



# Sun's Roar (Royal Lupine Elementals #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Helena Divatas restaurant recipes never prepared her for the flames literally erupting in her kitchen. On her thirtieth birthday, mysterious fires ignite throughout her culinary domain. Before she can make sense of her world going up in smoke, a devastatingly handsome stranger appears with an impossible claim: she's causing the fires with powers she never knew she possessed.

Prince Sol Cadoret, the passionate alpha of the Sunflare pack, has spent his life waiting for a wolf mate worthy of standing beside him as Luna. Instead, fate delivers him a fiery-haired human woman with flame-wielding powers and a stubborn streak that makes his wolf burn with desire.

As Helena struggles to control the raw fire surging through her veins, an undeniable attraction builds between them—one as intense and consuming as the flames themselves. When Helena becomes the target of Sol's enemies, she has to embrace her newfound abilities. Sol must protect his mate, even if it means she'll have to leave her human world behind.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

ONE

HELENA

Helena wiped beads of sweat from her brow as she leaned over the simmering pot and inhaled the complex aroma of her newest creation. The kitchen of Ember & Spice buzzed around her, a symphony of clattering pans and shouted orders she'd grown to love more than any birthday song.

"Chef, the supplier called about the truffles. They're delayed until tomorrow." Marco, her sous chef, appeared at her elbow with a clipboard.

"Of course, they are." Helena tucked a loose strand of red hair behind her ear. The same rebellious red hair that had been with her for thirty years as of today. Not that anyone needed to make a fuss about it. "Tell Jean to redo the special menu card without the truffle risotto. We'll substitute the wild mushroom ravioli."

"On it. Also—" Marco hesitated, a poorly concealed grin spreading across his face. "Happy birthday."

Helena rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress her smile. "It's just another Thursday, Marco."

"A Thursday where you're officially old," Marco teased.

"Thirty isn't old!" She flicked her kitchen towel at him as he ducked away laughing.

The rest of the morning passed in a rapid blur of prep work and taste testing. Helena lost herself in the familiar patterns, her hands working from muscle memory while her mind raced ahead to the evening service.

Her phone buzzed occasionally with birthday texts from her best friends scattered across the country—Lorelei in Boston, Isolde in Portland, Seraphina in Miami, Thea in Providence, and Everly in New York City, all promising to video chat on the weekend when Helena might actually have five minutes to spare.

At two o'clock, she took her customary fifteen-minute break, collapsing onto the chair in her small office. The mirror on her wall reflected her flushed face and her hazel eyes bright from the kitchen heat. She looked the same as yesterday despite crossing the threshold into her thirties today.

“So, this is what thirty looks like,” she murmured, running her fingers through her hair.

She shook her head and glanced down at her desk. Like usual, there were stacks of invoices, reviews, and scheduling conflicts—the less glamorous side of running the hottest restaurant in San Diego. Helena sighed and felt a strange warmth building in her chest. Heartburn? At thirty? She pressed a hand to her sternum.

“God, I really need a life beyond these walls,” she whispered to the empty room. “Maybe a date that doesn’t involve food critics or supplier meetings.”

The warmth intensified suddenly, spreading down her arms. Helena frowned, rolling up her sleeves. Her pale skin looked normal but felt like she’d stepped too close to the wood-fired oven. Before she could process this further, a knock came at the door.

“Chef, the Nicholsons are here. They’re asking if you’ll come out and say hello.” Her lead server poked her head in.

Helena nodded, pushing away the strange sensation. “Tell them I’ll be right out.”

As she stood, the warmth receded, leaving only a lingering tingle in her fingertips. Probably just stress and exhaustion—the constant companions of a restaurant owner who hadn’t taken a real day off in three years.

Before she knew it, the workday was just about over. Her shoulders ached as she wiped down her station one last time. The last customers had left twenty minutes ago, and the kitchen cleanup was nearly complete. Her thirtieth birthday had passed by in a blur of seared scallops and plated desserts, exactly as she’d wanted—no fuss, just work.

“Chef, could you check the walk-in before you go?” Marco called, his voice oddly formal.

Helena frowned. “I thought Javier already inventoried?—”

“Just real quick,” Zoe interrupted, appearing from nowhere to guide Helena by the elbow. “Something looks off with the produce delivery.”

Helena allowed herself to be steered toward the refrigerator, too tired to argue. The strange warmth from earlier had returned intermittently throughout service, flaring whenever she’d gotten frustrated with a returned dish or a missed ticket. She’d dismissed it as some weird birthday anxiety.

When she pushed open the heavy door, darkness greeted her.

“What the?—”

The lights flicked on.

“SURPRISE!”

Her kitchen staff crowded inside, Marco holding a chocolate cake blazing with candles. Her favorite—dark chocolate with ganache filling and raspberry coulis. The sight made her throat tighten.

“You guys,” Helena whispered, the warmth in her chest expanding into something that felt dangerously close to tears.

“Make a wish, Chef,” Zoe urged, her dark eyes dancing with mischief. “Thirty candles for thirty years.”

Marco set the cake on a prep table someone had cleared. “Though your advanced age required us to buy extra packs.”

Helena laughed as everyone gathered around. Their faces glowed in the candlelight, these people who’d become her surrogate family during endless dinner services and kitchen disasters.

“Happy birthday to you...” they began singing, slightly off-key but with genuine affection.

Helena closed her eyes when they finished, drew in a deep breath, and leaned forward to extinguish the flames.

Instead of going out, the candles flared upward.

Flames shot two feet high, instantly catching the paper towels nearby. The fire spread along the countertop with unnatural speed.

“What the hell?” Marco jumped back, bumping into a shelf.

Helena froze, her lungs seizing with panic as she watched flames dance across her kitchen. The heat didn't burn her skin despite how close she stood. Instead, it seemed to reach for her, curling around her fingers like an affectionate cat.

"Fire extinguisher!" someone yelled, but nobody moved, all eyes fixed on the inferno that had been a birthday cake seconds ago.

The strange warmth in Helena's chest surged in response to her fear, racing down her arms. Her fingertips tingled, then burned, then glowed with an inner light that matched the fire consuming her kitchen.

"This can't be happening," Helena whispered, staring at her hands in horror as tiny flames danced across her skin without burning her flesh.

"Helena!" Zoe screamed, finally breaking from her shock. "Get back!"

But Helena couldn't move, transfixed by the impossible sight of fire flowing from her own body, feeding the blaze that threatened everything she'd built.

"What's happening to me?" she gasped, as the kitchen—her sanctuary, her life's work—blazed around her.

Helena watched as the flames danced further across the wooden prep table, spreading with unnatural speed toward the ceiling. Her heart hammered against her ribs while her gaze remained fixed on her fingers where tiny flames continued to flicker like birthday candles replanted on her skin.

"We need the fire extinguisher now!" Marco shouted, jolting into action. He lunged for the red canister mounted on the wall.

Zoe grabbed a large metal lid, slamming it over part of the burning cake. "Helena,

move back!”

Marco unleashed a blast of white foam from the extinguisher, dousing the main blaze. Two line cooks grabbed pitchers of water, dumping them on smaller flames licking at the edges of the counter. The sizzling hiss of dying fire filled the kitchen along with the acrid smell of smoke and chemicals.

Helena closed her fists tightly, willing the impossible fire on her hands to disappear. The warmth in her chest constricted, pulling back through her arms, and the flames on her fingertips extinguished as if someone had thrown a switch. No one seemed to have noticed—they were too busy with the chaos around them.

“Is everyone okay?” Helena finally managed, her voice barely audible above the commotion.

“What the hell kind of candles were those?” Marco asked, setting down the extinguisher.

“Just regular ones from the party store down the street,” Zoe replied, her eyes wide with lingering fear.

The door to the kitchen banged open. Paige, the restaurant manager, burst in with her ever-present tablet clutched to her chest. Her neat blonde bob swung as she surveyed the foam-covered mess.

“What happened here? I smelled smoke from the office,” Paige demanded, her gaze sweeping over the damage.

Marco gestured to the ruined cake. “The birthday candles went nuclear.”

“Jesus,” Paige exhaled sharply. “Thank goodness you caught it quickly.” She stepped

closer to Helena, lowering her voice. “We can’t afford to close for renovations right now. Not with Vesper’s new place stealing our regulars and that critic from the Tribune coming next week.”

Helena nodded mechanically, barely hearing the words. She stared at her hands. Normal hands now. Her pale skin looked slightly reddened from kitchen work, but no fire anymore. Had she imagined it? But the flames had been real enough—the scorched ceiling tiles proved that.

“I’ve never seen candles do that,” one of the line cooks murmured. “It was like watching a magic trick gone wrong.”

“It could’ve ended everything,” another whispered. “My cousin’s restaurant burned down last year. They never recovered after that.”

The celebratory mood had evaporated completely. Everyone looked between the damage and Helena with confusion written across their faces.

“You okay, Chef?” Marco asked, concern creasing his brow. “You look paler than usual.”

“Fine. Just—” She forced a weak smile. “Not how I pictured my birthday ending.”

Zoe stepped closer, lowering her voice. “We can clean this up. Maybe you should head home.”

Home. Yes. Somewhere private where she could process whatever impossible thing was happening to her.

Helena shook her head, trying to ignore how her fingertips still tingled with phantom heat. “I can stay,” Helena said, though every instinct screamed for her to run. “My



kitchen, my responsibility.”

Helena grabbed a mop, attacking the foam-covered floor while trying to keep her hands from trembling. The acrid smell of smoke hung in the air, but beneath it, she detected something else—a scent like cinnamon and woodsmoke that seemed oddly comforting. Her fingers tingled with remembered heat as she worked.

