vials, soaps, oils, and salts she puts in to scent her water and "relax."

The steam rises up from the water and I wet a washcloth, soaping it and running it over Kira's body. She hums slightly, under her breath, a tune I can't make out, her

head lolling slightly.

I should have asked Beth for more instructions—will Kira need to eat? Should I watch for anything? A year ago Emin got a concussion, and it was imperative that I not let him go to sleep until they were able to scan and make sure there was no additional brain bleeding.

As I look at her, lift her arms and wash beneath them, I wonder about the toll these premonitions might take on her body, how they'll affect her in the long-term.

After the bath, I drain the water, lift her out, and dry her off. She falls asleep on her feet several times, but I have my hand on her, steadying her.

Fifteen minutes later, I have her in my arms, in my bed, when I get the call from Emin, whose voice is serious and impressed.

“Got there right as the kid hit the water,” Emin says, breathless and shocked. “I can’t believe ... does this mean...?”

“Yeah,” I glance down at the top of Kira’s head, where she’s nuzzled against my chest, breathing steadily. “It does. Maybe I didn’t make it clear during the last meeting, but make sure everyone in this pack knows that nobody is to question her abilities from here on out, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Emin says, a rare show of formal language from him. He still sounds shocked. After all this time, he still believed Kira was lying about her abilities, and here she is, having saved that little boy’s life.

When I get off the phone with him, I ignore the aching in my gut and slide down into the bed, pulling her body firmly against mine.

I'm thrumming with need, but I'll wait until she wakes up, let her sleep this off. The way she moans lightly in her sleep, nuzzling into me again, tells me she's already thinking about it, too.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

“Well, something smells good.”

I turn, grinning, to find Beth standing in the front door. For the first time since moving in with Dorian, I truly feel like myself, wearing a dress I put together from one of my favorite patterns. It’s bright and yellow, matching the way I’ve felt this past week.

My mind flashes with images of Dorian, the hunger in his eyes, the tenderness and roughness with which he handled me all at once. His hand over my mouth, his gaze digging into mine, the constant check-ins, “this okay?” and “you like that?”

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I wave Beth inside, showing her the banana bread on the counter.

“It’s cooled,” I move to the cabinet, pulling out a small plate. “Want a piece?”

“More than anything.”

I slice the bread, pop it onto a plate, and microwave it for just three seconds to warm it. Then I slather a pad of homemade butter on it and push the plate over to her.

“I can see why Dorian has been in such a good mood lately,” Beth says, after the first bite. “This is fantastic.”

My cheeks flush—the food has been good, but that’s not the only reason he’s been in a good mood. I have a feeling it has a lot to do with me waking up in his bed, my hips tucked against his, the soft growl he lets out into my ear each morning as he tugs me

against him, already hard and ready.

“Speaking of fantastic,” Beth goes on, her gaze wondering over me, as though looking for signs of damage. “Last week, when you saved that boy—”

I suck in a breath. It’s still weird to hear the praise, the thanks. Dorian told me the family asked me over for dinner, then they sent a bouquet of flowers here, the little white card folded over and addressed to me.

With my heat, I haven’t wanted to leave or see anyone, but the messages came through Dorian. I’d woken up in his arms, in his bed, and every moment after that was a haze of our bodies together, breaks for water and food.

He hadn’t even really wanted me to cook, insisting he could order us something in, but making him wait felt good. Sitting across the table from one another, and watching him finish his meal, bite by bite, only made me want him more.

After Beth finishes her slice of banana bread, we get to work, with her running me through exercises, showing me how to clear my mind. For nearly an hour, we work on reaching for the energy, summoning a premonition.

“It can work with an object, or information,” Beth explains, sliding the plate she was eating from to the center of the table. “Let’s say, for example, that this was your best friend’s favorite plate. It might be imbued with her energy, should she love it enough, hold it long enough. You might be able to use this, or thoughts of her, if you’re close, to summon a premonition about her.”

“How do I ensure it’s from the future?” I run the tips of my fingers over the lip of the plate, thinking about the massive mistake I made in the past. The one that led to the death of Dorian’s grandfather. “And not from the past?”

“It’s a little more tricky,” Beth admits, “but it’s a certain type of energy. We’ll focus on identifying it from when you have the premonitions naturally.”

Another hour goes by, and when Beth is ready to leave, I wrap an extra loaf of banana bread for her, thanking her for her time. Dorian is gone—at a meeting—so I pass the time cleaning the kitchen and checking on my roast in the oven.

It looks delicious—tied up in the pan with onions and carrots beneath to act as a natural lift. I brush some butter over the top and close it, trying not to feel idle.

When I was working for Jarred, I always had something to do, but now there’s so much more time on my hands.

As I turn to the sink, washing out the pan from the banana bread, my mind wanders back to thoughts of Dorian, as it usually does.

The sex has been amazing—the result of a lifetime of wanting—but we haven’t talked in any concrete terms about what it meant for us, or what our plans might be going forward. He apologized for the things he said, but I always got the sense that it was more about the way he said them, rather than him rescinding the sentiment.

I get the feeling that he wants me here, would have me stay forever if he could.

But would I want to stay if he doesn’t accept me as his mate? If he doesn’t make it clear that we’ll be together, officially, letting everyone in the pack know about it?

No.

The realization is almost painful, but it’s true. As much as it would pain me to leave, that’s what I’ll do if Dorian doesn’t accept me as his mate. I’ve been hiding away in this house since I got here. At first because I knew nobody in the pack would accept

me, and I would only feel worse being around them, and then for the week of my heat.

But I don't want to hide. I want the pack to accept me. And that will only happen if Dorian walks back his rejection.

Makes me the luna.

It sends a shiver up my spine—to be the luna of a pack. Such a far cry of from where I started. And I can't deny I might like the expression on my parents' faces, to realize that I rose up much higher than any of them ever could.

When the door opens and I hear Dorian come in, I can't stop myself—I move to the front hallway and throw my arms around his shoulders, drawing him in close.

The cool night air clings to his jacket, and when he wraps his arms around me, it makes a shiver run up my back.

“Kira,” he whispers, and I resist the urge to climb onto him. When he raises his head, and I see his cheeks are flushed, his hair mussed, I want to reach up and smooth it down. “What is that smell? I'm so hungry.”

We sit together, eating the roast, while Dorian makes little comments about how good it is, how much he loves my cooking. The whole thing feels so domestic, like he and I have been cohabitating for years, rather than weeks. I feel natural sitting across from him, like he's been my best friend my entire life.

That's what the mating bond can do. It can wash over years of history, flood your system with dopamine and serotonin. Dorian is a natural stress reliever the moment I see him.

When I stand up to clean the kitchen after dinner, Dorian follows me and wraps his arms around my waist, kissing the side of my neck and breathing deeply, like he wants to inhale my scent into his blood stream.

“I don’t think so, Kira,” he murmurs, turning me in his arms. I giggle against him, leaning back when he starts to kiss at my exposed cleavage. “You cooked this dinner. Now, you’re going to go upstairs and get in the bath while I clean this up. Understood?”

“You think just because you’re the alpha leader you get to tell me what to do?” I ask, tilting my head.

“Last I recall,” he murmurs, his voice nearly dropping into a growl as his eyes darken. “You liked it when I told you what to do.”

A blush rises, spreading over my neck, and I whip him with the towel before turning, climbing the stairs, and following his instructions.

Last week, after my premonition, a package came to the doorstep from the little soap makery in town. Oils, salts, and bath bombs in every scent you might want—lavender, rose, chamomile.

Now, I drop some of them into the water and sink inside, letting my body relax against the tub. I can hear Dorian downstairs, even feel the slight vibration of his throat as he hums, washing up the dishes.

I like that he cleans. I like the way he holds me. I like that one of the first things he did was apologize to me for the way he treated me when we were kids.

This house calls to me, and I love being here. I love the kitchen, love of the view of the canyon you can see just from the back of the house. I love how natural and easy

things feel with him.

But he still hasn't made it clear what's going on here. If he's just having fun with me, or if he wants to make a life together.

I stand from the bath and wrap myself in one of the fluffy towels, then rub a cream from the same soapery into my skin, breathing in the calming citrus scent.

"You smell good," Dorian says, appearing in the doorway to the bathroom. He's clearly done his own round of grooming, his hair combed back his breath minty when I step into him, running my palms over his chest.

"Thank you," I say, reaching back and tugging on the towel, letting it fall to the ground. His eyes roam my body, and he growls, reaching down and lifting me with ease.

Later, when he's sated and fast asleep, I stare out the window. Ten years ago, I would have cowered, been too afraid to say anything. I would have stayed in this place of not knowing forever, until Dorian did something to clear things up.

But not now.

Tomorrow, while we're eating breakfast, I'm going to ask him.

I'm going ask him if this is what he wants, and tell him exactly what I need from him to make it work for me.

A public acknowledgment of our relationship—if not a formal marriage. Everyone in the pack to know that I am their luna. For Dorian to stand in front of everyone—like he did so many years ago—and tell them that rejecting me was a mistake.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I always know when I'm dreaming.

In my dreams, Gramps is still alive, and right now, he's sitting across from me at the table, his head tilted, his eyes serious and fixed. This dream comes to me a lot, a memory that plays out in picture-perfect detail.

"What do you mean ... right?" he asks.

Up to this point, Gramps has received every question of mine with grace and understanding. His philosophy has been that there are no stupid questions, and if he's going to train me to be the best alpha leader I can be for this pack, I'll need to feel comfortable asking him even the most delicate questions.

I feel my teen self clear his throat, hands gripping the edge of the table, thinking about Kira Argent. Who came into the classroom reeking of her own scent.

The only reason I'd been able to control myself was because of the meditation I'd done with Gramps. Discipline was my middle name. But I'd still done what I could to get her sent home from school—my mind swam with her.

"It was more ... than the heat," I remember saying, eyes on the table. "Something else. Like—I don't know how to explain it. She felt ... right to me."

Gramps is quiet for a long time, and I remember this moment, the discomfort, the slow realization that I should have kept this information to myself.

"No," the dream version of him says, and I snap my head up to look at him, wide-

eyed. “No,” he says again. “That girl is not a good fit for you. Doesn’t exactly look the part of luna, does she? Your mate will be someone capable. The luna of the pack nurtures, Dorian. I’m certain it won’t be an Argent.”

“So what is this feeling?” my dream self asks. I already know the answer.

Gramps shrugged, “We’ll work on your intuition, son. That feeling might not be anything more than good, old-fashioned lust.”

The dream fizzles out, something interrupting it, but I know what happened after that.

I’d laughed and gagged, telling him not to say stuff like that, and he’d chuckled. Said it was time to get to my training, that the next time I thought I’d found my mate, to give him some warning first.

He played it off, made it seem like I’d have any control over who it ended up being. But even back then, even trusting him as much as I did, I knew that he was wrong.

That feeling deep in my gut meant that Kira was my mate, no matter what Gramps said, or how I denied it to myself. And it would only get worse, so I’d only get more vicious with her, hating that my body wanted her the way it did.

With the dream gone, I roll over, wrap my arm around Kira, and pull her into me, sucking in a deep breath of her scent, trying to get myself to fall asleep again, forget the weird memory-dream.

At first, I assume the vibration is coming from somewhere deep inside of me, a sort of universal understanding of my new life, and how everything is falling into place exactly the way I want.

Kira is here with me, and she hasn’t left my bed since that first night she showed up

at my door. This is what I want—this life with her—and I know I need to tell her that officially. But I was so sucked into her heat, unable to think about anything but getting her body against mine.

It's finally ebbed, her scent cooling, now not filling the house and pooling in the corners, but hovering around her like an aura, the way it's usually meant to.

I can tell from the frenetic energy about her that now that her heat is done, she's looking for something to do. She's been baking so much lately that I've started taking it with me, setting it out for others to take at the pack center.

It's time Kira was re-introduced into the pack. Accepted as the luna. But I'm still trying to figure out the best way to do that, to announce to everyone that I'm claiming her. To give her the formal responsibilities of the luna—caring for the people in this pack.

As a natural cook and nurturer, it's obvious she's perfect for the job.

Another round of incessant vibrating pulls me from my half-hazy, half-asleep thoughts, and I realize it's not coming from me.

The sound, the vibrations, are coming from the bedside table, where my phone is lit up. I blink a few times, raise my head from the pillow, and feel Kira adjust around me, her arms snaking in around my waist.

Soft and supple. Kira. My mate.

Anger rises in my throat at whoever thought it was a good idea to call this early—to risk waking her up—and I almost laugh when I see the caller ID.

Kellen Argent.

Of course. He's the only person who would think to call me at such an ungodly hour—I glance at the clock to confirm it's before four in the morning.

For some reason, the first thought that comes to mind is that, in a traditional sequence of events, I would need to ask Kellen for his permission to claim his daughter as my own. But I won't be doing that—for one, she already bears my mark. And Kellen gave up his right to her when he let her leave all those years ago.

“What?” I snap, the moment I'm out of bed and in the hallway, having left Kira curled up in bed so she could get her rest, even if members of my idiotic council think it's a good idea to call before the sun comes up.

“Sir?” the moment he speaks, I can hear it in his voice. There's something very, very wrong. Kellen speaks with a beat of nervousness and excitement, urgency that I haven't dealt with in a long time.

“What is it?” I ask again, this time softening my tone. I turn, slip back into the bedroom, grab a pair of black jeans and a black top, pull them on silently as Kellen talks in my ear. With every word he says, my concern grows, heart beating faster, the wolf inside me demanding immediate action.