“You know,” she said to Marco as he scrubbed carbon scoring from a stainless-steel counter, “I’ve never seen small birthday candles do that.”

“Me neither.” He shook his head. “Must’ve been defective or something.”

Helena nodded, but doubt gnawed at her. The flames hadn’t felt defective—they had felt right. Like old friends reaching out to greet her after years apart. Even now, as she glanced at the charred ceiling tiles, she felt an inexplicable pull toward the damage rather than revulsion.

The kitchen door swung open, and Tyanna breezed in, her ponytail swinging. As the restaurant’s bar manager, she rarely ventured into Helena’s domain.

“Holy shit, Helena! I heard there was a five-alarm situation in here.” Tyanna whistled, surveying the damage. “Happy birthday, I guess?”

“Thanks.” Helena leaned on her mop. “Maybe turning thirty means entering my firestarter phase. Should I start collecting lighters and matches?”

Tyanna laughed, grabbing paper towels to help clean. “Girl, please. If you were going to have a pyro breakdown, it would’ve happened during that month when the health inspector kept showing up unannounced.”

Helena smiled, but her mind suddenly flashed back to countless memories she’d

never examined too closely before. Like how she'd always volunteered to tend campfires during Girl Scout trips, how she found the dancing flames of her gas range soothing after stressful days, and how she'd always chosen candles over electric lights when entertaining at home.

"Maybe I've always been a little obsessed with fire," she murmured.

"All chefs are," Tyanna replied, bumping Helena's hip with her own. "It's literally your job to play with fire."

When the kitchen finally gleamed again—albeit with a few battle scars—Helena dragged herself to her car. The evening air felt unusually cool against her skin, which had maintained a pleasant warmth since the incident. She slid behind the wheel and pressed her fingertips to the steering wheel, half expecting the leather to sizzle beneath her touch.

Her phone suddenly rang, her mother's face lighting up the screen.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart!" her mother's voice sang through the speaker.

"Thanks, Mom." Helena smiled despite her inner turmoil.

"Did you do anything special?"

Helena's throat tightened. "Just a small thing at work. Nothing spectacular." The lie tasted bitter on her tongue, but how could she possibly explain what had happened? Hi, Mom, I think I might be able to create fire with my bare hands. No big deal.

After promising to visit soon, Helena ended the call and sat in silence, staring at her hands. The desire to see flames dance across her skin again was almost overwhelming—not destructive, not dangerous, but like a musician longing to hear a

familiar melody. She flexed her fingers, searching for that inner heat that had surged through her veins earlier.

“What’s even happening to me? And why now?” she whispered to her empty car.

The questions hung unanswered as Helena started the engine. But she couldn’t shake the terrifying certainty that something fundamental had changed—that her predictable, carefully constructed life had just gone up in flames.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

TWO

SOL

Sol stretched his arms across the cool marble edge of the infinity pool. Water droplets cascaded down his tanned chest as he tilted his face toward the setting sun. His castle's backyard transformed into a golden paradise at this hour, the dying light catching on every wet surface and turning his domain into a kingdom of fire.

"Impressive turnout," Joshua remarked beside him, his dark hair slicked back with pool water. "Your pack parties are becoming legendary."

Sol's gaze swept across his territory with satisfaction. Pack members in human form lounged on plush chairs sipping drinks that caught the sunset's glow, while several wolves prowled the perimeter, their fur gleaming wet from occasional dips in the water. The scent of grilling meat wafted from the stone outdoor kitchen where his personal chef worked diligently.

"A strong alpha provides." Sol's voice carried the natural authority that made others instinctively straighten their posture. "A pack that plays together stays together."

The sound of squealing laughter drew his attention to the shallow end where his nephews and niece splashed in mock battle, their small bodies darting through the water.

"Uncle Sol! Watch this!" His dark-haired nephew, Finn, performed an awkward attempt at a cannonball that ended in a thunderous splash.

Sol nodded approvingly, unable to suppress the grin tugging at his lips. “Better than last week, pup.”

Joshua chuckled. “Your sister’s going to murder you when they come home soaked and hyper.”

“Let her try.” Sol’s green eyes flashed with challenge, though the smile never left his face. “Claire knows better than to question how I handle the pups.”

A female pack member in a crimson bikini slowly approached the pool’s edge, swaying her hips. “Prince Sol, can I bring you anything? Another drink perhaps?”

“Bourbon. Neat.” Sol barely glanced her way, though he registered her disappointment as she retreated. “They never stop trying, do they?”

Joshua snorted. “Can you blame them? Unmated alpha prince with a castle, power, and those cheekbones? Hell, I’d throw myself at you if I swung that way.”

Sol splashed water in his beta’s face. “Your loyalty is noted. Your taste, questionable.”

The wolf inside him stirred restlessly, pushing against his skin. Despite the perfect evening and the contentment of seeing his pack thrive around him, something felt off-balance. He’d been experiencing this odd sensation for weeks now—a burning in his blood that no amount of swimming, hunting, or fighting could quench.

“You’ve got that look again,” Joshua observed, his voice dropping lower. “Like you’re about to shift and run into the forest for three days.”

Sol rolled his powerful shoulders. “Maybe I should. Something’s not right.”

“The council meeting tomorrow?”

“No.” Sol’s jaw tightened. “Something else. Something...”

A burst of laughter erupted from a group nearby as one of the pack members shifted mid-conversation, clothes tearing as fur emerged, prompting others to dive away from the spray of water.

“Theo!” Sol barked, authority resonating in his voice. “Shift in the designated area. You know better.”

The wolf lowered his head in immediate submission before padding away, tail between his legs.

“Was that necessary?” Joshua asked.

“Rules exist for reasons. Respect them or challenge me for leadership.” Sol’s eyes flashed dangerously before softening. “Besides, he ruined a perfectly good outfit.”

As darkness soon settled around them, the outdoor lights activated, casting the backyard in a warm glow that mimicked the embers of a dying fire. Just as Sol liked it.

Thirty minutes later, the full moon emerged from behind a wisp of cloud, casting silver light across Sol’s domain. Joshua hoisted himself out of the pool, water cascading down his muscular frame.

“Time to wrangle the pups before my very pregnant wife threatens to shift and hunt me down.” Joshua nodded toward the shallow end where his children splashed wildly.

Sol tracked his gaze to the three youngsters. The twins, Filip and Finn, were locked in some sort of underwater wrestling match while their younger sister, Emma, jumped from the edge repeatedly, her delighted squeals piercing the night.

“She wouldn’t dare hunt my beta.” Sol’s lips curled into a challenging smile. “But her temper does rival mine.”

“Exactly why I’m not testing it.” Joshua whistled sharply. “Pups! Time to go!”

A chorus of protests erupted from the children, but one stern look from Sol silenced them immediately. The alpha power he exuded wasn’t something he could—or wanted—to turn off, even around children.

“Listen to your father,” Sol commanded, his voice gentle but unyielding. “You can come back tomorrow.”

The children climbed out obediently. Emma ran straight to Sol, who was still in the pool against the marble edge, and wrapped her small arms around his wet neck.

“Will you shift for us tomorrow, Uncle Sol? Please?” Her eyes, so much like Claire’s, shone with admiration.

Sol placed his hand on her damp blonde head. “Perhaps. If you behave for your mother tonight.”

Joshua gathered towels for his brood. “I’ll be back shortly. Save some of that bourbon for me.”

As Joshua herded his children toward the castle’s side entrance, Sol emerged from the pool in one fluid motion. Water streamed down his body, highlighting every sculpted muscle earned through centuries of fighting and leading. The restlessness inside him

hadn't quieted. If anything, the full moon intensified it.

Sol's wolf paced beneath his skin, eager for release, but he pushed the sensation down. Tonight was about his pack's unity, not his inexplicable discomfort.

He soon moved through his gathered pack members with practiced ease, the perfect alpha in his element. He clasped shoulders, asked about family members, and settled minor disputes with simple decrees that no one questioned. This was what he was born for—leadership, respect, and power. The devotion in his pack members' eyes fed something primal in him.

"Your Highness," Eliza, one of his oldest pack members, approached with a bottle of bourbon. "Shall I refresh your drink?"

Sol held out his empty glass. "Your timing is impeccable as always."

"The young ones were wondering if you might shift later and run with them," she said, pouring a generous measure. "They rarely get to see their alpha's wolf these days."

The request stirred his wolf's interest, but Sol kept his expression neutral. "Perhaps. The night is still young."

Two hours passed in a blur of conversations, subtle pack politics, and maintaining the delicate balance that kept his territory thriving. When Joshua finally returned, Sol felt a big grin stretch across his face.

"About time," Sol called out. "I was beginning to think Claire had finally made good on her threats."

Joshua grinned back. "She tried. But I escaped by promising to do all the chores for



the next week.”

“A high price.”

“Worth it for this downtime.” Joshua gestured to the illuminated volleyball court where several pack members were already gathering.

Sol’s competitive nature flared instantly. “Marcus, Ryder,” he called to two of his strongest pack members. “Care to test yourselves against your alpha?”

The challenge hung in the air, impossible to refuse. The pack members who weren’t playing gathered around the court, drinks in hand, eager to watch their leader in action.

“Rules?” Ryder asked, rolling his powerful shoulders.

“Win or suffer the shame of defeat,” Sol replied. “First to twenty-one.”

The crowd whistled and cheered as Sol took his position, the moonlight highlighting the intricate pack tattoo that covered his upper right arm—a black wolf howling before a blazing sun surrounded by trees. The symbol of Sunflare royalty.

Joshua served first, the ball arcing high before smashing down just inside the line. The game was instantly intense with neither side willing to concede a point without diving, leaping, or slamming their bodies into the sand.

Sol’s wolf reveled in the competition and display of strength and dominance. Each powerful spike he delivered drove back the strange burning sensation that had plagued him for weeks.

Before long, the score was twenty to seventeen. One point away from victory , Sol

thought to himself. The volleyball hung suspended in the air for a fraction longer than gravity should allow. Sol tracked it with predatory focus, his muscles coiled as he readied for the kill shot.

“Mine,” he growled to Joshua, claiming the final spike as his birthright.

Joshua deftly set the ball with expert precision, lifting it to the perfect height. Sol launched himself skyward, his powerful body defying gravity as he rose above the net. Time seemed to slow as he hung at the apex of his jump, arm cocked back, every muscle defined in the moonlight and artificial glow of the spotlights.

His hand connected with savage force, driving the ball between their opponents who barely had time to flinch before it hammered into the sand.

“Twenty-one!” Joshua shouted, pumping his fist in triumph.

Sol landed gracefully, a satisfied smirk playing across his lips as the crowd erupted in cheers. The defeated pack members bowed their heads slightly in deference—even in games, the hierarchy remained clear.

“You could’ve left something for them to salvage,” Joshua laughed, clapping a hand on Sol’s bare shoulder, their skin glistening with sweat in the summer night.

Sol’s eyes glinted with primal satisfaction. “Mercy is a luxury for those who can afford weakness.”

He raised his arms in victory, accepting the adulation of his pack with the confidence of a ruler born to command.

Then it happened.

A sensation like lightning striking water coursed through his body. Sol's spine straightened as if pulled by an invisible force. The air around him charged with a power ancient and familiar, yet somehow brand new.

The massive bonfire at the center of the gathering suddenly flared twenty feet into the night sky, flames twisting into shapes that resembled wolves in mid-hunt. The pack members gasped. Several of the younger ones backed away while the older ones stood transfixed, their expressions a mixture of awe and understanding.

Sol's wolf slammed against the cage of his human form, demanding release, howling with such ferocity that Sol had to clench his jaw to keep from physically crying out. The fire in his blood that had been simmering for weeks now blazed like a supernova.

Joshua went completely still beside him, his eyes wide with recognition. "Sol," he whispered. "Is that what I think?—"

"Your Highness." Mitesh appeared before them, the elderly royal advisor moving with unexpected swiftness. His weathered face was illuminated by the still-pulsing bonfire, his eyes reflecting centuries of wisdom. "After centuries..."

Sol couldn't speak. His throat had closed around words that wouldn't form. The burning sensation that had plagued him transformed into something entirely different—a tether, stretching away from him toward some unknown destination.

"Your Luna has awakened," Mitesh confirmed, his voice reverent yet firm. "The Moon Goddess has blessed you at last."

The pack had gone completely silent, every member seeming to feel the shift in their collective power and waiting for their alpha to acknowledge what they all sensed—the awakening of his Luna.

Sol remained immobile, centuries of waiting crashing down on him in a single, perfect moment. After endless years of patience and solitude, somewhere in the world, his Luna had finally come of age.

She was ready. She was his. The wolf inside him howled in triumph.

Sol stood on the edge of the volleyball court, sand still clinging to his bare feet as the warm summer air caressed his skin. The sensation coursing through his veins was unlike anything he'd experienced in his centuries of existence—a liquid fire that burned without consuming, a perfect fusion of pleasure and pain that centered him in this moment beneath the full moon.

“Yes,” he finally said, his deep voice resonating with certainty as he met Mitesh's knowing gaze. “The Moon Goddess has indeed blessed me tonight.”

The words felt sacred leaving his lips, a truth he'd waited lifetimes to speak. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, no longer restless but purposeful, ready to claim what was rightfully theirs.

Joshua patted him on the shoulder, his eyes bright. “After all this time, brother.”

Sol's mouth curved into a smile that transformed his usually stern features. The pack members gathered closer, drawn by the palpable shift in their alpha's energy.

“For centuries,” Sol addressed them, his voice carrying across the castle grounds, “I've ruled the Sunflare Pack alone. I've watched each of you find your mates and build your families.” His gaze drifted briefly to Joshua, thinking of his sister Claire and their three pups—the family bond he'd only experienced as an uncle, never as a mate or father.

The burning sensation centered in his chest pulled like a compass pointing north.

Somewhere—not too far, he sensed—she was waiting. Whether she knew it yet or not.

“Tomorrow at dawn,” Sol announced, drawing himself to his full height, “I leave to find her. To find the woman the Moon Goddess has chosen to be my Luna, to be the mother of the next generation of Sunflare royalty.”

A cheer erupted from the gathered pack, glasses raised in celebration. But Sol’s mind was already racing ahead. After centuries of patience, his time had finally come. The flickering mate bond inside him would eventually lead him to her—his perfect match, the one woman in all the world whose spirit called to his wolf.

“For the Sunflare Pack,” he called out, raising his glass. “And for our Luna, whoever she may be!”

“For our Luna!” the pack echoed, their voices rising into the night sky.

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

THREE

HELENA

Helena slid her key into the front door lock of Ember & Spice at precisely 5:30 AM the next morning. As she pushed the door open, the restaurant sat in morning darkness, still holding the subtle scents of last night's closing service—garlic, white wine, and a lingering hint of smoke that made her stomach tighten.

She flipped on the lights and made her way to the small office tucked behind the kitchen. The kitchen had been her sanctuary for years, the place where chaos bent to her will. Unlike the strange incident with the birthday candles that still prickled at the edge of her thoughts.

She settled into her chair and opened her laptop, the blue glow illuminating her tired face. Sleep had been fitful, her dreams filled with dancing flames that called to her rather than frightened her. She shook her head and focused on her morning routine—checking inventory, reviewing reservations, and scrolling through emails.

Her finger froze mid-scroll.

“What the hell?”

The email from San Diego's city manager sat boldly in her inbox, subject line reading: “Urgent: Property Acquisition Notice - Ember & Spice Location.”

Her heart hammered as she clicked it open. Her hazel eyes widened as she scanned

the contents, each word landing like a blow.

“Redevelopment... corporate complex... condos... acquisition of current property...”

But then her gaze caught on a surprising detail.

“Restaurant identified as a cultural asset... buyer interested in retaining operation... substantial buyout offer for current owner...”

Helena let out a string of curses that would’ve made her line cooks blush. She grabbed her phone and dialed the number at the bottom of the email.

“City Manager’s office, this is Rachel.”

“This is Helena Divata, owner of Ember & Spice. I just received your email about our property.”

“Oh yes, Miss Divata! I was hoping you’d call early. The investor is quite eager.”

“I bet he is,” Helena said, twirling a strand of red hair around her finger. “Can you explain exactly what this means for my restaurant? For my staff?”

Twenty minutes later, Helena hung up, her mind racing. The offer was staggering—enough to clear all her debts, provide generous bonuses to her loyal staff, and still leave her as executive chef with a substantial salary increase.

She glanced around her cramped office at the stack of unpaid invoices and the dwindling profit projections she’d been working on before the birthday incident. The restaurant industry was brutal, and competition had been eating into their margins. The security this deal offered was tempting.

“You look like someone just offered to buy your soul,” Tyanna said, poking her head through the doorway. “I knocked, but you were somewhere else.”

Helena’s lips curved into a wry smile. “Someone just offered to buy the restaurant.”

“What?” Tyanna stepped fully into the office. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. Some millionaire is buying up the whole block for redevelopment but wants to keep us as the crown jewel of his fancy new complex.”

“And?”

“And I think I’m going to take it.” The words felt strange leaving her mouth but also freeing. “We’ve been treading water for months.”

By ten o’clock, the entire staff arrived, and Helena gathered them all in the dining room.

“So,” Helena said, clasping her hands together. “I have news. Big news.”

Her stomach fluttered as fifteen pairs of eyes fixed on her. The kitchen staff still wore their whites, prep half-finished for the day ahead. The servers stood with notepads in hand. Helena had rehearsed this speech a dozen times in her head, but now the words seemed to evaporate like water on a hot skillet.

“I sold the restaurant,” she blurted out, then quickly raised her hands as gasps rippled through the room. “But before you panic—everyone’s jobs are safe. More than safe, actually.”

She tucked her red hair behind her ear, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. “The investor is some tech millionaire looking to revitalize this block. He wants Ember & Spice as



his flagship restaurant. And..." She took a deep breath, savoring the moment. "He's providing substantial bonuses for every single one of you."

Helena watched their expressions transform from shock to disbelief to cautious excitement. Marco, her sous chef, stepped forward with arms crossed.

"How substantial are we talking?"

Helena smiled and named the figure. The room erupted.

"Holy shit, Chef!" Tyanna squealed. "That's three months' rent!"

"And health insurance," Helena added, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders. The staff's medical benefits had been keeping her awake at night for months. "Full coverage, starting next month."

Joey, their youngest line cook, looked up from the calculator on his phone. "But what about you, Chef? Are you still..."

"I'll be staying on as executive chef with complete creative control and a proper salary that doesn't involve me eating ramen four nights a week." She felt a blush creeping up her neck. "And we're meeting the new owner today."

The announcement sent the kitchen into overdrive. Suddenly everyone was polishing surfaces that had already been cleaned, rearranging perfectly arranged place settings, and debating what special to feature.