My body is pleasantly worn from all the time I've spent with her this week. I haven't been entirely celibate since she left, but it's hard to find another woman halfway interesting when there's only one thing your body wants.

And since puberty, my body has only wanted one body. One set of curves, one head of red-golden hair. Her skin under my hands.

So to go from nearly nothing to having her under me three times a day, for an entire week—it means I've been eating like an animal, and that my muscles are sore, stretching and worked more than they have been for the last five years.

Even now that her heat is finished, I feel my eyes wandering over to her, my eyes lingering on the spot I've left on her neck, healing now; the spot on her body that smells more like me.

Gently, I touch my hand to my own matching spot, just above my shoulder.

Soon, our scents will start to morph, leaning in and taking from one another, creating a new scent that our children will carry before developing scents of their own.

"Sir?" Kellen asks, his voice sharp and quick over the phone. I realize I haven't answered him, that I've just been standing, staring at Kira as she sleeps, suddenly overcome with the idea of what our children might look like.

I want a thousand little heads, all with her hair. All with her bright smile. Children I can raise to be much better than I ever was. Maybe I'll prepare one of them to take over for me in the future, the way my grandfather did. Or maybe I'll find a new way to do things, to keep the peace in this pack.

But now, there's something bigger, and much more important to focus on. A threat to all of us that I won't ignore. Shaking my head, I clear my thoughts of Kira—I'll have to focus on her when I get home.

If I think about her now, I won't be able to perform my duties as alpha leader, keep the needs of the pack at the front of my mind.

Stepping out into the hallway, I hold the phone tightly to my mouth and say, "I'm on my way. Don't do anything until I arrive."

"Yes, sir."

I get to the door, but before I slip out, braving the cool morning and driving to the

pack hall to deal with this mess, I turn around, walk over to Kira, push her hair away from her face, and lean down, running my lips over her forehead.

“I’ll be back,” I mouth more than whisper, not wanting to wake her up. “And I love you, Kira.”

With a final, resolute kiss to her temple, I stand and force myself to leave the room, already looking forward to the second I walk back through the door.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

This time, when I wake up alone in bed, I temper my emotions, tell myself not to react to it. Dorian is probably just downstairs, or in the garage, or making me breakfast, like last time.

I sit up slowly, stretch, go to the bathroom and take a long shower. The shower in his bathroom is heavenly, with a wide square head that rains the water down over you evenly. I stand under it for a long time, running through how the conversation would go with him today.

How should I address it? Open the dialogue?

Thinking about it makes my heart skip along, nervous. I try to tell myself not to be nervous—of course, Dorian wants this, too. Even if he hasn't said anything. Why bring me here, why keep me here?

As I dress, pulling on a new sage green romper I've just finished, I list out the evidence in my head: the apology, the way he held me, bringing my sewing machine despite the danger, defending me to my family not once, but twice.

There are so many more.

But when I descend the steps and walk into the kitchen, Dorian isn't there. I walk to the front door, pull aside the little curtain on the half-moon window, and realize his car is gone.

What time did he leave this morning? And he didn't even say goodbye?

I stop, take a deep breath. Dorian is the Alpha leader of the pack—he might have to leave sometimes.

But he could have at least said goodbye. I check my new smartphone—only recently taken out of the package and set up, the screen still shiny—but there are no texts from him.

For the next hour, I wander around the house, trying to figure out what to do with myself. I've been wanting to make a pull-apart garlic bread, but when I stare at the ingredients, I just can't get myself to do it.

I sit in front of my sewing machine, staring at the pattern I got out yesterday, but I don't even turn the machine on.

I'm saved an hour later when there's a knock at the front door.

Of course, I know it's not Dorian—he wouldn't knock, he would just come right in. At first, I think it might be Beth, back sooner than she said to go through more premonition training with me, but when I open the door, it's neither of them.

“Hey, stranger,” Ash says, voice monotone as she grins at me. “Figured I'd stop by and see how you're doing.”

Without meaning to, or thinking enough to stop myself, I lunge forward, wrapping my arms around her. She lets out a surprised breath, and I realize she is the first person I've touched other than Dorian in a long, long time.

“Whoa,” she says, pulling back and looking me in the face, scanning me the way her brother does, as though looking for injury. I wonder if it's something they got from being raised by their grandfather. “Everything okay?”

I swallow and glance inside, toward the empty house. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just lonely. Dorian left this morning without saying goodbye.”

Ash raises an eyebrow. “Can I come in?”

“Oh,” I back away from the door. “Of course you can.”

Five minutes later, we each have a glass of lemonade, and we’re sitting on the deck, staring out at the landscape. In the distance, shadows blanket the red dirt, spotting over the stretch of land and moving slowly, like whales in the sea.

“I hate to say it,” Ash says, glancing over at me. “But you’re probably going to have to train him.”

“Train him?”

She shrugs. “You want him to say goodbye to you? You’re probably going to have to tell him that. Our Gramps was ... very direct. Taught us a certain way of doing things. Dorian does something that makes you unhappy? Just tell him not to do it again. Explain how it affects you, and he’ll fix it.”

“Now that you’re saying it out loud,” I say, voice quiet as I stare at the ice bobbing in my glass, “it seems pretty obvious.”

“Your relationship is tricky, though, right?” Ash is leaning back in the chair, looking like she doesn’t have a care in the world. “Sometimes you need someone with an outside perspective. Dorian has his moods, and he might get really in his head about being the alpha leader. The moment I realized he’d brought you here, I knew this was going to happen.”

“What do you mean?” I lean forward, set my lemonade down, turn to look at her.

“Gramps didn’t want there to be any more fighting about the alpha leader,” Ash says, fixing her bright blue eyes on me. “So he decided to train Dorian for it. Never been done like that before, right? We’d always just waited for the old alpha leader to get old, then guys would fight for it. Or someone would claim it, and the old alpha would step down. But Gramps thought it would be better if someone prepared for the role, you know?”

“I remember,” I say, because I do—Dorian training every day after school. Studying outside of our normal classes. He was busy bullying me, but I noticed every single thing about him.

“Well, I think all that pressure Gramps put on him was good and bad. Good because, obviously, it made Dorian into a good leader. His head is with the pack. But it’s bad because in the end, it was still pressure . And that responsibility to the pack makes him get tunnel vision sometimes. So he might do things like taking off early in the morning without saying goodbye.”

“Do you know why?” I ask, and when she looks at me, I realize I haven’t been clear. “Why did he leave today, or what’s going on?”

“No,” she says, laughing. “Dorian does not keep me updated on that stuff—I’m not on the council, and I don’t want to be. I did see a bunch of vehicles up at the pack hall, though.”

My heart starts to beat a little faster at the thought of him there, dealing with whatever issue got him out of bed early this morning. I’ve been here by myself for a lot of the time, but this is the first time I’ve started to feel left out.

I know the luna of a pack usually focuses on helping out with the kids and running programs, but I have the strangest urge to talk to Dorian about being on the council too, so I can take part in the decision-making process.

“Just talk to him when he gets back,” Ash says, clapping a hand down on my shoulder and standing, a groan rolling through her body when she does. “I have to get home—I’m tired from fishing this morning. But ... Kira?”

“Yeah?”

“Give him a shot, okay?” Ash’s eyes are kind, softened, something I haven’t seen from her yet. I nod, and she shows herself off the deck, back through the hallway. I hear her walking down the stairs, then catch the eventual closing of the front door.

I’m just about to stand, to force myself back into the sewing room or to focus on cooking, when I get the strangest feeling at the edges of my vision. When I try to look out at the landscape, it’s blurry, just a haze of red that doesn’t quite form the same shapes as it did before.

A premonition.

Sitting back in my chair, I suck in a deep breath, close my eyes. Pinpoint the energy, feel the shape of it—it’s crisp, new, yet uncertain. From the future, then.

I sink inside my body, wait for it to come to me, being patient like Beth said. It could be hours or minutes that go by, but I stay still, and eventually, I hear it.

Wailing.

A sort of breathy, sucking cry. It only takes me two seconds to realize it’s a baby crying, and my chest squeezes at the sound of it, desperate and alone, sad. I bite my tongue, try to stay focused, and relax so the premonition doesn’t fizzle away.

And then, for the first time in my life, I hear my own voice in my head. My voice from the future, shushing the baby, whispering softly to it.

“Shh, love, everything is going to be okay,” I hear myself say, voice ragged and tired.

Then, a feminine voice, maybe Ash, “She’s beautiful. You did such a good job, Kira.”

Shock rolls through me, and I accidentally cut off the premonition. It fizzles out, replaced with a thudding, sudden headache.

I don’t have to examine what it means. It’s the future, and I’m pregnant. Ash is there. I glance down at my belly, head spinning at the thought.

It’s the future, but I don’t know how far ahead it is—it could be years, for all I know. But something inside of me, maybe intuition, or maybe a sense from the spirits around me, tells me that this premonition is coming to me from nine months in the future.

Which means I realize, while sitting alone in his house, that I’m pregnant with Dorian’s baby.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

It's still dark outside when I arrive at the northern border, breathless and with the headlights off. I know these roads like the back of my hand, and in case there's anyone else out here, we don't need them seeing the lights and gathering more information on us.

Emin, Kellen, and two of the patrol guys are in a little bunker when I walk up. I remember these from when I used to join patrols as a teenager—they're small mounds that you hardly notice until you get close to them. Nearly impossible to see, but a place for shifters to hide out and keep an eye on things. Some shifters stay in these, others actually walk just inside the territory lines, shifted and keeping a nose up for enemy scents.

When I stop just outside the mound and wait, a small section of it shifts to the side, and Emin pokes his head out, looking up at me with bright, excited eyes.

"Dorian," he says, and for a second it's almost like we're kids again, and he's discovered a cool path through the woods we can take next time we hunt. Instead, he shifts to the side, allowing me to shimmy my body into the space, and I realize this is nothing like when we were kids.

Against the back wall of the small bunker is a cheap fold-up lawn chair, and sitting in it is a man I've never seen before, his wrists tied together behind his back, his ankles looped carefully to the legs of the chair.

A shifter from our pack sits on either side of the chair, still in their wolf forms, dripping saliva from their mouths, their sharp eyes darting, growls low in their throats.

“Caught him this morning,” Emin says, breathless, raking a hand through his hair, and I recognize the scent of this stranger, even though I’ve never seen him before.

A Grayhide.

On the phone, Kellen said they’d captured someone trying to make it over our territory lines, but he didn’t specify exactly which pack it was. Now, a low growl forms in my throat, too, but I push it down, trying to focus on the moment, on this man, shifter, in front of me.

He’s gagged, and he doesn’t look afraid. If anything, he looks exhausted. Resigned to his fate. His hair is short, looking like it’s been recently buzzed. His eyes are gray and flat, a scar stretching over his left cheek faint, but still shining a silvery line in the low light of the bunker.

Well-defined and sharp-eyed. Likely some sort of reconnaissance for the Grayhides.

And surely just barely over eighteen years old.

But why? Why send someone over here to get information from our pack when Jarred likely already has several plants in here already? Trying to get a wolf over enemy lines is practically a death wish, and he had to have known that when sending this shifter in our direction.

Unless our defenses were completely down, we never would have let something like this slip through. No matter how stealthy, how well-trained, he never would have made it through our lines.

I stand still in front of the man, watching as he raises his gaze to mine. His jaw is strong, his stare somehow unwavering, even in his position. Even bound and gagged, he gives off the air of someone who wouldn’t back down to anyone.

“Alright,” I sigh, grabbing my own chair, spinning it around, and dropping into a seated position in front of the guy. I look him up and down once more, still trying to get a read on the situation, and jerk my head at Emin.

He gets the order, steps forward, and removes the Grayhide’s gag. To my surprise, the man doesn’t launch an attack, doesn’t try to bite him—nothing.

“Well,” I say, hating how my curiosity continues to rise. “This is fascinating.”

The man just stares back at me. I cross my arms and lean forward on the back of the chair.

“A Grayhide trying to cross over the border,” I speak slowly, watching him carefully, getting the feeling that he’ll reveal nothing willingly. He tilts his head as I continue, “That doesn’t make any sense. You knew you weren’t going to get through, so your goal was to get caught. But what good does that do you?”

He surprises me by speaking, his voice clear when he says, “Are you the alpha leader of this pack?”

No point in lying. He likely already knows the truth if he can smell my scent.

“I am.”

He looks to the left and right, eyes never going to the other shifters, but just taking in the area. Finally, when he meets my eyes again, he says, “Thought you would have something ... bigger.”

I laugh, “Is that it? Some sort of tracker on you, thought we’d take you right into the middle of town? You don’t think we’re that stupid, do you?”

“I don’t,” he says, slight emphasis on the “I.”

A moment passes, quiet stretching out, and I can’t shake the growing sense that if this man weren’t from a rival pack, I might like him. Communicating a lot while saying little.

“What’s your name?” I ask, and to my surprise, he answers straight away.

“Aidan Grayhide,” he says, and the way his voice inflects tells me that this matters. Of course it matters—the current alpha leader of that pack is not a Grayhide. In fact, the last I knew, the Grayhide line was killed off decades ago.

“Is that so?”

“Let’s cut the crap. Does that sound good?”

My guys growl, each swiveling their snouts toward Aidan, but I hold up a hand, and they stop, slowly turning to face forward again, though I can tell that, with their pent-up energy, they are more than ready to tear him limb from limb right now.

“Sounds perfect. What the fuck are you doing in my territory, Aidan Grayhide?”

He clears his throat, sits up taller, and looks me right in the eye.