Helena fled to the safety of her kitchen where Marco was aggressively chopping scallions.

"So, who is this mystery millionaire?" he asked, knife flashing. "Should we be

worried?”

Helena’s hands found comfort in the familiar ritual of kneading dough. “Honestly, I have no idea. The city manager just said he was young, ambitious, and specifically requested that we stay operational.”

“Young, rich, and interested in fine dining?” Tyanna wiggled her eyebrows as she passed by with a tray of dessert glasses. “Maybe he’s single too.”

Helena rolled her eyes but couldn’t stop the small smile that tugged at her lips. Though her practical nature had always kept romance low on her priority list, something about this birthday—candle disaster aside—had awakened a restlessness inside her. A hunger for something beyond the comfortable rhythms of her kitchen.

“Let’s focus on impressing him with our food first,” Helena said, wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron. But even as she turned her attention to the day’s menu, she couldn’t help but wonder about the mysterious investor who had just changed all their lives.

Helena soon found herself straightening the menus at the hostess stand, adjusting them for the fifth time. The restaurant wouldn’t open for another two hours, but the investor who’d just bought the place could arrive at any moment. She combed her fingers through her red hair and smoothed her chef’s coat, aware that her usual kitchen attire wasn’t the most glamorous outfit to greet a millionaire in.

The front door suddenly swung open, sending a shaft of golden California sunlight across the polished floor. Helena blinked against the brightness, then froze as a silhouette filled the doorway.

The man who stepped through wasn’t what she expected. Instead of some tech-bro in a hoodie or an old-money type with slicked-back hair, he moved with the fluid grace

of a predator. His broad shoulders seemed to test the limits of what appeared to be a custom-tailored charcoal suit. No tie, just a crisp white shirt with the top button undone, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of tanned skin. His dark brown hair was styled in that effortlessly perfect way that suggested both sophistication and a hint of wildness—short at the sides, fuller on top.

But it was his eyes that caught her off guard. Green like the forest trees, that locked onto her with an intensity that made her heart stumble over its next beat.

Helena cleared her throat. “Welcome to Ember & Spice.”

“Thank you.” His voice was deep and warm.

He approached her with confident strides, crossing the short space with a presence that seemed to compress the air around them. Something primal skittered up Helena’s spine as he drew closer—a sensation both foreign and strangely familiar.

“I’m Sol Cadoret.” He extended his hand.

Helena placed her hand in his, and the instant their skin connected, warmth spiraled up her arm. Not uncomfortable, but surprising enough that she almost pulled away. “Helena Divata.”

His fingers lingered against hers a beat longer than necessary. “Helena.” The way he said her name made it sound like something precious.

“Can I help you today, Mr. Cadoret?” She tried to sound professional and unassuming, but her voice came out huskier than intended.

“Sol, please.” His eyes hadn’t left hers, even as his thumb brushed once across her knuckles before releasing her hand. “And I think perhaps we can help each other.”

Helena took an instinctive step back, needing to reestablish some professional distance. The movement caused her to bump against the hostess stand, sending the carefully arranged menus sliding.

Sol reached out with surprising speed, catching them before they hit the floor. As he straightened, a hint of a smile played on the corners of his mouth, partially hidden by his neatly trimmed beard.

“Quick reflexes,” Helena said, accepting the menus back.

“You have no idea.” His smile deepened, revealing a flash of perfect white teeth.

“Would you like a tour?” Helena gestured toward the dining room, desperate to redirect her thoughts away from speculating what else those reflexes might be good for.

“Lead the way.”

She felt his presence at her back as they moved through the dining area, her awareness of him almost tactile. “The dining room seats sixty-five. We’re known for creating an intimate atmosphere despite the open layout.”

“It’s beautiful. Warm.” His gaze swept the room before returning to her, something appreciative and possessive in his eyes. “I can see why people are drawn here.”

Helena soon led Sol through the gleaming kitchen, hyperaware of how his presence seemed to fill the entire space. The staff paused in their tasks, eyeing the stranger in the expensive suit with undisguised curiosity. She felt oddly protective of her domain, yet proud to show it off.

“And this is where the magic happens,” Helena said, gesturing to the custom-built

wood-fired oven that was the heart of her kitchen. “We use local oak that gives the food a distinctive smokiness.”

Sol leaned closer to the oven, inhaling deeply. “It reminds me of home,” he murmured, his voice tinged with a fondness that piqued her curiosity.

“Well, Mr. Cadoret,” Helena said, placing her hands on her hips as she concluded the tour, “what do you think of your new acquisition? Will Ember & Spice meet your expectations?”

Sol’s eyebrows shot up, his green eyes widening slightly before a slow, amused smile spread across his face. “My acquisition? You think I’m buying this restaurant?”

Heat flashed through Helena’s body, starting at her core and rushing to her cheeks. “You’re not?” Her voice emerged as a mortified whisper.

“I’m afraid not.” His smile widened.

Helena’s embarrassment quickly morphed into irritation. “Then why did you let me give you an entire tour? I’ve spent the last thirty minutes showing you around like you own the place!” She glanced nervously at the clock on the wall. “The actual investor will be here any minute.”

Sol stepped closer, his tall frame forcing her to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. “Because I wanted to spend time with you.” The direct simplicity of his statement knocked the breath from her lungs.

“You need to leave. Now.” Helena pointed toward the exit, ignoring the curious glances from her staff.

“I will,” he agreed, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through her chest.

“If you have dinner with me tonight.”

The audacity stunned her. “Are you serious? I just told you my new boss is coming today. I need to be here for dinner service. To make a good impression.”

“Tomorrow, then.” His persistence should have annoyed her, but something in his unwavering attention sent thrills racing through her body.

“Look,” Helena sighed, “I need you to go. The investor could literally be here any minute.”

Sol pulled a business card from his inner pocket and held it between two fingers. “Take this. Call me when you’re ready.”

Helena snatched the card, shoving it into her chef’s coat pocket without looking at it. “Fine. I’ll call. Now please, leave.”

His gaze held her for a moment longer, intense and searching, before he nodded. “Until then, Helena.”

The way he spoke her name—like he was tasting it—sent another ripple of heat through her body. She watched him stride away, noting how the staff seemed to unconsciously make way for him, parting like water around a stone.

The moment the door swung shut behind him, Helena exhaled shakily, pressing her palm against her pocket where his card burned like a promise.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

FOUR

SOL

Sol burst out of the front door of the restaurant. His jaw was clenched so tightly he could have crushed stone between his teeth. Two centuries as alpha and Prince of the Sunflare pack, and some chef had just dismissed him like a beggar at the palace gates. The afternoon sun beat down on his face, but it was nothing compared to the heat building in his chest.

He spotted the black SUV idling across the street, Joshua's silhouette visible behind the wheel. Sol's wolf prowled under his skin, unsettled and ready to claim what was rightfully his.

"It went that well, huh?" Joshua remarked as Sol slid into the back seat, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I take it by your expression, she fell instantly in love with you."

Sol's eyes flashed with dangerous intensity. "She thinks I just wasted her time. She gave me a tour of the damn restaurant thinking I was some investor."

Mitesh turned in the passenger seat, his weathered face creased with amusement. "The Luna doesn't recognize her alpha?"

"She's human," Sol growled, tugging at his hair.

Joshua glanced in the rearview mirror. "You're kidding. A human Luna? That's...

unprecedented.”

“Her power has only just awakened.” Sol stared out the window, recalling the fierce determination in Helena’s hazel eyes, the way her chef’s coat hugged her curves, and how her red hair cascaded down her back like living flame. “She has no idea what’s happening to her right now.”

“But you felt the connection?” Mitesh asked.

Sol’s fingers gripped the leather armrest, remembering the intense pull he felt when he saw her. “The very moment I walked in. It was like every flame in my blood reached for her.”

“Yet she kicked you out.” Joshua’s shoulders shook with barely suppressed laughter.

“She has fire,” Sol admitted, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. “Her red hair—it’s like she wears our pack’s element as a crown.” His voice dropped lower. “And she has curves that would make a saint commit sin.”

Mitesh cleared his throat. “If I may, Your Highness, perhaps this situation requires more... finesse than your usual approach.”

Sol’s eyes narrowed. “Meaning?”

“You’ve spent two centuries commanding respect through power alone,” Mitesh said carefully. “This woman doesn’t know our ways. You can’t simply order her to accept her destiny.”

“I was perfectly charming,” Sol protested.

Joshua snorted. “As charming as a wolf with a thorn in its paw, I’m sure.”



Sol leaned forward. “I’m not leaving without her. The pack needs its Luna.”

“And you need...” Mitesh left the question hanging.

Sol didn’t answer immediately. The truth was he’d seen something in Helena beyond her beauty. A strength that matched his own, and an independence that challenged him.

“I need her to understand what she is,” he finally said. “What we could be together.”

“Well, did she at least take your card?” Joshua asked, arching one eyebrow.

“Yes,” Sol murmured, a predatory grin spreading across his face. “She did.”

Sol peered through the SUV’s tinted back window at the restaurant’s front entrance. His wolf clawed beneath his skin, demanding he go back inside and claim what belonged to them. Two centuries of waiting, and now his Luna was mere feet away, completely unaware of her destiny—of their destiny.

“We should leave.” Joshua’s voice cut through Sol’s fixation. “You’re doing that thing with your eyes again.”

Sol caught his reflection in the rearview mirror—his green irises were ringed with gold, the telltale sign of his wolf rising too close to the surface. He blinked hard, forcing control.