Normally, a death wish. But there’s something about this shifter that’s giving me pause.

“Jarred Blacklock is not the rightful alpha leader of the Grayhides,” Aidan says, voice a low growl. “I am.”

I sit back, raising my eyebrows. “Last I heard, Jarred defeated the previous alpha in a

battle fair and square. What do you have to do with it?”

In fact, I’d heard the battle was so bloody that shifters were vomiting on the sidelines—shifters who had seen battle and gruesome death already. That was before I ever took over as the alpha leader.

“Jarred,” Aidan says, sounding like he’d curse the man with his own name if he could, “Is a slimy, dishonorable trash-fucker.”

Emin lets out a little sound behind me, and I bite my lip to keep a straight face. Aidan doesn’t seem to notice my right-hand man’s amusement, however, and continues on.

“The Grayhide line did not die out,” Aidan says, leaning in as much as he can, until he runs up against the restraints holding him back. “They were murdered in cold blood. Women, children, and the elderly. Jerrod’s father killed my mother in front of us.” His voice shakes, but he recovers. “Thought he killed me, too—but someone got me out. I was brought up in the pack, completely oblivious to my true roots. And after Jarred killed his own father to take over, and there was a chance I might figure out who I was, he had me taken away, too. Cast out.”

I hear Emin suck in a breath behind me, and wish I could turn around to tell him to be quiet. But I don’t want to take my eyes off Aidan. As a non-pack-member, I can’t tune into his being, can’t listen to his heartbeat and see if he’s lying to me, but my intuition is telling me that what he says is true.

“That still doesn’t explain what you’re doing in my territory,” I snarl. “What the Grayhides do is none of my business.”

“Actually,” Aidan says, letting one side of his mouth curl up. “I come to you with information. Figured you’d never answer a message from a nobody asking for a meeting, but you would definitely come to the border if you heard someone was

trying to infiltrate. Especially now that you have your mate—”

His words cut off as my hand wraps around his throat, squeezing. I see red, fury hurtling through me at an alarming pace. The only thing that keeps me from snapping his neck is my training, my Gramps’s voice in my ear telling me not to act in haste.

That panicked leaders are bad leaders. Men who let their anger control them are the very emotional beings they scorn.

Taking a breath, I slowly ease my hand from his throat, satisfied when he coughs roughly, heaving for air. Behind me, I can feel Emin’s gaze on me, his pulse rate increasing.

He has never seen me act like that before. I don’t care—the idea that this man is here and Kira is at home alone makes me sick. I turn around and glance at Emin, giving him a look, and he seems to understand it, nodding and climbing out of the bunker.

Right now, he’s making a few calls, sending some shifters to my place to watch over Kira.

“Let’s be very careful about what we say next,” I growl, watching as he finally gets his breath back. When he raises his gaze to mine, there’s something less than respect, more than acknowledgment.

“Fine,” he rasps. “I have information that you want. But I need a place to stay for the next month. I’ve been through hell and back—been sick. I plan to challenge Jarred and take my pack back, but I need time to train. To regain my strength.”

I let out a bark of a laugh, “You can’t be serious. You think I’m going to let a shifter from a rival pack into my territory?”

“Throw me in your jail,” he shrugs. “Just as long as I have a place to train, food to eat. I don’t have much, but I’ll pay you what I can. The Grayhide name has been poisoned by that greasy asshole. And I intend to take it back. Agree to my terms, and I’ll give you the information I have.”

“Your terms,” I raise an eyebrow. “A place to train, food? That’s it?”

He chews his lip, raises his head once more. “And one more.”

“What is that?”

“I want you to kill me.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

It feels like a cliché, but I'm sitting in the living room, starting to doze off, when Dorian finally comes walking through the door. I can tell that he's trying to be quiet, but the gentle brush of his jacket against the door alerts me to his presence.

If not that, then the scent of him.

I sit up, rage and uncertainty rolling in my stomach. Dorian hasn't claimed me as his mate, but I've been stuck in this house, still hiding myself from everyone, despite the fact that I have his bite on my neck and his scent has started to mingle with mine.

I've been sitting here all day with the knowledge that I now have. Pregnant with his child. All day, I've been subconsciously reacting, resting my hand against my belly without realizing it. Wondering if that pregnancy is now or later, but having the sinking, elated feeling that it's now.

The words roll through my head at a fast clip, popping up intermittently.

I'm pregnant with Dorian Field's baby .

And he didn't even send me a single text today, nothing to let me know he was okay or when he would be back. I made dinner earlier, prepared a creamy wedding soup, but it's boxed up now in the fridge, cold and slimy, the thought of it making me sick.

Hunger gnaws at my stomach, reminding me of how I sat at the dining table, staring down at the soup, willing myself to take a single bite.

"Kira," he says, the moment he turns around. Surely he could sense me, must have

known that I was waiting for him as he walked up the steps and toward the house.

“Dorian.” I stand, realizing my words are choked by anger and try to breathe through them. “What—where have you been all day?”

He blinks in surprise. “There was an ... issue. I had to deal with it.”

I get the sense immediately that he’s holding something back. There’s something he really doesn’t want to tell me. I shouldn’t—in reality, I don’t actually—care that much that he’s keeping something from me, but the fact that I’ve been stuck in this house and he’s in no apparent rush to tell anyone about me is making my skin itchy.

Does anyone else in the pack even know I’m here, other than my parents, Emin, Ash, and Beth? I’m tired of feeling like Rapunzel stuck up in her castle, looking out on the town. I want to go walk the streets again, actually browse the aisles of the market, rather than making an order to be delivered here and intercepted at the gate.

“What was the issue?” I ask, watching as Dorian’s face goes carefully blank. He swallows, looks to the side, and levels me with a completely apathetic expression.

It’s so different from everything this past week that it cuts to the bone, hurting more than any expression of anger would have.

“It’s none of your concern, Kira,” he says, and his tone is so pinched and tight that it makes me want to scream. I scan his face, eyes trailing over his strong cheekbones, straight nose, the black hair on his forehead. I’ve known Dorian as a boy, a teen, and now as this man.

In high school, he tormented me regularly. Taunted my body, my smell, pointed out every inadequacy.

And somehow, I have never been as furious as I am with him now.

“I’ll need a key to the house,” I say, which clearly takes him by surprise. He blinks, looks at the front door as though it might offer answers, then looks back at me.

“What? Why?”

I cross my arms over my chest, hate how the flick of his eyes down there makes me warm.

“The farmer’s market is tomorrow.” I take a step back from him, aware of how my body is reacting. I want nothing to do with these feelings of attraction. “And I’m going.”

His response is faster than I thought. “No, you’re not.”

“Ex cuse me?” The words are so quiet, they come out somewhere between a whisper and a hiss. “Am I your prisoner, Dorian?”

He winces, showing emotion for the first time in this conversation. Muttering something under his breath, he turns around, sighs, and looks back at me.

“Of course not, Kira. It’s just ... not safe for you right now.”

I hold his stare, humiliated tears streaking down my cheeks. “Why? What is the danger?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Well, then the only thing that makes sense is that there is no danger,” I spit, shaking with hurt and anger, and hating how those two things together are making me cry.

“And you’re ashamed of me, Dorian. You don’t want to let me leave because you don’t want anyone—”

A sudden wave of dizziness rolls over me, and the words suck right out of my mouth. I sob and bring a fist to my lips, trying to quell the nausea that follows right after the lightheaded rush.

“That is not it,” Dorian says, taking a step toward me, reaching up like he might touch me, but decides not to. As the pain increases, his words sound like they’re coming to me through the ocean, distant and warbled, muffled by the sudden cotton in my ears.

I can’t respond. I can’t do anything but succumb to the premonition taking over my body. This time, it’s less like something I’m reaching for and more like a bucket of ice water that’s been tossed over me, freezing my muscles and scrambling my ability to think.

“Kira?”

Dorian’s body tilts in my vision, and then I realize I’m staggering back, sitting down hard on the couch. My breathing comes quick, my skin prickling, every inch of me feeling raw and open in the worst way, like a single touch could stop my heart, bring all the delicate systems of my body crumbling to pieces.

“ Kira —”

“Don’t touch me,” I manage, and then, as though possessed by a demon, the next words out of my mouth don’t belong to me. They force their way out, like a violent, hacking sick: “ Don’t worry. I’ve got you, baby girl. ”

Dorian hovers close, apparently not bothered by the way words are coming out of my

body, unbidden. It doesn't even sound like my own voice, and it doesn't feel like anything I've ever experienced before, and my mind races through everything Beth told me about my abilities.

Hearing the future, hearing the past. And also hearing from the spirits. Benevolent and evil, those who would guide, and those who would lead you astray.

My breathing is coming fast. The approach was violent, but I feel the spirit around me, cradling, soft. Guiding. A gentle warning provided in a violent sense.

Maybe if I had more experience receiving messages like this, it would have gone differently. I sink into the feeling, the swirling, inky black abyss, letting my mind blink off for a few seconds, a tiny reprieve from the onslaught of feelings and sounds.

When I wake, it's with Dorian's hands clamped on either shoulder, his eyes boring into mine.

"Oh, thank fuck," he breathes, when my eyes flutter open. He moves like he might drop his head into my chest, but I push weakly against him, and he lets me go. I'm shaking like a leaf, barely able to get to my feet, but giving a wide berth to the hand he offers, the assistance he clearly wants to give me.

"Don't," I say, raising my eyes to him. "Unless you're going to give me a key to the house?"

It's not about the key—it's about Dorian making this public. Claiming me as his own. Which he so clearly doesn't want to do.

"Kira," he says, the word broken, and I turn away, ignoring the pounding in my head and the tears running down my face. When I reach the upstairs landing, I don't think twice—I turn left and walk into the guest room, my room, no matter how badly my

body craves the touch of sleeping with Dorian tonight.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

The slam of Kira's door echoes throughout the house, and I know I have to walk out of the door, or I'll go after her. Fall to me knees, beg for her forgiveness. Anything so she'll never look at me the way she just did.

As I step out onto the porch, I nod to the two shifters assigned to protect my house, letting them know I'm leaving. Their eyes glint from the trees, sure and steady. Two of our top fighters.

Surely, they heard the slam of her door, too.

I shift and launch into the trees, running through the scrubby underbrush and loving the feeling of the dry dirt underfoot. My thoughts aren't ordered, and I need to get them that way. I can hear Gramps' voice in my head: To be a good leader, you need to prioritize, order, take action.

Gramps trained me for years to take over the pack. During that time, he talked about the importance of finding a good luna, how my mate would be just as important to my leadership as my own discretion.

He always, somehow, made it seem like I would have a choice in the matter.

But more than that, he never spoke of how one would go about balancing mate and pack. Surely, he must have struggled to balance his duties to the pack with his own wife? Except my grandma wasn't his mate—just the luna he chose. And for him, there had never been a question between who he would choose.

The pack always, always came first.

Now, information from Aidan swimming in my head, I can't shake the different directions pulling at me. One that says to go to Kira, to give her whatever she wants so she'll stay with me, so her anger will dissipate.

But the other, stronger side, insists that it's more important to keep her safe. If something happened to her, I wouldn't be able to go on. She might be angry at me for the time being, but I can't sacrifice her safety.

And yet another side says that I shouldn't be thinking about Kira first and foremost. That if my first thought isn't what's best for the pack, I'm already failing.

My mind turns back to Aidan in that bunker, and how, once I'd agreed to give him what he wanted, he shared the information he had with me. The lights flickered slightly as he spoke, his tone low and even, relaying the details as though reading from a report.

After she left, Jerrod somehow had an epiphany that Kira was actually a psychic, that her gift was real, despite not believing it before. And he's decided he's going to do what it takes to get her back into the Grayhides, no matter what it takes.

As Aidan told me about Jerrod's strange affinity for Kira, my hackles rose, bile churning below my throat. There's not a doubt in my mind that bruise on her face was from him—that his interest in her is not purely due to her gift.

I break through the trees and into the gorge, the dirt shifting from loose and powdery to solid rock, the colors deepening and reddening. This is where Gramps used to take me to run with him, to improve my stamina. It's the painting I had commissioned that hangs in my bedroom. To remind me of all the work I've done to get where I am now.

If I had things my way, I'd propose to her tonight, plan our wedding tomorrow.

Throw a party for the whole fucking pack and show everyone how I cherish her. Introduce her as the new Luna.

Right now, with the information from Aidan, I don't feel secure enough to let her out like that. Parade her in front of everyone, only to give Jerrod even more chance to get to her? A fool's decision.

But what is the right decision? How can I do what's best for the pack, Kira, and even me?

The walls of the canyon race by on either side of me, and when I look up, I see the deep black sky with pinpricks of stars. More than anything, I wish Gramps was here, so I could keep asking him everything I don't know.

When I wake up the next morning, Kira's door is still firmly shut to me.

My body aches from her absence, and my sleep last night was total shit. I tossed and turned, came out and sat in the hallway, staring at the door, listening to the sound of her heartbeat through the door.

Since marking, her, she's officially been accepted back into the pack again. That means she's mine in more ways than one. My mate, but also one of my packmembers. And my first priority is protecting her, even if that means dealing with her disdain. As long as she's safe, we can work through everything else later.

By the time I get to the pack hall, there's a commotion. The place is usually pretty tame, with a few committee meetings taking place, members of the council managing their own separate affairs, but today it's abuzz with shifters coming and going, more of our fighters called into action.

“He’s been taken care of,” Emin says, appearing beside me, and I’ve been so lost in my head it actually makes me jump. If he notices, he doesn’t comment on it, which I’m thankful for.