“She’ll call,” Joshua added, starting the engine. “But right now, you’re one step away from looking like a stalker.”

“I am the alpha and Prince of the Sunflare pack,” Sol growled. “I don’t stalk. I claim.”

Mitesh cleared his throat. “With respect, Your Highness, humans have different... courtship rituals. A man lurking in a vehicle outside a woman’s workplace typically ends with restraining orders.”

Sol’s jaw clenched. “Fine. Drive.”

As the SUV pulled away, Sol cast one last look at the restaurant. Through the large front windows, he could see Helena bustling around, her red hair catching the light like living fire. The sight sent heat coursing through his veins.

“The Rancho Valencia Resort is nearby,” Joshua suggested. “Five stars. Excellent room service.”

“I don’t care where we go,” Sol muttered, though he did. An alpha provided only the best for his pack—even a temporary den deserved consideration.

“She was perfect,” Sol said, more to himself than the others. “That fire in her eyes when she realized I wasn’t who she thought.” His lips curled into a smile. “She didn’t back down. Not even when I crowded her space.”

“A worthy Luna,” Mitesh nodded.

Sol scratched his beard, recalling the scent of cinnamon and heat that surrounded Helena. The memory of her standing before him, defiant and beautiful, sent a visceral shudder through his body. “She is mine. There’s no doubt.”

“Human though,” Joshua remarked lightly, too lightly.

Sol’s gaze sharpened. “Careful.”

“It’s just an observation,” Joshua replied, turning onto the main boulevard. “The

council will have questions.”

“The council can burn,” Sol snapped. “Two hundred years I’ve ruled without their interference. I won’t start now.”

Mitesh turned in his seat. “What Joshua means is that we should prepare. A human Luna is unusual. She’ll need protection—human lives are so fragile, and she has no knowledge of our world.”

Sol’s wolf settled slightly at the protective thought. Yes, Helena would need safeguarding until she understood her powers and her place. Her place at his side.

“I have waited so long for her,” Sol rumbled. “I guess I can wait one more night.”

Sol tapped his fingers on the leather armrest as they drove to the hotel. His heartbeat was still erratic from his encounter with Helena. Through the tinted window, he watched the upscale buildings of the coastal town pass by, but his mind remained fixed on Helena—her flashing hazel eyes, the way her red hair seemed alive with her inner fire, and most distractingly, those curves that had made his wolf practically howl inside him.

“I just can’t believe your Luna is human.” Joshua shook his head, navigating the SUV through traffic.

Sol’s jaw tightened. “Does it matter? She’s mine. I felt it the moment I saw her.”

“It matters for her,” Mitesh replied, his weathered face thoughtful. “She knows nothing of our world, Your Highness. The transition will be... challenging.”

Sol pulled out his phone, checking for any missed calls. Nothing. His wolf paced restlessly, urging him to tell Joshua to turn the car around so Sol could go claim her

right now. Each passing minute without her phone call stoked his impatience.

“She’ll need proper training,” Sol muttered. “I’ll have to teach her everything—our ways, our history, and her responsibilities as Luna.”

Joshua looked at Sol in the rearview mirror. “And if she refuses to come back with you?”

Sol’s green eyes flashed gold. “She won’t.”

“With respect,” Mitesh interjected, “humans value choice above all else. Your usual... approach might not serve you well here.”

Sol’s nostrils flared. “What are you suggesting? That I leave my Luna behind when I’ve finally found her after two hundred years?”

“I’m suggesting patience,” Mitesh replied calmly. “A quality not commonly associated with alphas—or fire elementals.”

Sol checked his phone again, growling under his breath. His wolf was growing more agitated with each second that passed without Helena’s call.

“Has there ever been a human Luna before, Mitesh?” He leaned forward, his large frame filling the space between the front seats. “How can a human lead wolves? My pack will certainly question it.”

Mitesh turned to face him, his expression serene despite Sol’s intensity. “It’s uncommon, but not unheard of. The chronicles speak of three human Lunas in our pack’s history.”

Sol’s eyebrows shot up. “Three? In two thousand years?”

“Rare treasures are the most valuable, Your Highness.”

“But my wolves will want a Luna who understands?—“

“When you claim her properly,” Mitesh interrupted, his voice lowering, “when your teeth mark her as yours, it will awaken what has always been dormant within her.”

Sol froze, his wolf suddenly alert and listening. “Are you saying?—“

“Every Luna has a wolf inside, even those born human. The mating bite awakens it in humans.” Mitesh’s eyes twinkled. “Why do you think the Moon Goddess paired you with a fire elemental? Your wolves will be as perfectly matched as your human forms.”

Heat surged through Sol’s body at the thought of sinking his teeth into Helena’s soft skin. Of marking her as his mate for all to see. Of meeting the wolf that slept inside her.

“What will she be like?” Sol asked, his voice rough. “Her wolf?”

Mitesh smiled. “If her human form is any indication—fierce and beautiful. And quite possibly as stubborn as yours.”

Joshua laughed. “The Moon Goddess has a sense of humor, giving you a mate who’ll challenge you at every turn.”

The image of Helena’s wolf formed in Sol’s mind—sleek and powerful with beautiful fur, and eyes that burned with the same defiance he’d seen today. His own wolf rumbled with approval and desire.

Joshua finally turned the black SUV into the hotel’s circular driveway, pulling up

under the grand stone portico where three valets stood at attention. Sol didn't wait for the vehicle to come to a complete stop before pushing his door open, his body thrumming with impatience.

"I'll handle the arrangements," Sol announced, not asking but telling. He strode through the hotel's gleaming glass doors without looking back, knowing his men would follow.

The lobby stretched before him in polished marble and crystal chandeliers, a fitting place for an alpha and his closest pack members. The scent of wealth hung in the air—fresh flowers, expensive perfumes, and the underlying musk of power that money inevitably brought. Sol inhaled deeply, letting his senses map the building.

He approached the reception desk with the confidence of one accustomed to command. "Your finest penthouse suite. Three bedrooms minimum."

The receptionist's eyes widened slightly before her training kicked in. "I'm afraid our Presidential Suite is currently?—"

"Check again." Sol's voice dropped lower as he placed his black card on the counter. "I'm sure you'll find it's available."

Ten minutes later, the hotel manager personally escorted them to the top floor, babbling about amenities and services that Sol barely registered. His mind was elsewhere—on a fiery-haired chef who'd dismissed him like he was nothing.

The penthouse spread before them, all floor-to-ceiling windows and elegant furnishings. A massive terrace overlooked the Pacific, and through an archway, Sol spotted the gleaming jacuzzi big enough for six.

"This will do," Sol stated, taking the key cards and dismissing the manager with a

nod.

Joshua whistled as he wandered through the space. “Not bad for a last-minute booking.”

“I need to be alone.” Sol wasn’t asking for understanding. Mitesh and Joshua exchanged glances but knew better than to argue.

“We’ll be in our rooms if you need anything,” Mitesh offered before retreating, Joshua following close behind.

Sol headed straight for the fully stocked bar, selecting a crystal decanter of whiskey. He poured a generous amount into a tumbler, then downed it in one burning swallow. The alcohol warmed his throat but did nothing to soothe the fire in his blood.

With quick, efficient movements, he shed his clothes, dropping them carelessly on the marble floor as he made his way to the jacuzzi. His naked body—sculpted by centuries of shifting and fighting—reflected in the room’s many mirrors. His intricate tattoo on his upper right arm seemed to shimmer in the dimmed lighting, the symbols of the Sunflare lineage etched into his skin.

Sol turned the jets to their highest setting and sank into the steaming water, letting it envelop his tense muscles. He placed his phone on the edge of the tub, within arm’s reach for when Helena called.

When , not if . An alpha didn’t entertain doubt.

He closed his eyes, his mind drifting to the image of Helena, to the way her chef’s coat had deliciously hugged her generous curves. What would she look like without it? His imagination painted a vivid picture—her pale skin flushed with heat, those full breasts rising and falling with each breath, and her long red hair spread across his

pillows like liquid fire.

“Damn it.” Sol wiggled in the water as his body responded to the mental image. His wolf stirred, hungry for more than just a glimpse of their mate.

He imagined pressing her against a wall, capturing her mouth with his, and tasting the fire he knew burned within her. Would she fight him at first? Or would she surrender immediately to the unmistakable pull between them? Either way, the chase would be exhilarating.

Sol’s hand drifted beneath the water, but he stopped himself with a growl. “Patience,” he muttered to himself, though the word felt foreign on his tongue. Alphas took what they wanted. They didn’t wait.

But for Helena, he would try. She wasn’t just another conquest. She was his Luna—his missing half.

Sol finally extracted himself from the jacuzzi, water dripping off his muscular form. He dried himself roughly before throwing himself onto the king-sized bed, not bothering with clothes. The silk sheets felt cool against his overheated skin.

His phone remained silent on the nightstand. Sol stared at it, willing it to ring, while his wolf paced restlessly.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

FIVE

HELENA

The door to the restaurant banged open just ten minutes after Sol's departure, startling Helena out of her daydream. Her fingers had been absently tracing the edges of Sol's business card in her pocket, the thick cardstock somehow burning against her skin.

"This place better be worth what I paid for it." A sharp voice cut through the dining room.

Helena looked up to see a tall man with slicked-back hair and a suit that probably cost more than her car. His eyes were cold, assessing everything with a calculating gaze that made her skin crawl.

"You must be who we're waiting for," Helena said, stepping forward with an outstretched hand. "I'm Helena Divata, executive chef and former owner."