Of course, Emin is talking about Aidan, who, at this moment, is in one of the various cells in the basement of this building. It’s separate from the town jail, which is meant more for drunkards and overnight stays.

Turning, I face Emin, who stops and raises his eyebrows at me.

“What’s your read on him?”

Normally, I don’t question my own judgment. But this is about Kira. Aidan gave me information about my mate, told me about the dangers that might come for her, and I know that might make me more favorable toward him.

Emin studies me for a moment, and without me having to say it, I feel that he understands this situation. He knows how I feel for his sister, and how I’ll eventually make it clear that I’ve claimed her.

It’s obvious to those closest around me. My scent is already changing.

Emin understands that I rely on him in moments like this. To be my right-hand-man. To offer me his clear judgment.

“I think he’s telling the truth,” Emin says, finally. “You could have killed him in that bunker, and he didn’t show any regret. He knew full well that trying to come into our territory came with a high price—and a high likelihood that he would end up paying it. I think if he had any ulterior motives, he wouldn’t have been so ... resigned.”

I nod. “That’s the read I was getting, too.”

“So, what?” Emin asks, as we fall into step beside one another, heading toward the meeting room. “You going to make him stay in that jail?”

“Might talk to Claire about some sort of truth serum, a spell we can use to check his intentions. Maybe Beth could get a read on him. Don’t want to make him stay down there, but I’m not letting him out in my pack without more information, confirmation that he’s not going to hurt our people.”

Emin nods just as we turn the corner and walk into the meeting room. Kellen is there, his head bowed, likely still ashamed from the night I kicked him out of my home.

Good.

Emin takes a seat beside his father, but leaves a space between them. The rest of the room is filled with the council, plus additional heads for the heightened state of security we’re in.

“Hello, everyone,” I say, making my way to the front of the room. With this new threat coming from the Grayhides, it’s more important that we figure out our issue with the Amanzite. They all know something is going on, but the only people with specifics are Emin and me, along with the two shifters who actually captured Aidan and heard what he relayed.

“We don’t have time to waste, so let’s just jump right into what we have on the Amanzite problem. Leta? What do you have about the Llewellyn pack?”

“Not much,” she sighs, and when I glance at her, I see how this is affecting her. It’s been affecting all of us, and the bags under her eyes show how hard she’s been working at this. Clearing her throat, she shuffles her folders and says, “As you know, it’s difficult to get information about them. We have intel that they’re looking for powdered pranaxath—a rare red powder often used in potion-making—but it’s made

from a certain strain of palm leaves. Not something we can easily get our hands on. Besides that, my contact in that pack has gone quiet.”

I wasn’t expecting much from that avenue, but it’s still disappointing.

“Thank you, Leta, you’ve done the best you could. What else do we have? Claire?”

Claire looks worse than Leta, thin and shaking, her voice reedy as she pushes her hair back from her face.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she says, eyes on the table. “We’re working as hard as we can on synthesizing the gem with magic, but it’s just taking a long time...”

“Understandable,” I say, clearing my throat and trying not to look as panicked as I feel. Our options are quickly dwindling, to the point where Kellen’s original suggestion—of going back to the night market—is even out.

With them looking for Kira, it’s far too dangerous for me to leave our territory. And there’s no way I’m sending any of my people onto enemy land.

“Pull all the casters from every other endeavor,” I say, and all heads snap up to me. There are a lot of things our casters work on, outside of imbuing Amanzite, like clearing the fields of pests, making repairs, and healing. Pulling them from everything else is going to cause a problem.

But unless I can come up with something else, this is our last shot. I squeeze the back of an empty chair, clear my throat, and say, “Pull the other students out, too. Same parameters—pay the same, but everyone comes out full time. Get as many people on this as you can.”

“Yes, sir,” Claire says, her wide eyes hinting at her panic. I wouldn’t suggest this

unless it was necessary, and it seems like she knows that.

I hope everyone knows it.

This time, as they all filter out of the meeting room, there's less spirit. Less belief that we're going to be able to pull this off. With Jerrod threatening our borders, trying to come after Kira, and a fast-dwindling supply of Amanzite, it doesn't seem like there's much to be hopeful for.

"Dorian," Emin says, and I look up at him, realizing the room is empty besides the two of us. Frowning, I grab my phone from the table and tuck it into my pocket.

"What?"

"I had a thought," he says, and when he meets my eyes, I see a spark of hope there. "There's another way we might be able to get our hands on Amanzite."

"What's that?"

"Figure out who took it initially," his voice is low. I haven't even had time to focus on the details of the Amanzite going missing initially without stressed we are to find more.

"How are we going to do that?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at him. If it was easy, it would be done already.

"We have a brand-new, powerful psychic," Emin says, smile broadening. "In fact, she saved a kid's life the other day."

It's so obvious I hang my head—why hadn't I thought of that? Maybe, if Kira and Beth worked together, they might be able to find more information and lead us to the

thief. On the off chance they still have the Amanzite, we might be able to get it back.

But it will also be important to make sure they can't steal from us again, keep our supply secure.

"Only one problem," I laugh, rubbing a hand over my eyes.

"What's that?"

"Your sister is completely pissed at me," I say into my hand. "Since I'm making her stay home. But I can't tell her the full truth of what's going on—I don't want to freak her out."

Emin laughs, claps a hand on my shoulder. I've always felt closer than friends with him, but right now, I truly feel like his brother.

"Well, you'd better crawl out of the dog house and beg her forgiveness, because we could really use her help right about now."

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I wake up the next morning, in my room, alone.

As it has so often, my hand drifts down my body, resting on my stomach. Is there a little life in there? Something growing that Dorian and I have created together?

The thought of him makes my skin prickle, and I swing my legs out of the bed, getting to my feet. I walk to the window, pulling open the curtains and looking through the brush. If I look long and hard, I can just make out the town in the distance, the tall spiral of the old church right in the middle of everything.

I want to go out there. See what's changed. Other than that first day, when I was walking to my parents', I haven't been in the town at all. It's been far too long stuck in this house, and it's starting to grate on me. I'm going stir crazy.

But more than that, it's the sense that Dorian doesn't want anyone knowing I'm here. The same shame and humiliation burn inside me that I felt as a kid, but this time, there's the knowledge that I let him in, trusted him, am carrying his baby.

I drop my head into my hands and take a deep breath, trying to organize my thoughts. Trying to figure out what to do. A few days ago, I'd determined I would ask him point-blank what he wanted.

That's still what I need to do. I need to tell him that it's all or nothing for us—that either he accepts me, or I'm leaving.

The very thought of leaving him, especially with the baby I might be carrying, makes me sick. But I spent enough of my life not respecting myself, being okay with him

taking advantage of me. Accepting what everyone else said my value was, to the point where that's what I thought my value was, too.

Not knowing what to do, I decide it can't hurt to get ready for the day. I step into the shower, stand in the hot water. Then, I wonder if hot showers are bad for pregnancy and turn it to cool, then think that might be bad, too, before I settle on warm and realize I have a lot to figure out.

By the time I get out of the shower, I'm only feeling more confused.

I walk through the hallway, past the room filled with my sewing things, and remember the day he brought it all back for me. Our first kiss, the way it had felt to realize he was thinking of me, and that he was willing to go to Grayhide territory, to get the things I loved.

In the kitchen, I start to make myself a coffee, then realize I probably shouldn't have one if I'm pregnant. I put the cup back, stand still for a moment, then turn and walk back in the direction of my sewing room.

I have no pattern, no plan, but I start pulling fabric down from the shelf, cutting it out, mind whirring with Dorian leaving all day, how he didn't communicate with me.

How much pressure he must be under, to be the alpha leader.

We need to talk. That's obvious—I need to figure out how he feels about me and what he wants from me. I need to tell him what I need in order to be happy here.

I need to tell him about my potential pregnancy, the fact that I've had a premonition of giving birth to his baby at some point in the future. But he's not home now, and he was gone all day yesterday.

Without me realizing, two hours go by, the sewing machine working, my thoughts running, until I sit back and realize I'm holding a completed baby onesie in my hands. A little pale blue thing, so tiny I can hardly believe it would fit around a baby.

It probably won't—I didn't measure a thing to make it. But something inside tells me that I knew exactly what size my baby would need, exactly how tiny he would come out.

He. I blink, sit back in my chair, put my hand to my stomach again. Is this baby a boy?

Shaking my head, I try to clear the thoughts from my head. There's a chance that I might not even be pregnant—there's no point in thinking in circles, tying myself up with questions I can't answer.

I'm still sitting there, staring at the onesie, when I hear someone coming to the front door.

Dorian.

I know without knowing, and I'm on my feet, moving toward the door, watching as he pushes through. The anger and hurt are still simmering below the surface, and when I look at him, I can see that nothing has changed for him.

He's still unwilling to let me leave, to go out into the town.

Crossing my arms, I shift back from him, already feeling defensiveness crawl up my throat.

“What?” I ask. “You're home already?”

“Kira,” he sighs, letting the door shut behind him. He runs a hand roughly over his face. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but—I just need you to trust me, okay? You’re my mate. We’ve marked one another, and I—right now, I just have to keep you safe.”

“But you won’t tell me what the problem is,” I challenge, stepping forward, feeling the hem of my dress brush against my shins. “Do you understand how that makes me feel?”

To my shock, he nods, looking sorry. “I do. And I—well, I was actually hoping you might be able to help us with that.”

He laughs when I go completely quiet, eyes wide. Of everything I thought he was going to say, I certainly didn’t expect him to ask for my help.

“Okay,” I wind my fingers together slowly, watching as he reaches into a bag at his feet, pulling out an object. Some sort of keypad, wires dangling from the back, looking like it was uninstalled from the wall.

“Something was stolen from us,” he says, voice low. “And we have reason to believe it might be the Grayhides behind it.”

My throat jumps at the mention of my old pack, and Jerrod’s face flashes to mind, but I stuff it down. I need to show Dorian that he can trust me with this information. That I can be involved.

“I know you and Beth haven’t had much time together, but I thought that, maybe if you touched this, felt the energy or something, you might be able to hear something. Give us some insight into what might have happened.”

I want to demand that he tell me everything—what he knows about the Grayhides and what, exactly, was stolen. But this is a start. This is Dorian showing me that he trusts

me, that I might get to play the role I want in this pack.

“We have a lot to talk about,” I say, voice thick as I look up at him. “You know that I’m not happy, right?”

He swallows, his eyes locked on me. “I know. I’m sorry, Kira. I’m just—I’m doing my best, here.”

“Okay.” I nod, pushing down the simmering agitation, the need to get everything out in the open, sit him down and talk it through. Clearly there are other things going on right now that are taking his attention. My first taste of what it’s like to be mated to the alpha leader. “I’ll try.”

We move to the dining table, and Dorian sets the keypad in the center, then disappears. A moment later, he comes back with an ice pack and a glass of water, taking a seat across from me.

“Thank you, Kira,” he says, as I touch my fingers to the keypad. The interesting thing about it is that there are no numbers—almost as though they’ve all been rubbed off. Perhaps an attempt to avoid anyone being able to guess which keys are used the most.

“Can you tell me more about this?” I ask, trying to anchor myself to it, straining to listen, to feel the energy Beth talked about. “It might help me.”

“Sure,” Dorian leans back, crosses his arms. “It’s a keypad from a storage room at the pack hall. Very few people in the pack get access to it, and the code is changed daily.”

I nod, still trying to connect with it, find a path in.

“You might have more luck asking Beth about this,” I murmur, already starting to

feel the headache pushing at the back of my skull.

“She’s gone, remember?” Dorian says, quietly. “And by the time she comes back, it might be too late.”

I want to ask more about that, but I don’t. For five more minutes, we sit quietly like that, with me straining to hear something and only silence greeting me.

It’s so quiet, and so still in the house, with me barely even able to hear the sound of Dorian’s breathing, that when the four rapid knocks rap against the front door, it feels like gun fire.

I jump, nearly throwing the keypad on the ground, and feeling whatever progress I’d made dissolve, the spirits spooking around me and leaving, too.

“Fuck,” I whisper, hands shaking as Dorian gets up. I notice how he angles his body between me and the door and feel something tug in my gut at the sight of it.

I remember what he said when he first got here. Something is wrong, and he’s trying to protect me.

And now, somebody is at the door.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

Every muscle in my body tenses, readying to defend Kira to the death, if I have to. But a moment later, my mind fires to life, reminding me that I have two of my best shifters guarding this place, and they would have warned me if someone was approaching.

Then I catch his scent, and I relax slightly.

“Emin?” I ask, getting to the front door. His fist is raised to knock against the door again, and he lowers it when I swing the door open, his panicked, wide eyes swinging up to me.

“Damn, Dorian, you can’t answer your fucking phone?”

Normally, I wouldn’t allow someone—even Emin—to speak to me like this. But there’s something off about his face, something panicked there that I don’t understand.

Voice low so Kira can’t hear, I ask, “What’s going on?”

Emin seems to register that I don’t want this to be overheard, and he tips his head down, hands shaking at his side and forming fists as he says, “There’s been an attack on the northern border. We’ve already sent more out there, but—”

Once again, my body reacts first, turning and leading me into the house without second thought. I find Kira still sitting at the table, looking like she was trying to overhear the conversation between Emin and me, but couldn’t.

“Come on, I need to get you into the safe room,” I say, taking her by the shoulders and standing her up from her chair. Her body submits to me—of course it does—and she’s walking down the hallway with me, but there’s a sense of hesitancy in her demeanor.