He shook her hand, his touch lingering a beat too long before dropping it. "Victor Sulick. And yes, I own this establishment now." His eyes swept over her like a predator sizing up its prey.

"Let me show you around." Helena gestured to the dining area. "As you can see, we have the main dining room with seating for sixty-five, plus the bar area that can accommodate another twenty."

“The décor is outdated,” Victor muttered, running a finger across a table and examining it for dust. “We’ll need to modernize everything.”

Helena’s stomach clenched. The rustic, homey atmosphere was part of what made their restaurant special. “The locals really appreciate the?—“

“Locals aren’t who I’m after. I want to attract the right clientele,” Victor interrupted, snapping his fingers impatiently. “Continue.”

As they moved through the dining room, Helena found her thoughts straying back to Sol. The way his green eyes had seemed to see straight into her soul. There had been something magnetic about him, something that made her feel...seen.

“This is our bar manager, Tyanna,” Helena said as they approached the polished wooden bar.

Tyanna looked up, her dark eyes narrowing as she took in Victor. “Pleasure,” she said, the word dripping with sarcasm as she continued wiping down glasses.

Helena shot her a warning look that Tyanna pointedly ignored.

“The bar needs to be completely redone,” Victor announced without even greeting Tyanna. “Something sleeker and more upscale.”

“Our regular customers like this bar just fine,” Tyanna replied, setting a glass down with a little more force than necessary.

Victor’s mouth tightened. “Regular customers don’t spend enough.”

Helena quickly steered him toward the host stand where Paige was organizing menus. Relief flooded her when Paige stepped forward with a wide smile.

“Mr. Sulick! What an honor to meet you,” Paige gushed, practically bouncing on her toes. “I’ve read about your business ventures. Your takeover of the Meridian Hotel chain was absolutely brilliant.”

Victor seemed to thaw slightly under the praise. “An observant one. You are?”

“Paige Donovan, restaurant manager. If you have any ideas you’d like implemented, I’d be happy to?”—“

“I have many ideas,” Victor cut in. “Perhaps you’ll be useful after all.”

Helena’s fingers closed around Sol’s card in her pocket. If only he had been their new owner instead of this cold, calculating man. Sol, with his warm smile and strong presence. She wondered what it would be like to see him again. The thought sent heat through her that reminded her oddly of the birthday candle incident.

People like Victor were why Helena had always kept her head down and focused on cooking. But Sol... Sol felt different. Maybe she would call him later and take him up on his dinner offer.

“Now I’d really love to see the kitchen,” Victor said, suddenly leaning closer to Helena. “I hear it’s your domain.”

Helena took an instinctive step back. Victor’s eyes had suddenly changed, the coldness replaced with something warm but calculated—like a predator mimicking friendliness.

“Of course,” Helena replied, gesturing toward the swinging doors. “This way.”

As they walked, Victor shifted from formal to familiar, his hand briefly brushing her lower back as they entered the kitchen. Helena felt her skin prickle with discomfort.

“You know, a talented chef is the heart of any restaurant,” Victor said, his voice lowered to what he likely thought was an attractive timber. “And I’ve heard extraordinary things about your... abilities.”

Helena frowned. Something in his phrasing seemed odd, almost like he meant more than her cooking skills. She led him through the prep area, deliberately taking a path that kept them away from where Marco was still enthusiastically chopping vegetables.

“We focus on seasonal ingredients,” Helena explained, feeling heat rise to her face as Victor stood too close, examining a tray of prepared herbs. “Our new menu launches next week with butternut squash risotto and?—“

“I’m more interested in how you create such magic,” Victor interrupted, his eyes not on the food but fixed on her face. He reached out and brushed a strand of her hair from her face. “Has anyone told you that your hair is the exact color of flames?”

Helena stepped sideways, disguising her retreat as reaching for a clipboard. “Our specials rotate daily.”

“And what’s special about today?” Victor asked, his voice dripping with double meaning.

Across the kitchen, Marco looked up, his knife pausing mid-chop as he observed the interaction. Helena caught his eye and subtly shook her head, willing him to stay put. Marco’s protective instincts toward her were legendary in the kitchen, and the last thing she needed was a confrontation between her sous chef and their new boss.

A strange warmth began pooling in Helena’s stomach, spreading outward through her limbs. It wasn’t desire—it felt more like irritation made physical, a simmering heat that seemed to pulse with each condescending smile Victor gave her.

“Is it hot in here?” Helena asked, fanning herself while maintaining a professional distance.

Victor smiled. “Only when you’re in it.”

The line was so cheesy that Helena almost laughed. What was happening today? First, Sol with his intense stares and genuine interest, now this new owner with his transparent attempts at flirtation while in her kitchen. Thirty years of relative invisibility to the opposite sex, and suddenly she was attracting attention like moths to a?—

Flame. The word popped into her mind unbidden, sending another wave of warmth through her body.

“The range hoods need to be cleaned more regularly,” Victor said, changing tactics when he noticed her discomfort. He rested his hand on her shoulder. “Perhaps you could show me your office later? We could discuss... improvements.”

The heat inside Helena intensified, pooling in her fingertips until they tingled. She gripped the edge of the stainless-steel table, alarmed by the sensation. It reminded her of yesterday’s candle incident, that odd kinship with fire, and that feeling of power.

Her pulse raced as Victor’s hand soon traveled down her arm. The heat building beneath her skin intensified with each passing second, her fingers tingling in a way that both frightened and exhilarated her.

“Perhaps I could demonstrate one of our signature dishes,” she suggested, desperate for any distraction from the uncomfortable proximity. “It might give you a better sense of our culinary style.”

Victor’s eyes lit up with an interest that seemed strangely disproportionate to her

offer. “I’d love to see you... work with your hands.” His emphasis made her stomach clench.

“Excellent.” Helena moved toward her station, deliberately putting the prep table between them. She gathered ingredients with practiced efficiency—wild mushrooms, shallots, fresh thyme, and a bottle of aged sherry.

Victor circled the table, tracking her movements like a predator. “They say you have quite the... special touch in the kitchen.”

Helena frowned at his odd phrasing. “Cooking is about intuition and balance.” She focused on slicing the mushrooms, the rhythmic chopping grounding her as the strange heat continued pulsing through her veins.

“And passion,” Victor added, leaning against the counter uncomfortably close. “Fire.”

Her knife faltered. “Fire is just a tool.”

“Is it?” His eyes held hers in a knowing way that made her skin crawl.

Helena turned away, gathering butter and olive oil. “For this dish, we use a combination of fats to get the perfect sear on the mushrooms.”

As she reached for a pan, Victor shifted closer. “You know, Helena, I have plans for this restaurant... and potentially for you.”

The heat in her fingertips further intensified, and Helena stared at her hands in alarm. They looked normal yet felt like they might burst into flame at any moment. She flexed them nervously, then busied herself arranging ingredients.

“I need to focus on the dish,” she said, moving toward the gas stove.

Victor followed, his breath hot on her neck as he leaned in. “I’d like you to focus on our... partnership.”

Helena reached for the knob to light the gas stove, her hands shaking slightly. Victor pressed closer, his chest brushing against her back. His lips nearly touched her ear as he whispered, “I know what you are, Helena.”

The words sent a chill down her spine that contrasted sharply with the heat building in her core. What did he mean?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she managed, turning the gas knob.

Victor’s hand slid around her waist, his touch unwelcome and intrusive. “The fire inside you. I can help you understand it.” His lips grazed her neck.

Helena jerked backward instinctively, repulsed by his touch. “Don’t?—“

As she pulled away, something inside her surged—a hot, electric current that raced from her chest to her fingertips. The gas ignited, but instead of a controlled blue flame, an explosion of fire erupted from the stovetop. The blaze shot upward in a column of orange and red, touching the ceiling tiles.

Helena stumbled back, watching in horror and fascination as the flames seemed to dance and reach toward her, almost sentient in their movements. Instead of scorching heat, she felt a curious kinship with the fire—like recognizing a part of herself that had been dormant until now.

Victor stepped back, his eyes gleaming with triumphant hunger rather than fear. “Magnificent,” he breathed, staring not at the fire but at Helena. “Even more

powerful than I thought.”

The kitchen staff froze in their tracks, Marco’s knife suspended in his hand, and Tyanna’s mouth opened in shock from the doorway. They all stared, transfixed by the impossible column of flame that showed no signs of diminishing despite nothing fueling it but the small gas jet.

Helena raised her arms, and to her astonishment, the flames seemed to respond, swaying toward her hands like plants bending toward sunlight.

Helena grabbed the bucket of water sitting by the prep station, her hands trembling. The flames reached for her with greater force, the bright tendrils stretching across the air like eager fingers. Her heart hammered in her chest, a strange thrumming beat that matched the pulsing of the fire.

“What’s happening inside of me?” she whispered, watching in horror as the flames grew higher when she approached closer. Instead of dying down when she threw the water on it, the flames roared louder, feeding off her panic like it was oxygen.

“Get out! Everybody out now!” Marco shouted, abandoning his station and herding the kitchen staff toward the emergency exit. “Helena, come on!”

Tyanna remained in the doorway, her eyes wide. “Holy shit, it’s spreading to the dining room now!”

The fire leaped and danced, spiraling upward in impossible patterns. Helena stood frozen for a moment, mesmerized by the way it still seemed to move in rhythm with her racing heartbeat. Every surge of fear sent the flames higher, and every moment of awe made them brighter.

“Fascinating as this is,” Victor said, backing toward the exit, his calculating eyes still



fixed on Helena, “I have no intention of dying today.” He slipped through the door without another glance.