I need to make sure she’s okay. I need to ensure she’s safe before I go to the front lines. Even with two of my best shifters here, I’m not going to leave her here, knowing Jerrod’s motivations.

“What are you—Dorian!” Kira swivels out of my grip and turns around in the hallway on her heel, facing me, her mouth in a tight line, her eyes narrowing. “What the fuck is going on? Tell me the truth right now!”

“I can’t,” I reach for her again, knowing my touch will soothe her, make it easier for me to persuade her, but she ducks out of my reach, likely for the same reason.

“Don’t touch me,” she warns, glaring. “What does Emin want? What was stolen? What’s going on? I’m tired of feeling insane! I just sit here all day and wonder—”

“We don’t have time to talk about this now,” I say, growling and grabbing her anyway. Normally, I’d rather die than violate her consent, but there’s no way in hell I’m putting her in harm’s way.

I need her in that safe room, then I need to go to the border. If even a single shifter dies on my watch, without me there to have their backs, I’ll never recover.

As always, I hear my Gramps’s voice in the back of my head: “ Borders are the most important element. You always keep the security high, and you keep territory top of mind. We fought and died for the right to have our pack on this land. You let anyone encroach on it? Expect every other pack in a hundred-mile radius to follow suit. Pretty soon, you have no land, no pack. Does that make sense?”

Protecting the borders is the number one priority. If Gramps was here, he wouldn't be concerned about Kira. Wouldn't be wasting all this time dealing with her, trying to muscle her down the hallway without hurting her.

Trying to reason with her.

“Dorian—no— Dorian!”

This time, her outrage comes at the fact that I've lifted her clear off her feet, throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her down the hallway. Since we were teenagers, I knew I'd have no problem lifting her, carrying her, even with her being thicker than the other girls.

If you can't lift your woman, it's not her fault. It's your problem for being weak.

I'm sure Kira would disagree with that right now, as she pounds on my back, demanding that I put her down, that I let her go. She levels every threat against me that she can think of, I'm sure, because after another thirty seconds she starts to sputter, clearly out of ideas.

“I'm sorry,” I say, after carrying her down the stairs and getting her into the basement.

The panic room is completely hidden from the outside, and I have to press on the panel in the wall, step down, and punch the code in with one hand while she writhes on me.

A second later, I'm stepping inside the panic room, feeling the cool, filtered air against my face. I have no idea how long this room has been here, maybe even before my Gramps, but I've never had to use it.

Until now.

She gasps when I stop, practically tossing her onto the mattress. It's not glorious, but the panic room is hidden, secure, and has all the amenities—a mattress on the floor, a bathroom, a little kitchenette stocked with canned food and bottled water.

“Dorian—” I can tell the toss took the breath out of her, and she's trying to get her bearings, trying to get up from the mattress. “Dorian,” she warns again, her voice cracking on the word, tears coming, but I'm backing up, punching in the code, closing the door.

Without the code, she won't be able to get out.

“Don't—” she says, running up to the door as it shuts, but it's too late. It seals her in, and the last thing I see before turning away is the wounded, furious look on her face through the little window in the door.

Then, I step back and slide the panel in the wall shut, completely hiding her.

Emin is still waiting for me when I get back upstairs. I wonder if Kira is shouting down there—knowing her, she probably is—but we can't hear her. That's one of the features. No matter how much noise she makes, if anyone comes in here looking for her, I know they won't find her.

“Okay,” I say, fighting through the emotions clogging the base of my throat. I feel like a monster, grabbing her and locking her up like that, but the only thing I can do is hope that, at some point in the future, she's going to realize that I was doing this to protect her.

That I had no other choice.

“Come on,” Emin says, and together we step out the front door. I turn around and lock it, nod to the wolves still guarding my house, and shift with Emin as we run toward the boundary.

The Amanzite in my watch is warm to the touch, and I feel the magic coursing around my body, through my blood, making this transition easier for me. Bolstering me.

I’m worried about the fighting that’s taking place, and my people, my packmates. But I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that, in the back of my mind, I’m thinking about the magic this is going to use up.

The Amanzite going to waste right now, and the fact that we just don’t have the stores to replenish it.

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The scream that rips out of my throat when Dorian disappears is primal, angry, painful. It leaves me gasping for air, the stinging trailing all the way down my esophagus.

If I thought it was bad before, when I only felt trapped in this house, this is definitely worse. Much, much worse.

Dorian thinks he's protecting me. I know that. But from where I stand, he doesn't have the right to make this decision—he hasn't earned the right to throw me over his shoulder and lock me away. No matter how big the threat is, no matter how much he's worried about me.

I deserve to know what's going on. And I'm not going to sit here and wait for him to come back, wallow, feel sorry for myself. I am going to find a way out of this stupid little cube.

Mind going a bit numb, I move to the sink, take down one of the glass cups from the shelf—which is surprisingly clean—rinse it out, then fill it with water. After drinking the whole thing, I put my hands on my hips and turn, surveying the room.

There's a little grate in the corner of the room, and for a moment, I entertain the thought that I might be able to take it off, climb through it like a spy in an action movie.

But the grate is small, no bigger than the size of my fist, and when I try to dig my nails under it, I just end up hurting the tips of my fingers, sending a stinging pain down to my wrist. I have no tools, nothing I could use to pry it away. And I wouldn't

fit through it, anyway.

Pacing, I keep looking around, my hand going to my stomach absently as I do. I don't know when you officially become a mother—does it count if you've only had a premonition that you might, someday, have a kid?—but I want to be the kind of mother who shows her kid not to take any shit.

If I have a baby inside me right now, I'm going to show them that they're never trapped. That they can find a way out, a way through, a way forward. It's what I've been doing my entire life.

I stop my pacing, my eyes resting on a keypad just inside the door. It matches the one on the outside, the one Dorian punched his fingers into before the door opened. I should have been paying better attention, should have thought to take note of the code.

Moving over to the keypad, I hover my fingers over it, then punch in the year Dorian was born.

The screen flashes red, and proudly tells me that I only have two tries left before it locks out for biometric access, only.

I'm guessing that certainly doesn't include me, and would mean I'd definitely have to wait for Dorian to get back before I could get out of here. Taking a deep breath, I look up to the ceiling, wracking my brain for anything that might make sense.

A four digit pin. What would they use?

I remember the year that Dorian's grandfather became the Alpha from our pack history class and pause for just a moment, hesitating before punching in the numbers. It flashes red once more, and I shake my fingers out, bouncing around.

“Fuck,” I whisper, pushing my hands through my hair. I can figure this out—I know I can. If only I could get a premonition about this—

I stop, thinking about the keypad upstairs, the older one that Dorian wanted me to connect to. My eyes fall back to the one in front of me.

But I couldn’t do it. Wasn’t able to control my gift. Beth said that it would take a long time to train up to it, to be able to seek out information, rather than just having it come to me, like I’m used to.

This is my only choice.

Letting out a resolute breath, I step up to the pad, lightly rest my fingers on either side of it, close my eyes, and listen.

The rest of the world falls away. I feel my energy reaching out, fusing into the object, feeling what it feels, hearing the way that it exists. The soft humming of the electrical components, the soft zap years ago of a power drill mounting it to the wall.

Then, as though from nowhere, I hear a deep, raspy voice I’ve only heard a few times before. Despite not being familiar with it, I recognize it.

The voice of my former alpha leader.

Dorian’s grandfather.

The man that my pack believed I murdered.

Their voices come to me untethered, no visual to accompany it. Just their voices in a vast darkness, as though I’ve poked my head into the room, eyes closed.

“This room isn’t for you, Dorian,” I hear him saying. “It’s for someone like Ash. The point of this is never for you to hide in here, you get that?”

“Of course, Gramps.”

Dorian’s little voice, pre-puberty. He must have been about twelve when they had this discussion. I can imagine it, the two of them standing here, his grandfather with his arms crossed, his wiry hair popping up from all angles on his head.

“And the code you pick, it should have nothing to do with you, alright? No birthdays, no nothing special. Last thing you need is for someone to guess what it could be. Let’s go with something random, alright? What you got?”

Dorian answers, hesitantly, “Five ... six ... two ... eight.”

“That’s random?” his grandfather confirms.

“Yes.”

A second later, breaking free of the memory, I’m pushing out of the heavy door to the panic room, sucking in a breath of basement air. It takes me a moment to figure out the secret panel, how to push against it, and once it’s closed behind me, I take the steps two at a time, euphoria rushing through me.

I am so much more than Dorian thinks I am. Not just some asset to be protected—a force to be reckoned with. I think about Jerrod, how his hand connected with my face all those weeks ago, and realize I want to learn how to defend myself. That it’s high time I learned how to fight back.

It’s not until I’m in the guest bedroom, filling a duffel bag from under the bed with the weird mix of clothes from Ash and what I’ve managed to sew myself, that I

realize I'm leaving.

Maybe Dorian can come and find me, beg for my forgiveness, but I'm definitely not staying here like a good little girl until he comes back. He'll have to crawl on his knees to me, claim me as his mate in front of everyone, beg for my grace—

“Kira?”

When I spin around, I'm not expecting to see her.

But, at the sight of my mother, all my walls come crumbling down. It's like the five-year-old version of me steps forward when I fly into her arms, folding her much smaller frame into my arms, the sobs ripping out of me before I even realize they're coming.

“Mom,” I sob, falling apart further when her hand is on my back, rubbing large, soothing circles.

“Oh, honey,” she breathes. “I was looking for you everywhere—I didn't know what Dorian did—”

“It's okay,” I gasp, pulling back, wiping the tears from my eyes, but when I catch a glimpse of her concerned face, I start to fall apart again, everything flooding out of me. “Everything is so messed up,” I rasp, sitting down on the bed so hard the duffel beside me bounces. “I'm—I'm pregnant, and—”

She gasps, and I look up, sucking in quick, devastated breaths, feeling like I can't breathe.

“Darling,” she says, coming to my side, rubbing her hand up and down my arm. “Come with me. We're going to get you a warm mug of tea and talk this through,

okay?”

Something in the back of my mind hesitates, pulls away from her, remembers all the times she’s hurt me throughout my life. The other part of me insists that this is my mother—that if I can’t trust her, really, who can I trust?

So I stand, and I walk out the door with her, letting her lead me down the stairs, to the front door. Outside, the area is deceitfully peaceful. Something must have been going on for Dorian to rush away like that, but to either side of us, the low-lying, sprawling trees rustle in a slow breeze. A lizard climbs up the side of the house.

There’s not another soul out here, and no signs of distress.

“Come on, love,” my mother says, tucking me into her car gently. I let her close the door behind me, and stare up at Dorian’s house as we reverse, watching the front door get smaller and smaller.

She reaches over, running her hand over my hair gently, smiles, and says, “Don’t worry. I’ve got you, baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I always run faster with Emin at my side. A decades-old competition between us, one that I just barely win each time. This is no different; each of us shifted into our wolf forms, racing over the barren terrain toward the northern border.

This is too much like the last time this happened for me not to think about it. To not think about the alert, the insistence from Kira that an attack was coming on the northern border, despite the intel we had that said it might be coming from the west.

“It was a premonition,” I remember her insisting, saying in front of the council, her hands clasped as she looked up at my grandfather, willing him to believe her. We’d graduated only days before. The heat in the valley was just starting to come in, and I was sitting on the council, advancing in my training to take over as alpha.

Kellen was younger then, and apologizing profusely for Kira, going so far as to stand, grab her arm, try to pull her from the room. Around us, fighters were getting ready, waiting to hear what we said. Would we go to the north or the west?

Dividing the group might mean a defeat on whichever border wasn’t protected.

“Sorry about this, sir,” Kellen said, his head bowed. “We’ll make sure to deal with her.”

Kira broke free of his grasp, breathing hard, her eyes meeting mine, her curls rampant around her face and falling over her shoulders.

Then, she turned and walked out the door.

Prickles rose along the back of my neck and over my arms. I leaned over, tapping my grandfather on the wrist, eyes locked on the door as it finally shut, latching in place behind her. It was like there was a timer running in my head, a counter of how long it had been since I last saw her.

She was my mate. And she had just walked out the door. And we knew that an attack was coming.

“Dorian,” my grandfather snapped, turning his head, glaring at me. He coughed slightly at the end of the sentence, an homage to the secret that only he and I knew—he was sick. That’s why he’d been so much harder on me lately, pushing me to learn more, faster.

His warning was not to interrupt him as he spoke with Kellen, the two of them going back and forth over what the right move was. I loved my grandfather to death, but the man was a bureaucrat sometimes, talking and talking when my mate was getting further away.

It was like my body reacted without my permission.

I was standing, I was pushing through the door, shifting, following her scent—that sweet, alluring, fucking irresistible scent—out the door and through to the street. It pooled at the bike rack, which was not a good sign. On foot, Kira never would have outrun me. She was a non-shifter.

But being on her bike meant that she could cover a lot more ground. And her scent was leading off down the street, in the direction of our northern border. If she was right, and if the attack was coming there, she would be killed instantly.

Kira was not a fighter.

So I moved without thinking. Without considering what it might mean for me, the rising alpha leader—to move toward the northern border. I didn't think about the fact that surely some of the shifters had followed me out of the building.

I didn't think about the fact that splitting the group would weaken both sides. Or that my grandfather, who was becoming far too weak to fight, would still take his warriors to the western border, and would shift, engaging in the fighting himself when it was clear they weren't going to hold up.