The flames curved around Helena, forming a half-circle that trapped her against the cooking station. She flung more water at the closest part of the blaze, but instead of extinguishing it, the water hissed and evaporated instantly, turning to steam that only seemed to fuel the fire further.

“Helena, please!” Tyanna screamed from the doorway. “This whole place is going up!”

“I can’t leave it!” Helena cried, grabbing the fire extinguisher from the wall. “Everything I’ve worked for is here!”

The restaurant had been her life for eight years. Every recipe perfected, every customer relationship built, every late night and early morning sacrifice—all of it was embodied in these walls. How could she just watch it burn?

“It’s not worth your life!” Marco shouted, his voice cracking with emotion before he, too, disappeared.

She aimed the extinguisher at the base of the flames, but the chemical spray merely created swirling patterns in the fire without diminishing its intensity. A sickening realization dawned on her—the fire wasn’t burning the kitchen anymore, it was burning from her.

The flames had taken on an unnatural red-gold hue, brightening to almost white where they reached toward her. Helena backed away, feeling the heat not as a threat but as a strange extension of herself.

“This isn’t possible,” she murmured, watching as the flames followed her movement

like a loyal pet.

The smoke thickened around her, black and choking. Helena coughed, feeling her lungs burn with each breath. Yet even as the smoke filled the room, the flames maintained a clear path to her, as if creating a corridor only she could navigate.

The sprinkler system finally engaged, raining water down from above, but it made little difference. Whatever force was feeding these flames transcended normal physics. Helena stumbled backward, her vision blurring as the smoke intensified.

“Get... it... together,” she gasped between coughs, desperately seeking control over something—anything—in this chaos.

For a brief moment, when she focused her thoughts and tried to visualize the flames receding, they actually seemed to respond, pulling back slightly. But her concentration broke when a support beam crashed down behind her, sending sparks flying into the air.

Helena spun around, disoriented, finding herself surrounded by a circle of fire. The heat pressed in from all sides, yet strangely, her skin didn’t burn. Her clothes remained intact even as the wooden prep table nearby was reduced to charred remains.

“What am I?” Her voice was thin, barely audible over the roar of the fire.

The room spun, oxygen depleting rapidly. Helena sank to her knees, her body heavy and unresponsive. The last thing she saw before darkness claimed her was the fire above, forming what looked almost like a protective dome around her fallen form.

Then there was nothing but smoke and silence.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

SIX

SOL

Sol sprawled across the luxury hotel bed, staring at his phone in his hand impatiently, when it hit him—a surge of heat that blazed through his veins like wildfire. He bolted upright, chest heaving as the sensation intensified. This wasn't his own emotion. It was Helena's, flowing through their fledgling mate bond.

“Shit,” he growled, springing from the bed.

He grabbed his clothes off the ground, putting them on hastily as his bare feet slapped against marble toward Joshua's bedroom door.

“Joshua, move!” Sol shouted through the door as he pounded on it. The door flew open beneath his fist. “Something's wrong with Helena.”

Joshua appeared instantly alert, despite his rumpled hair. “How do you know?”

“I feel it.” Sol pressed a hand to his sternum where the heat continued to build. “It's like she's burning from the inside out. Rage and fear, all mixed up.”

Mitesh emerged from the adjacent room, already dressed. “The Luna's powers are unstable right now. If she's experiencing intense emotion?—“

“We need to get to that restaurant. Now,” Sol interrupted.

Minutes later, Sol could barely sit still in the back of their SUV while Joshua steered them through the early evening traffic. His wolf clawed at his skin, desperate to emerge and find their mate. Sol fought the urge to shift. Helena didn't even know what she was yet—seeing him transform would only add trauma to whatever crisis she was currently facing.

“Faster,” Sol commanded, his knuckles white as he gripped Joshua's headrest.

Joshua swerved around a taxi. “Any more ‘faster’ and we'll need to explain to local authorities why we're breaking every traffic law in the city right now.”

“I don't give a damn about—“ Sol's words died as they rounded the corner onto the restaurant's street.

Orange flames licked the early evening sky, illuminating a crowd of shell-shocked onlookers. The building that housed Helena's beloved kitchen was engulfed. Black smoke billowed upward, choking the air.

Sol didn't wait for the SUV to stop. He flung the door open and hit the pavement at a run, scanning the crowd frantically for a flash of red hair.

“She's not here,” he muttered, pushing through the gathered staff members. His nostrils flared, sorting through the acrid smells of smoke and fear, searching for Helena's distinctive cinnamon-and-vanilla scent. “She's still inside!”

Joshua caught up to him, grabbing his arm. “Sol, wait?—“

Sol shook him off. “I can feel her. She's in there, and she's fading.”

Her emotions had shifted from panic to something more disturbing—a dreamy detachment that told him she was losing consciousness.

“Let the firefighters handle this,” Mitesh advised, appearing at his other side.

“She’s my Luna. I’m not standing here while she burns!” Sol roared.

A firefighter attempted to block his path. “Sir, you can’t go in there?—“

Sol fixed him with a stare that made the man step back instinctively. “Try to stop me.”

He approached the entrance, heat blasting his face as the flames reached hungrily toward him. For a moment, he stood at the threshold, letting his wolf’s senses map the building’s interior through the smoke and chaos.

“Hold this position,” he instructed Joshua. “If I’m not out in five minutes?—“

“We’re coming in after you,” Joshua finished.

Sol nodded once, then plunged into the inferno to find his mate. The world around Sol instantly transformed into an orange-red hellscape. The flames licked at him but he barely registered the heat or got burned for some strange reason. Was her fire responding to him? Protecting him because he was her mate?

“Helena!” he shouted over the crackle and pop of burning wood.

No response but the groan of weakening support beams. Sol pushed deeper, instinctively dropping to a crouch where the air was clearer. His wolf surged close to his skin, lending him its superior senses. He inhaled deeply, filtering through the smoke to catch Helena’s distinct scent—that intoxicating blend of cinnamon, vanilla, and something uniquely her.

There. Faint but present. Coming from the back.

Sol vaulted over a fallen beam, landing with preternatural grace. The kitchen. Of course, she would be here. The bond between them pulsed faintly.

“Mine,” he growled, the word escaping unbidden as he shoulder-checked doors that had warped in their frame.

The kitchen was a disaster zone. Equipment melted and surfaces blackened. And there—slumped on the tiled floor—was Helena. Her vibrant red hair spilled across her pale face, and her chef’s coat was smudged with soot. Even unconscious, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Sol was at her side in an instant, one hand cradling her face. “I’ve got you now.”

He checked her pulse—steady but faint. The bond between them hummed with her dormant energy, unnervingly quiet but still present. Relief crashed through him with such force, he nearly staggered.

A section of ceiling tiles crashed down nearby, showering them with embers. No more time. Sol scooped Helena into his arms, cradling her against his chest like the precious treasure she was. Her head lolled against his shoulder, and the protective surge that ripped through him was nearly overwhelming.

“Nobody’s taking you from me,” he murmured against her temple. “Not fire, not fate, not anyone.”

Sol navigated the burning labyrinth with unerring precision, his wolf’s memory having mapped every inch of the path in. The main dining room was now fully engulfed, forcing him to kick open a side door that led to an alley. Fresh air hit him like a blessing, and he drew in deep lungfuls as he carried Helena toward the street.

As he emerged into view, backlit by flames, some of the gathered onlookers cheered.

Sol paid them no mind, his focus entirely on the woman in his arms, checking over her again. Her breathing was shallow, but color was returning to her face as she took in the fresh oxygen.

That's when he caught it—a flash of movement in his peripheral vision. Sol's head snapped around, his hunter's gaze locking onto a figure slinking away at the edge of the gathered crowd.

The recognition hit him like a physical blow. Victor Sulick.

The exiled pack member's face was partially hidden in the building's shadow, but Sol would know those calculating eyes anywhere. Their gazes met for one electric moment across the chaos—Victor's mouth curling into a knowing smirk before he disappeared behind a nearby building. Every muscle in Sol's body coiled with the urge to chase, to hunt, and to tear into the man who had once betrayed their pack.

Sol charged through the growing crowd, Helena's unconscious form nestled against the hard planes of his chest. Her warmth seeped through his button-down shirt, stirring his wolf's protective instincts into a frenzy. Even covered in soot and ash, her red hair glittered in the firelight like a banner—a declaration of what she was. What she would become. His Luna.

The fact that Victor Sulick had shown his face here, tonight of all nights, sent rage spiraling through Sol's veins. He spotted Joshua and Mitesh rushing toward him, concern etched across their faces.

"She's alive," Sol growled immediately, adjusting Helena in his arms to cradle her head more securely. "But we have bigger problems. Victor was here."

Joshua's eyes widened. "Victor? Are you certain?"

“I’d recognize that snake anywhere.” Sol’s jaw clenched so hard he felt his teeth might crack. “He was watching from the edge of the crowd. Smirking.”

Mitesh’s face darkened. “If he’s here, then he knows what she is.”

“He’s after her power,” Sol confirmed, his voice lowering to a dangerous rumble. “He’s always wanted what wasn’t his.”

Sol glanced down at Helena, her chest still rising and falling in shallow breaths. Her lashes cast delicate shadows across her cheekbones, and an overwhelming tenderness cut through his rage. His fingers tightened possessively around her shoulder.

“I need to hunt him down.” The words came out rough, his wolf pushing to the surface. “Now, before his trail goes cold.”

“Your Luna needs you,” Mitesh reminded him gently.

Sol shook his head, his decision already made. “What she needs is for me to handle the threat. Victor won’t stop now that he’s found her.”