Later, in the center of town, outside the fountain, leaning over my grandfather, back in his human form but limp, covered in blood, long dead from his fight before he could say anything else to me, I hadn't thought about it when Kira touched me and I whirled on her, telling her to keep her hands off me.

"I'm sorry, Dorian," she had sobbed, covering her face with her hands. "I thought—you have to know how much this pains me, too!"

"You know nothing of the pain you've caused me."

We had an audience—nearly every member of the pack come out to the town square to watch. Finding my grandfather dead, and Kira staring up at me with fear as I shouted at her.

"I do," she insisted, that familiar spark glinting in her eyes as she stepped back toward me. The dangerous thing about her was that, as meek as she seemed, as resigned as it always seemed she was, there was a fighting spirit in her, too. Squaring her shoulders, widening her stance, she stared me down and said, for everyone to hear, "Because I'm your mate."

Emin sucked in a breath. The whole group did, all the onlookers.

My grandfather had just died. The man who told me Kira wasn't a good fit for Luna. That being matched to her would be a massive mistake, not just for me, but for the pack as a whole. And, in that moment, it appeared that he was right.

And that's when I said the thing that I regret to this very day, the shame and remorse of the moment hanging over my head like a black cloud from the moment I uttered it.

My voice full of hatred, I'd taken a step toward her, towering over her form, and said, "You are not my mate, Kira. And if you ever say something so blatantly false again, I'll kill you myself."

Some of the people around us gasped. Some turned their heads away.

Nobody went after her as she ran away sobbing, her cries echoing down the street in the dim twilight. I went along with the process of preparing Gramps's body, completed our ritual of saying goodbye. Sent him into the afterlife with my love.

And when I emerged from that grief-ridden haze, when I realized that I'd turned my mate away, when I sought out the pack psychic and started to get answers, it was already too late.

Because Kira was gone.

Now, Emin and I round the corner of the canyon and find the northern territory completely different from what it was years ago. Before, when we ran out here, there was nothing—not a soul. Nothing but drifts of dirt and sand, the quiet chirping of insects.

But now, the sounds of growling and bodies hitting the rough canyon floor fill the air, echoing off the walls loudly.

To the left , I send to Emin, launching into the fray, finding a Grayhide and burying my teeth in his neck. He's surprised by it, and I'm able to roll over him, taking him to the ground, snapping his neck, and moving on to the next.

As we fight, I keep my head up, looking for the alpha leader. Trying to pinpoint where he's standing, where in the fight he is. It's my job to find him, take him out, and keep him from targeting my shifters.

Only after twenty minutes of battling, growling, and launching my body at other wolves, watching Emin's back, circling and clawing, do I come to a startling realization.

The Grayhide alpha leader isn't here. He's not fighting alongside his shifters.

Which means one of two things—either he's excellent at hiding his position among this group, or he's not here at all. He's somewhere else.

A shiver runs up the length of my spine as I throw another wolf to the ground and swivel around to look at Emin. The Grayhides aren't engaging fully, instead running at us then bouncing back, forcing us to either chase them or wait for the next attack.

Other than that first wolf I killed by ambushing him, the others have been careful not to let me get too close. In fact, as I survey the area, I realize that's the case across the board—we aren't killing each other. Just continuing a pointless, endless fight.

Emin , I send, thoughts whirring as I take it all in. If this isn't a real fight, that means
—

It's a diversion , Emin sends back, a growl of his slipping through the bond.

In a startling moment of clarity, I remember Kira's last premonition, the strange tone

of her voice when she'd spoken. It had sounded like her, but also slightly different at the same time. Older. Like Kira in twenty years.

Don't worry. I've got you, baby girl.

Another chill runs down my back at the realization. Someone Kira might trust, despite everything that's happened to her. She told me herself.

Stay here , I send to Emin. Keep up the charade. Make sure they don't actually cross the border .

It's risky, considering the fact that we're so low on Amanzite, but there's no other option. I turn and race back in the direction of my house, heart hammering at what I might find when I get there.

I pray that Kira is in the safe room, pissed at me but unharmed.

But something deep in my chest tells me I'm just not that lucky.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

“Where are we going?” I twist in the passenger seat and watch as the road to our house comes and goes, and we keep hurtling away.

“Somewhere safe,” she says, eyes resolutely on the road, and a shiver runs over my skin when I look at her. Like something isn’t quite the same. I tell myself that it’s just the anxiety and sit back in my seat, trying to calm down.

“I’ll put it in that damn tree house.”

“What?” I jerk back, looking over at my mom. “What did you say?”

She smiles softly, reaches over, runs the tips of her fingers over the nape of my neck. “I said, I’m going to take you somewhere safe, baby.”

That’s not what she said—I know it’s not, but everything feels strange, the world slightly blurry, so I just nod and sit back against the seat, trying to calm myself down.

We drive for five more minutes, until we’re on the outskirts of Badlands, and she turns the car, pulling into a dusty lot just outside an old wooden building. It looks like it might have been some sort of saloon, a watering hole for drifters, but it’s long-abandoned now, nothing but one other pickup truck in the drive, on the far end of the lot.

“What is this place?” I ask when she comes to a stop, turns off the car, and reaches over to undo my seatbelt. The belt tangles in my arm, and I stop, pushing it off as I climb out after her.

The sun is high in the sky, the air hot and dry, and she stalks toward the door purposefully, only sparing me a brief glance over her shoulder.

“Come on,” she says, “I’ll show you.”

I feel a distant tug, as though coming to me over miles and miles of space, begging me to stay where I’m at, but I ignore it, shake my head, and follow her inside.

My father and brother are on the council. It’s not inconceivable that they might have information about a safe house on the outskirts of town. She probably heard about it, and is bringing me here to keep me safe from whatever is going on.

But the moment I step through the doorway after her, I wish I had listened to my instincts. To that desperate call outside, begging me to stop.

“Well, hello, Kira.”

Jerrod is standing in the back of the building, flanked by two of his men. One of them is the one who kidnapped me weeks ago, dragging me out of my home in nothing more than that little silk slip. A nauseated shiver runs over my skin at the sight of them, and for the first time in my life, I decide I’m not going to stand around and let it happen to me.

It must be shocking to them, because I’m through the doorway again when I hear Jerrod shouting for them to follow me, to get me. I run around the side of the car, glancing inside, but it’s locked and my mother has the keys—I remember the remote beeping as we walked inside.

Knowing I only have seconds, I eye the old air conditioning unit outside the building and hoist myself up onto it, grab the ladder hanging from the side of the building, pray it’s strong enough to hold me, and haul my self up onto the roof just as Jerrod’s

cronies come running around the side of the building.

I stay low, belly to the searing hot metal of the roof as I watch them, trying to keep my breathing as quiet as I can. They can probably smell me. My time is running out before they realize I'm up here.

Like cartoon characters, I watch them circle the building once, twice, then start shouting at one another. A second later, Jerrod walks out, and I can hear the angry timber of his voice.

“What the fuck —”

He stops in front of the guys, glancing around like he can't believe they don't already have me in their clutches.

“It's not like she can outrun you,” Jerrod growls, then he crouches down, looking underneath the car, and I have to put my hand over my mouth to keep from sucking in a breath, imagining what it would have been like to see his face like that if I'd chosen that hiding spot.

Adrenaline pounds through my body, my mind only now catching up to the facts of this situation.

My mother brought me here.

My mother knew that Jerrod was here.

She's a traitor. Stomach roiling dangerously, I clutch the edge of the building and watch as she walks out of the building, her hand coming up in the familiar gesture to cover her brow, shade her eyes.

And then she turns, meeting my eyes instantly. My mother, of course she knew exactly where I would hide. The person who raised me, who played hide-and-seek with me while Dad was at work.

For a long, lingering moment, we hold the stare, and I silently plead with her. It's not too late to undo this, to protect me now, though she's never made the choice to before.

And then, as though in slow motion, I watch as she raises her arm, pointing to me, and Jerrod and his cronies turn, clearly catching sight of me from where I'm peeking over the edge of the roof.

Time jolts into full-speed again, and I scramble across the roof as fast as I can, sliding on my ass, getting my foot against the rail of the ladder.

It only barely held on when I was climbing up, so, desperate sobs ripping out of me, I pull my leg back and kick once, twice—

A hand appears, swinging wildly and grazing my ankle, and I can't help it—I scream. Jerrod's crony pops his head up over the side of the roof and grins at me, and I take the moment to land one more solid kick to the ladder, full dislodging it.

The grin slides off his face, and this time it's him screaming as he plummets from the side, landing with a grotesque-sounding smack on the side of the air conditioning unit before. I'm breathing hard, leaning over the side of the building, when I see the other man, Jerrod, and my mother round to the back.

My mother's eyes flash to the crony on the ground, who is completely motionless. Did I kill him? I stare in horror, stomach churning harder.

"Get. Up. There," Jerrod grinds out, his eyes skipping up to me as his other crony

disappears around the side of the building.

This time, it's him and me holding gazes while my mother stumbles to the side, retching into the dry, patchy grass. Distantly, somewhere behind me, I hear the roar of a truck engine, but it's like I'm hypnotized by Jerrod's stare, caught in the weight of it.

"Come on, Kira," he practically sings, his voice softening, his eyes somehow managing to rake over my form even from this distance. I would laugh if I wasn't so desperate—he's practically licking his lips like he's the big bad wolf. "Come on down from there."

"Fuck you," I clip back, pleased with myself for how his head pulls back in shock, his lip curling.

That's when I hear a clamor from behind me and turn to see the other crony slamming one meaty arm up onto the roof, his sights set on me. And he doesn't look happy, rage swirling in the depths.

I realize, with a pang of fear, that he probably isn't too happy at the fact that his crony friend is motionless in the dirt below me. Hands shaking, I reach to the side, picking up a hot black pipe that nearly scorches the skin on my fingers.

"Stay back!" I shout, looking around wildly, heart thundering.

He laughs, hauling himself up onto one knee on the roof. "What are you going to do, bitch? Try an—"

Without much thought at all, I pull back and throw the pipe at him, a surprised squeak popping from my lips when it hits him square in the face. He, like his friend, dropped down from the building, but he seems to be alive.

I rush to the edge to see him on his back in the bed of a truck, a toolbox tipped on its side. He must have used it to climb up here. He lets out a mangled, wet-sounding groan and rolls to his side, blood streaming out from between his fingers.

“Fuck you, you fucking bitch—”

His words are muffled, quieting into a round of sobs, and my hands continue to shake as I back up from the ledge. Jerrod and my mother round the front of the building, and the sight of Jerrod makes my blood run cold.

The fury is gone. Now he just walks calmly over to the truck, opening the passenger side and climbing back out a moment later with something small in his hand. I stand on the edge of the roof, the sound of his cronies' groans the only thing breaking the silence as Jerrod reaches into the back of the truck and pops the lid on a gas can.

I stand quietly as he dumps it at the base of the building, then straightens back to look up at me.

“Come down,” he says, simply, as though we’re lovers and he’s asking me to bed.

“Fuck you,” I say again, crossing my arms over my chest.

Jerrod shrugs, strikes the match, and tosses it without a care onto the pile of shimmering gasoline. The last thing I hear before the wall of heat runs up against my face is my mother’s high-pitched scream.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

I'm halfway through town, following the faint trail of Kira's scent, which is now mingled with mine, when I see the smoke.

Her scent floats down main street, weak enough that anyone else not mated to her wouldn't smell it. But I do, and it shows me where she's gone. Shows me that the path she took leads straight to the plume of black smoke rising in the distance.

I run faster than I ever have before. Fast enough that my paws sting, the hot, gritty pavement and friction of my speed compounding to burn along my paw pads. But I don't care, I ignore the feeling.

Everything in my body focused on Kira and if she's okay.

I see her, standing atop the burning building, her mouth open in a scream that, at first, I can't hear. Then it clicks into place, the sound finally reaching my ears, "Dorian, watch out !"

I dodge to the left, but not fast enough. The wolf coming at me gets his jaws around my front left leg, making me crash to the ground, blood spattering against the dirt. I feel his teeth snap through the tendon, and a slicing pain arcs up my leg, all the way to the joint.

Fuck .

Ignoring the pain, I get back to my feet, breathing hard, limping, and taking in the brown wolf circling me. He's slightly bigger than me, and strong with the might of the Alpha leader, like I am. I catch sight of the glinting Amanzite hanging at his neck.

He snarls, saliva dripping from his mouth, his eyes glinting black. His coat is a dull brown, rather than the ashy gray the Grayhides are known for.

Jerrod.

Somewhere near the building, a car swings around, the tires crunching against the gravel and kicking up a plume of dirt. I think for a moment that it might strike me, but it turns to the side, leaving the lot. There's a wet popping sound, and I turn to see a truck against the building, the rubber molten and melting from the heat of the building.

In his wolf form, all Jerrod can do is snarl at me. I know his type, assume he'd want to give some big speech right now, but instead he just growls, his muscles tensing, and I know he's planning to launch at me.

There's a loud crack, and Kira lets out a quick scream.

I've been trained for combat from birth. I should know better than to look at her, to start running in her direction, to take my eyes off my enemy for even a second.

But it's Kira. I can't think, can't focus on Jerrod when I know she might be engulfed by the growing, creeping flames any second.

Jerrod gets me around the waist, dragging me to the ground, his paws scrambling for purchase against me as we tumble together, maws open, each trying to go for the neck of the other. There's a brief moment where he pins me down, and I see victory flash in his eyes.

Something rears up inside me. In an instant, I remember the day my grandfather was killed the day I took over as alpha leader. How Jerrod's leadership of the Grayhides has affected every aspect of my life.

Kira will never be safe as long as Jerrod is alive.

With a roar, I push back against him, launching him off my body and sending him sliding back through the dirt. Kira screams again and my entire body pulls toward her, instincts blazing inside me to turn and get her down, but I have to kill Jerrod.

I have to.

By the time I pounce on him, he's already back on his feet, and the impact sends us both sprawling to the ground again. We roll and buck, snapping, my jaw just an inch from his neck. He twists around, knocking me off balance and getting me on my back, and I manage to dodge his open mouth just in time, protecting my neck.

It's hard to breathe, my sides aching from the impact, my front left leg still dripping blood onto the ground, unusable, the pain excruciating when I try to put any weight on it.

Kira screams again, and this time, I can't stop myself—I turn to look. She's standing next to what looks like some sort of exhaust pipe atop the building, but she can't hold on to it. Her shirt is pulled up over her face, and the flames are licking at her feet.

I'm no fireman, but I know the look of a collapsing building when I see one. And if that building goes down, it's going to swallow Kira up in the blaze.

Jerrod is older than I, more experienced. But he's not fighting to save his mate.

Rallying all the power I have left in my body, I push back against him. Thinking about all the time I've already lost with Kira, and all the time I intend to get back. When this is over, I'm telling everyone in the pack that I've found our luna. I'm going to make this all up to her a million times, again and again.

At the exact moment I throw Jerrod off of me, there's a low rumble, vibrations through the earth. Jerrod is distracted, glancing up, and I take it as an opportunity to pounce on him. We tumble to the dirt again, and this time I get my teeth around his neck.

He twists, forcing pressure onto my left leg, and I let out a cry of pain at the shock of it, releasing him. We hit the ground together, my head bouncing off the dirt just in time to see a massive engine veering into the lot, sirens blaring, a cloud of dust following in its wake.

A fire truck.

The doors on the truck open, and guys come stumbling out. Through the smoke and the cloud of dirt, I can make out a familiar head of gray hair, a slight old woman swinging out from the front seat. A moment later, a purple Jeep trails after the engine.

I know that Jeep, and I know the woman hopping out of the driver's seat, calling Kira's name.

Jerrod stumbles back, but I turn and catch him just in time, snapping my jaw around his leg in the same way he did to me, feeling the force of it snap through his tendons, crack the slight, delicate bones. I keep clamping down, ignoring the bright, metallic taste of his blood in my mouth. He yelps, paws clawing against the ground for purchase he doesn't get, his leg jerking as he tries to get away from me.

“Dorian!”

It's Kira, her voice a cry of fear, and I turn to see her on the edge of the building, which is tilting, a loud, creaking groan an indication that some important support is about to go. The men from the truck are trying to set up one of those trampolines to catch her, but it's taking too long.

Jerrold whimpers in pain, still trying to kick away from me. With this hold on him, I could fully break his leg, continue the attack, get to his neck. But that will take time, I don't have.

I only have a second to decide, and I do—letting him go, turning, running in her direction instead. I make it to the edge of the building just as the final support cracks.

In my wolf form, I can't speak, can't tell her what I want her to do, but it must be obvious, because Kira is already in the middle of doing it, backing up, running, leaping from the edge of the building.

For a moment, she's suspended in midair, the sun bright behind her head, creating a silhouette, and I know that if I make it through, this is a moment I will never forget.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

When I was a kid, I always used to have dreams that I was falling. They'd take different forms—sometimes, my family's car would go off the side of a bridge. Sometimes I'd just wake up in the sky, and my body would start to plummet immediately.

But never did I dream of this —my body flying through the air, Dorian crouched down below, favoring one of his paws, ready to catch me. For the first time in a long time, I wish I was lighter. I wish I was a smaller woman, who wouldn't land quite so hard on him.

The moment we make contact, he tumbles to the ground, rolling and absorbing the impact of the fall. The sound that comes out of him is harrowing, like all the air has left his lungs, and a moment later, he's crying out.

“What?” I push up off of him, watching as he breathes. I've seen him in his wolf form—seen many of them shifted from a distance—but never up close like this before. He's massive, easily four times my size, maybe more. If we stood, my head might only come up to his shoulder. It makes a shiver run through my body to feel the soft scrape of his fur against my knees.

Dorian lets out a huff of air from his nose, and it blows hot against my skin. I scoot closer to him, and he settles his head in my lap, panting.

“I'm sorry,” I say, though I'm not sure exactly what it is that I'm sorry for. Leaning forward, I bury my face in his fur and breathe deeply. “I love you, Dorian. I want you to be in my life. This was—I should have trusted you.”

I'm crying in earnest now, and he lets out another low, animistic sound, rolling his head off of me and moving to his other side in the dirt. I place my hands on his side, feeling the ribs shifting under the skin. Did I kill him? By landing on him, did I murder him?

"His Amanzite," someone breathes, and I look over my shoulder to see Emin there, crouching down. When he turns to look at me, his eyes are serious, but not panicked.

"Fuck Kira, you look like shit, are you—"

"I'm fine." The hand I have settled on Dorian is shaking. "What about him, can you help him? What's wrong?"

"He looks okay to me, but in order to wrap his wounds, we need him back in his human form."

A beat passes as Dorian lets out another low whine, writhing in the dirt. "He's going to shift now."

"Okay," I nod, wanting nothing more than to see his face again. But Emin shakes his head.

"It's—without the Amanzite, it's going to be—you shouldn't watch, Kira."

I'm about to protest, to insist that I stay for it, when a hand lands on my shoulder, and I look up to see Beth gazing down at us resolutely. To our left, smoke is still billowing out of the building, white now. Several men hold massive hoses, spraying out water and dousing what's left of the flames.

"Beth," I breathe, standing, and that's when Ash reaches us, falling to her knees beside her brother, next to me.

“His Amanzite,” she rasps. “Oh, fuck—”

Her hands shake as she slides a bracelet from her wrist, saying, “He can take mine—”

“It’s too late,” Emin says, as Dorian twists, letting out a howl.

“Come with me,” Beth says, taking me by the shoulders and drawing me to my feet.

“I know you want to stay, but I can’t imagine he wants you to see him like that.”

I want to protest, but she’s right. Dorian would not want me to see him like that. The moment I get to my feet, I realize the bottoms of my feet are aching, searing with pain. In fact, that pain is present in all parts of my body, from my hands, which are blistering, to my lungs, which feel like I breathed in all the dirt in the valley.

“Here,” Beth says, sitting me on the back of the fire engine and handing me a bottle of water. “Drink it slowly. The paramedics should be here shortly.”

“How did you know?” I ask, wincing when I hear another howl of pain coming from Dorian’s direction. Beth sets a hand on my shoulder, smiling.

“You’re not the only one who has premonitions, you know.”

“Kira!” I turn to see Emin walking toward me, the sleeves of his shirt pushed up to the elbows. His hair is a mess, and his face is streaked with dirt. A deep gash on his right arm is actively bleeding, but he acts like he doesn’t even notice it. “Dorian shifted back, but he said Jerrod was here? Where—”

“He got away.”

I watched as he tucked his tail and ran the moment Dorian let go of him. It was a pathetic, limping sort of run, but he’s surely long gone now, back into Grayhide

territory.

“Fuck.” Emin puts a hand over his chin, then raises his eyes to me. “I saw two dead Grayhides near the building. How did you...?”

“Long story,” I rasp, laughing a bit and taking another sip of water.

“Kira,” Emin says, and when I meet his eyes, there’s no mirth in them. He swallows, looks to the ground. “Dorian said—Mom—”

I open my mouth to respond, but the thought of it makes my throat swell with tears, and I close my mouth again, nodding instead. He curses and turns away, running his hands over his face, kicking at the dirt.

“ Fuck .”

“Emin,” I say quietly, and he turns back to me. My brother. The brother who tormented me as a kid, and is now looking over my wounds like he’ll fight the fire that caused them.

The only other person on this Earth who understands what it’s like to be betrayed by our mother like this. “Tomorrow, I can tell you more about what happened. But right now ... I think I know where you can find the stolen Amanzite.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

The first thing that comes back to me is the pain. Throbbing in my left leg, just at the Achilles heel. Of course, one of the most difficult injuries to heal from. At least, as the alpha leader, I have the privilege of healing faster.

The second thing that comes to me is the sweet, swirling scent of cinnamon, warm and cozy like a bakery in the middle of a snowstorm.

“Dorian.” It’s a whisper, Kira’s voice, and I recognize her straight away. The soft tenure, the gentle brush of a hand across my cheek.

I realize her voice has been playing in my dreams, replaying what she said to me out in the dirt, when the transformation was starting to ease over my body, and there was no Amanzite to soften the blow.

“I’m sorry. I love you, Dorian. I want you to be in my life. This was—I should have trusted you.”

Forcing myself into a seated position, I open my eyes to see her sitting at my bedside. She has her own wounds, her palms bandaged, a scrape on her forehead covered with a band-aid, but she looks more gorgeous than I’ve ever seen her.

Wearing a pink plaid dress that’s tight around her chest, her mountain of curls pulled back into a bow, the hair loose around her bare shoulders, glinting in the light from the fire.

Those eyes—her amber, liquid gold eyes—fixed right on me.

“Dorian,” she says, frowning and reaching out, “Be careful—you don’t need to sit up—”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I grunt, ignoring the pain and focusing on her.

She blinks, shaking her head slightly in confusion. “What are you—”

“Out there, before I shifted, you said you were sorry, but I’m the one who should be apologizing. I never wanted to make you feel like I was keeping you a secret, or that I was ashamed of you, Kira. We’d heard that Jerrod wanted you back, that he was coming for you, specifically. And ... I was afraid. I let that fear control me, and more specifically, I let it control you.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” she asks, eyes softening as she lets out a sigh. “That would have made it a lot easier to understand.”

“I didn’t want you to feel unsafe,” I admit, closing my eyes. “I didn’t want you to think I couldn’t protect you. And more than that, I was worried you might try to take off, sneak out in the middle of the night.”

When I open my eyes, the look on her face tells me that it’s something she thought about, and I let out a little laugh.

“Dorian,” she takes my hands, leaning forward and resting her forehead against mine with a little wince. “I feel like ... everything in our relationship has been complicated. But if you want it—”

“I want it, Kira,” I practically growl. “That’s why I marked you.”

She laughs. “Okay. You want it, but I need you to communicate with me. I need ... I know that being the alpha leader is important, and that the pack needs you, but—”

“ You are my top priority,” I say, taking her hand in mine, careful to avoid the bandage on her palm. “From now on.”

Quiet stretches around us as we stay like that, foreheads together, until I reach an arm around her waist and pull her into the bed with me. My body aches, but that pain starts to ease the moment I have her beside me, the warmth of her seeping into me, her head resting on my chest.

“You’re my mate, Kira,” I mutter. “And you’ve always been. I’ll spend the rest of my life making this— everything —up to you. I know I don’t deserve you, but I’ll get as damn close as I can come to that.”

She sighs, tipping her head up and kissing just beneath my jaw.

“I have something to tell you,” she whispers, voice uncertain. “But I don’t want to overwhelm you. The healers said it’s important for you to be low-stress while you heal—”

I squeeze her, nuzzling into her, wishing for a moment that I could just climb inside her body and live there.

“Tell me,” I say, voice muffled against her. “Whatever it is you have to say, I want to hear it.”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Even better,” I laugh, raising my head to meet her eyes. “If I pass out, the healers will come take care of it.”

“Okay.” She shifts, pushes the hair from her eyes, then says, “I ... it’s not certain yet, but I had a premonition and...” she closes her eyes, squinting her face, “I might be—I

mean, I think I'm pregnant, Dorian."

The entire world stops spinning. Kira and I are the only objects that remain in motion.

Endorphins flood through me like a detox, washing away the pain and leaving elation in their wake. It's like my limbs wake up, all stiffness and aching completely gone as I push up, wrap my arms around her, and flip her so her back is against the mattress.

She giggled, admonishes me, "Dorian—you're not supposed to—"

I silence her with a kiss, capturing her lips with mine, swallowing her words and being careful of her as I press our chests together.

Kira is pregnant. We are having a baby ,

My baby. I will have a baby—a son. A daughter. A child of my own. Tears spring to my eyes, and I surprise myself by letting out a happy sob against her lips.

I only wish Gramps were here to see it.

"Dorian?" she asks when I pull back, kissing down her jaw and to her neck, body suddenly thrumming with the need to get this woman's skin on my tongue, to taste her in more ways than one.

"Shh," I murmur, trailing my lips over her collarbone, hands finding the skirt of her dress and bunching it around her hips. "Remember what I told you?"

She giggles when I push the dress up more, pushing my lips against the soft swell of her belly.

"What?"

“I told you,” I rasp, cock already hard, body electric with the feel of her. “That, when I had more time, I was going to linger with you. Taste every inch of your skin. That time is now.”

A shiver runs the full length of her body at my words, and I love seeing the power I have. How a single sentence can make her shake like this, trembling under my touch.

I slide lower, hooking my thumbs around the band of her panties, drawing them down until I’m drowning in the scent of her. She gasps, looking down at me, her eyes wide.

“Dorian, are you—”

“Think of this as behavioral conditioning,” I murmur, touching my lips to each of her thighs. Gods, I could spend the rest of my life down here, worshiping the smooth, soft skin on her inner thighs, kissing and biting, nuzzling my face into the gentle curve of them.

“What?” she laughs, the sound cutting off into a breathy rasp when I move my mouth so I’m hovering right over her, lips pressed gently to her skin, barely a whisper of pressure, but enough that her legs jerk, tightening around me.

“You gave me the best news of my life,” I say, watching her shiver as the vibration of my voice reaches her, getting her even more wet for me. “So I’m going to give you the best orgasm of your life. Teach you to keep doing that.”

“So, you want—” she gasps when I use my hands to pull her apart, sliding my tongue up the length of her and groaning deeply at the taste. “So you want,” she tries again, panting. “Dorian, if you do this every time, we’ll end up with a million kids.”

“Okay,” I murmur against her clit, grinning when I see her hands searching for purchase, grabbing the sheets and balling them in her fists.

“That’s what you want?” she asks, raising her head. When her eyes meet mine, and she sees me like this, between her legs, tasting her, I watch her pupils blow wide. My cock is trapped between me and the bed, and each time I move against her, the friction there just winds me tighter, tighter.

“With you?” I ask, pressing into her with the flat of my tongue. “Yes.”

Kira lets out a whimper, either at the admission or the sensation, and I don’t waste any more time in making this woman come on my tongue.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:11 am

Dorian is relentless, seeking, his tongue hot and persistent against me as he chases my orgasm. I wind tighter and tighter around him, burying my fingers in his hair and nearly losing my mind at the gentle up-and-down, up-and-down of his chin, how he swirls his tongue, how he works over me like he doesn't want to miss a single millimeter of my skin.

When I orgasm, my legs lock in a vice grip around him, but he never stops, never relents, keeping the same pace and murmuring encouragements to me as he goes.

"Dorian," I breathe, as I come down from the high, body feeling loose and limber, like Jell-O. "Fuck, Dorian."

"I want to fuck you, Kira," he says, trailing kisses over my hips, squeezing my love handles, running his hands over the curve of my belly and thighs like a man praying to his gods. "Can I fuck you?"

I've no more than nodded weakly, hair in my face, when Dorian's hands anchor on my hips, and he's turning me over.

"Don't rest on your hands," he says, curving over me, stacking pillows under my chest. My dress is still on, the skirt bunched ridiculously around my hips, but for some reason, that just makes the whole thing hotter, his hands on me, brushing against the fabric.

I could cry from the tenderness, but I'm too shocked from the feeling of him pushing into me from behind, sliding in fully in one fell swoop, his hips nestled against mine, the pressure exquisite, bursting behind my eyes like fireworks so quickly that I let out

a sound of pleasure.

“Do you like that?” Dorian asks, curving his chest over my back so his mouth is against my ear. It makes goosebumps run the length of my spine, every nerve in my body set alight, and it multiplies the sensation of his cock inside me.

He draws out, pushes in again, adjusts to find a better angle. Each thrust sends me higher and higher, the sounds come out of me, out of my control, wild and breathless. I’ve only had sex twice—or three times now, if we’re counting what he just did with his mouth—and this is, by far, my absolute favorite.

“Fuck,” I hiss, almost laughing at myself for the originality, but I can’t—can’t think of anything but the blinding pleasure, his grunting in my ear. I don’t know what feels better, the pressure inside me, or the knowledge that it’s my body doing this for Dorian, my hips his fingers are digging into, my hair he winds around his palm, my name he’s whispering as he thrusts.

“Such a good girl, Kira,” he rasps, and I come apart on him, crying out into the pillow, body going limp as he swells inside me, his knot forming and pushing out, out, stretching me to the delicious point of pain.

I let all the sounds out into the pillow as he breathes against me, kisses my back, tells me how good I feel. How I’m perfect, made just for him, so perfect.

It’s bliss. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted.

After all this time, all this wanting, feeling like my mate was always just out my reach, here he is. Pulling out of me, wiping me up, tenderly folding me against his chest.

Kissing my forehead, whispering, just before we both drift off, “I will never lose

sight of you again.”

The first time I wake up, it's with a large, heavy arm thrown over my torso, anchoring me to the bed. I sigh and snuggle into it, loving the way Dorian pulls me against him, making our bodies flush together, even in his sleep.

Hours later, I wake up again, and this time he's gone, the bed still warm from where his body was. I stretch and sit up, looking out the window and to the view, breathing in the scenery for a moment before I swing my legs out of the bed and walk gingerly on my burned feet to the door.

The healers were able to work over me, easing the dry pain in my lungs and fixing the skin on my feet, leaving them tender but not painful. Now, I make my way down the steps carefully, holding onto the railing and turning the corner to find Dorian in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” I ask, raising an eyebrow when I see him at the stove. He jumps, though he obviously would have heard me, and spins around, giving me a sheepish grin.

“Look,” he says, gesturing to the pan, where a perfectly golden pancake sits. “Didn’t burn it this time.”

I smile and take a seat at the counter, shifting my weight and getting comfortable. Everything feels tender and new after last night.

“Emin called me this morning,” Dorian says, crossing over to me, pan in his left hand as he transfers the pancakes to the plate with his right. I watch as he sets a pad of butter on it, sprinkles it with powdered sugar, then drizzles it with maple syrup.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, pulling my eyes from his garnishing and up to his face.

“Everything is great,” he says, “you were right about the Amanzite being in that tree house. Apparently, your father had no idea.”

I bite my tongue, then ask, “Do you believe that?”

Dorian is quiet for a long minute, then he says, “I think so. Emin said your father has really been going through it. The realization that his wife is a traitor.”

When I say nothing, Dorian winces, “Sorry, love.”

The pet name makes my body flush with warmth, and I shake my head. “No, it’s okay. I just—I guess even after everything, I never thought she’d be capable of that. Of hurting me like that.”

“We’ll find her,” Dorian says, voice low, eyes dark and serious when they meet mine. “We’re not leaving this alone—Jerrod will regret the day he decided to fuck with our pack. And your mother is likely hiding in their territory—we’ll find her, too, make her pay for ever trying to hurt you.”

Tears are slipping from my eyes. I know this is going to take me a long time to get through, but I have plenty of experience with working through my past. I’ll get through it.

Especially now that I have my brother back. I rest my hand on my belly, smile up at Dorian. I have the chance now to build my own family, to be the mom for this baby that I wish I had for myself.

As if he can read my thoughts, Dorian circles the counter, placing the plate of pancakes in front of me and kissing my temple.

“You’re going to make an amazing mother,” he whispers, resting his forehead against the side of my head, sucking in a deep breath.

I smile at him, pick up the fork, and cut away a piece of the pancake. If I’m honest, it looks fantastic, perfectly golden and delicious. But when I put the bite in my mouth, I immediately choke, coughing it into a napkin and reaching for the glass of orange juice.

“Shit, what’s wrong?” Dorian asks, and I hold the fork out to him, laughing.

When he takes a bite, his reaction is the same as mine.

“Oh, gods,” he says, running his hand down his tongue and reaching for my orange juice, “oh, what happened—”

“Did you read the labels?” I’m standing, turning around the clear plastic containers until I find one with a one-half measuring cup still inside. Pinching a bit between my fingers, I bring it to my lips, tasting. “Salt—Dorian, did you add salt instead of sugar?”

“That’s salt ?” he coughs again, taking a sip of orange juice. I’m laughing so hard tears drip down my face, and I step toward him, hooking my arms around his waist.

His eyes go soft, and he leans down, touching his lips to mine gently. When he pulls back, I brush my nose against his.

“I love you,” he says, like the words are as easy as breathing to him.

“I love you, too,” I say, popping up on my tiptoes for one more kiss. “But, can we make a deal?”

His eyes shine. “Anything.”

“Why don’t you leave the cooking to me?”

I hardly realize what’s happening before he has me over his shoulder, and I’m staring at the floor.

“What are you doing?” I laugh, heat already flooding my core as he carries me toward the stairs.

He slaps my ass, his laugh vibrating through my body.

“You know,” he says, grinning at me as he lays me back on the bed, his eyes raking me up and down, pancakes completely forgotten in the kitchen. “Behavioral conditioning.”

“How is she doing?”

“That’s a great question,” I say, practically running through the general store, heart thudding in my chest. Products zip past me in a blur of colors, and the other shoppers stare, move out of my way, all of them surely vaguely aware of what’s going on today. “I have to get back, but I’ll be sure to update you when I know.”

Brock, the general store owner, crosses his hairy arms in front of his chest, and his petite wife, Alecia, smiles at me from her place at his side.

“Here,” she says, pushing a small package over the counter to me. “I put these together for her. You can tell her it will help her to care for the perinea—”

“Thank you,” I say, loading my things into a bag. “I have to go. Add this to my account?”

“Already done,” Brock says, grinning. “Best not keep her waiting.”

I’m running out to my car when a woman appears on the other side, nearly giving me a heart attack.

“Is it time?” Ash practically shouts, bouncing on her heels. “Tell me it’s time! The look on your face is like the sky is falling!”

“It’s time,” I tell her, the certainty of that statement settling in my gut. I hold the bag up before I throw it in the backseat. “Midwives sent me out for this stuff. I have to get back, they need it—”

Ash lets out a sharp laugh as she falls into the passenger seat. She's pulling her seatbelt on as I drop into the driver's seat, starting it, yanking on my own belt, and throwing it into reverse all in the same motion.

"What?" I ask, annoyed at her laughter, when I feel a fizzy sense of panic building in my stomach. "What's so funny?"

"Take your time, Dor," she laughs, leaning back in the chair. "Those midwives don't need this stuff—I'm sure they all came prepared. They probably just needed to get your annoying ass out of the house."

I roll my eyes at her, jamming my foot against the gas pedal as we fly out of town, but realize she's probably right. They probably didn't actually need the stuff. That doesn't stop me from feeling like I need to get back there as soon as possible.

Emin is the first to greet us as we walk into the house. He's been spending a lot of time with Aidan lately, helping him to train. When he's not doing that, we're working together, trying to track down Jerrod Blacklock and Mhairi Argent. So far, both have been evading us, but we know we'll have to take out the alpha leader of the Grayhides.

It can't come soon enough for me, as I haven't forgotten his obsession with my mate.

Kira wasn't okay with the idea of her father being present, as he's still facing punishment from the council for harboring the Amanzite, and generally being unaware of his wife's dealings, but she told me to call Emin as soon as we realized today would be the day.

I'm glad to see that he came right away.

"Hey," Ash says, eyes skipping from Emin and to the back room, where the midwives are set up with Kira. "How is she doing?"

“Uh, lots of screaming and cursing,” Emin says, leaning on the counter. “Told them I’d be here if they need anything. They haven’t.”

Ash nods. “Well, they are professionals. Boy, I bet she’s ready to be off bed rest.”

Of course, Kira’s pregnancy was a little more complicated than we thought. The midwife instructed her to go on bed rest for around six months, and she’s been trapped in that back room ever since.

“Yeah, thank the gods,” Emin says, rolling his eyes. “I don’t need any more scarves.”

I stifle a laugh—the last thing I’m going to do is poke fun at my mate on the day she’s giving birth. But Emin has a point—getting out of bed will hopefully slow Kira down on the knitting. Between what she was able to sew before the bed rest and all the cute knitted onesies, our child won’t need any clothes for a year.

A scream rips out through the space, and the midwife pokes her head out the door, glancing around the room.

“Dad?” she says, eyes landing on me, and my stomach flips in response to the new title. “You’re needed. It’s time.”

I follow her into the room, my eyes meeting Kira’s when I do. She’s slicked down with sweat, her hair pushed back from her face, and more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her.

Wordlessly, she holds her hand up to me, and I move to her side, taking it. The process is exactly as I’d heard to be, and a thousand times more impactful, the strange scent of Kira and something new, the tiny person her body has created. The midwives moved quickly, communicating under their breaths, the sudden, piercing cry throughout the room.

My son . My body sways, pulling toward him, but I hold tight to Kira's hand as she grips onto me, crying out again. I look to the midwife between her legs, eyes widening when I hear her say, "One more, Mom. Come on, you got it."

"One more?" I ask, uselessly, because in the next moment, there's another set of cries, mirrored screaming filling the room. Kira is laughing and crying, her hand holding mine too tight.

"My babies," she says, craning her neck, looking for them. "Where are my babies?"

Seconds later, our boys are returned to her, settled on her chest, cleaned and swaddled, and she cries. I take one of them, watching as his tiny eyes squeeze shut, his breathing leveling out.

Impossibly small, warm, tender.

Our child—I look to Kira, eyes skipping over the little bundle she holds. Our children . Our boys.

"Twins ?"

Kira and I look up to see Emin and Ash standing in the doorway. Ash walks in slowly, her eyes filling with tears as she stares at the son in my hands.

"Can I...?"

Kira nods, and Ash reaches out for him, letting out a sad, happy little hiccup as she nuzzles him to her chest.

"Holy shit," Emin says, standing beside her, his eyes locked on the baby. He glances at Kira, looks a bit like he might pass out, and says, "Well, that explains the bed rest."

Kira laughs, then says weakly, “Watch your mouth around my kids, brother. Here, do you want to hold—?”

“Nah,” Emin holds his hands up, like he’s afraid we might try to put a baby in his hands anyway. “I’m all good. Happy to look. Gods, I can’t believe you had both of those inside you.”

“Alright, everyone,” one of the midwives says, holding her hands up. “Mom has to try and nurse these guys, so we’ll need a little privacy.” Then, looking at me, she says, “Have the two of you settled on names?”

I glance at Kira’s whose eyes are wide. We had just one name, weren’t expecting twins. This changes everything. As Emin and Ash file out of the room, I place my hand on Kira’s shoulder, smiling down at my miraculous wife.

“No,” I say, “but I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

THE END