He transferred Helena carefully into Joshua’s waiting arms, his hands lingering longer than necessary. The separation physically hurt, a tug deep in his chest where their bond had begun to form.

“Guard her with your life,” Sol ordered, his eyes flashing with wolf-light. “If she wakes, tell her I’ll be back for her. Tell her—” He hesitated, struggling with words that seemed inadequate. “Tell her she’s safe now.”

Joshua nodded, already scanning the crowd. “What about her human friends? They’ll be looking for her.”



Sol followed his gaze to where Helena's coworkers huddled together, casting anxious glances toward the ambulances.

"Handle it," Sol commanded. "Make them believe you're authorized to care for her."

With quick efficiency, Joshua handed Helena to Mitesh and darted toward a nearby ambulance. He returned moments later wearing a paramedic's jacket, the ID badge conveniently flipped backward.

"This should buy us some cover," Joshua said, taking Helena back into his arms. "But we can't stay here long."

Mitesh placed a steadying hand on Sol's shoulder. "Remember who you are, Alpha. Don't let your wolf take complete control."

Sol rolled his shoulders, already feeling his skin prickle with the need to shift. "Victor crossed a line coming here. He'll answer for it."

"And if the humans see?" Mitesh pressed.

Sol's lips curled into a dangerous smile. "They won't."

He bent over Helena one last time, inhaling her scent to imprint it deeper into his senses. On impulse, he brushed his lips across her forehead, a claiming gesture as old as his kind.

"Mine to protect," he murmured against her skin.

Then he straightened, his focus shifting to the hunt ahead. Without another word, Sol turned and stalked toward the shadows where Victor had disappeared, every muscle coiled for pursuit.

Sol followed Victor's scent with single-minded intensity, his nostrils flaring rapidly as he tracked the exiled wolf. Victor's trail led away from the restaurant and toward the small city park that bordered the neighborhood—a perfect place for confrontation away from human eyes.

The park's tall oaks and dense undergrowth provided cover as Sol moved with predatory grace, his footsteps silent despite his size. His skin prickled, the shift hovering just beneath the surface, begging for release. The bond with Helena pulsed in his chest like a second heartbeat, fueling his rage at the man who dared threaten what was his.

He caught movement ahead—a flash of expensive clothing disappearing behind a copse of trees. Sol quickened his pace, cutting through a thicket to intercept his prey.

Victor stood waiting in a small clearing, his stance casual as though this were some social call. The emerging moonlight caught the silver at his temples but did nothing to soften the cold calculation in his eyes.

“The mighty alpha, playing hero,” Victor drawled, straightening his tailored suit jacket. “How touching.”

Sol stalked forward, keeping his movements measured despite the fury burning in his veins. “You’ve made a fatal mistake, Victor.”

“Have I? Was it me finding your Luna before you did?” Victor's smile sliced through the darkness. “The fire in that charming restaurant was unexpected though. Seems your little mate has quite the temper.”

“Stay away from her,” Sol growled, the words vibrating with command.

Victor chuckled, circling slowly. “Or what? You’ll exile me again? I’ve spent

decades building power while you played house with your little pack. And now I find that the universe has delivered me the perfect weapon—a fire wielder with untapped potential.”

“She’s not a weapon. She’s my Luna.”

“She’s unclaimed,” Victor countered. “And untrained. When I tell her how you banished me from your territory?—“

Sol’s patience snapped. “Enough!”

He lunged forward, already shifting as he moved. Clothes tore, bones cracked and reshaped, and where a man had stood, a massive black wolf now snarled, his green eyes blazing gold with ancient power.

Victor’s shift was slower, more calculated, but soon a sleek gray wolf crouched opposite Sol, ears pinned back in challenge.

They circled each other, fangs bared. Sol’s wolf form towered over Victor’s, muscle rippling beneath midnight fur. He soon feinted left, then slashed right. His teeth sank into Victor’s haunches, drawing first blood.

Victor yelped but twisted free, snapping at Sol’s exposed flank. His teeth grazed skin and Sol countered using his superior weight to slam Victor into the dirt.

The fight was vicious but brief. Sol pinned Victor beneath his massive paws, his jaws clamped around the gray wolf’s throat—not killing but dominating. Blood and saliva mingled as Victor whimpered, finally submitting.

Sol reluctantly released him with a warning snarl that needed no translation: come near her again, and next time would end differently.

Victor scrambled back, shifting partially to human form, blood trickling from various wounds. “This isn’t finished,” he spat. “She’ll never fit into your world.”

Sol shifted back, standing naked and unashamed, every inch the alpha as he towered over his defeated rival. “She is my world now. Cross my path again, and I’ll rip out your throat instead of merely tasting it.”

Victor retreated into the shadows, limping but defiant.

Sol dressed quickly in his torn clothes before returning to the fire scene. One thought consumed him: Helena wasn’t safe here. Victor would regroup, plan, and strike again. The only place Sol could properly protect her was on pack territory, surrounded by loyal wolves and ancient wards.

Joshua still cradled Helena when Sol returned, her face pale against the paramedic jacket Joshua had commandeered.

“Victor?” Mitesh asked quietly.

“Dealt with. For now.” Sol reached for Helena. “We need to move her to safety.”

Joshua surrendered her willingly. “I’ve handled her coworkers. They believe she’s being transported to County General.”

“Good.” Sol gazed down at Helena’s face, struck anew by the delicate arch of her brows and the fullness of her lips. Even unconscious, she radiated a warmth that called to his wolf. “We take her home. Tonight.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

SEVEN

HELENA

Helena's throat felt tight as she opened her eyes. Moonlight streamed through tall windows draped with heavy burgundy curtains, illuminating an unfamiliar room with honey-colored stone walls and ornate wooden furniture. A four-poster bed with silken sheets cradled her body.

Where the hell am I?

She pushed herself up on her elbows, wincing at the ache spreading through her muscles. A coughing fit suddenly seized her, bending her forward as she struggled to clear her airways.

"Easy now." A woman appeared beside the bed, offering a crystal glass of water. "Small sips only."

The woman had dark hair pulled into a neat bun, her crisp black dress resembling some kind of uniform. Helena accepted the water gratefully, letting the cool liquid soothe her raw throat.

"Better?" the woman asked softly.

Helena nodded, finding her voice. "Who are you?"

"I'm Deina. I've been assigned as your personal servant during your stay."

“My personal—“ Helena glanced around the opulent bedroom. Tapestries depicting nature scenes adorned the walls, and delicate silver candelabras sat atop antique wooden surfaces. “Where am I exactly?”

Deina smoothed her already immaculate dress. “You’re in the Prince’s castle, within his territory.”

Helena’s head spun. “The Prince? What prince? Why would a prince want me at his castle?”

Deina approached a large wardrobe and pulled out a green sundress. “The Prince rescued you from a fire in the city just beyond our borders. He happened to be there on business and brought you here for your recovery.”

Fire. The word triggered a cascade of memories—the kitchen, the gas stove, flames leaping unnaturally high and reaching for her. The restaurant. Oh god, the restaurant.

“The fire!” Helena threw back the covers and stood up, ignoring the dizziness that followed. “The restaurant—is everyone okay? How bad was the damage?”

Deina gently guided Helena back to sitting on the bed’s edge. “The Prince pulled you from the building while you were unconscious. Everyone is safe. The fire was eventually extinguished.”

Helena’s fingers trembled as she accepted the green sundress. “I need to call my coworkers. They must be worried sick about me.”

“In due time.” Deina gestured toward an arched doorway leading to the bathroom. “First, you should take a nice, soothing bath, and then change into that comfortable sundress.”

As Helena followed Deina into a lavish bathroom, more questions bubbled up. “So this prince just... what? Rescues random restaurant workers and takes them to his castle? That’s not weird at all.”

“He’s known for his generosity,” Deina said as she started the bath water. “He wanted to personally oversee your recovery.”

Helena surveyed the large copper clawfoot tub as steam rose from the water. This place was beyond luxurious. Definitely not what she was accustomed to in her practical lifestyle.

“And when do I get to meet this mysterious Prince Charming who whisked me away?” Helena wrapped her arms tighter around herself, suddenly aware she was wearing unfamiliar silk pajamas. “And who changed my clothes?”

“That was me,” Deina replied, handing Helena a fluffy towel. “And you’ll get to meet the Prince soon enough.”

Helena’s mind raced as she pieced together the bizarre situation. One minute, she had been in her restaurant kitchen with Victor, the next she was waking up in some castle fit for royalty. The timeline seemed impossible, yet here she was about to take a bath while a personal servant waited on her.

“Wait—is Victor the prince you’re talking about?” Helena asked, watching Deina test the water temperature.

Deina’s brow furrowed, genuine confusion crossing her face. “Victor? I don’t know anyone by that name. The Prince has been the ruler of this territory for many years.”

Helena considered this new information. “So, the man who now owns my restaurant isn’t the same person who brought me here?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about your restaurant,” Deina replied, adding fragrant bath salts to the steaming water. “The Prince simply instructed me to tend to your needs until you’re well enough to join him.”

Helena ran her small hand through her tangled hair. Of course—it made perfect sense.

“He must go by Victor when he’s conducting business,” Helena muttered, more to herself than to Deina. “I guess that’s what millionaire princes do—use different identities when buying restaurants.”

Deina’s expression remained neutral as she arranged more fluffy towels beside the tub. “The bath is ready, miss. I’ll wait outside while you refresh yourself.”

Left alone, Helena slipped out of the borrowed silk pajamas and eased herself into the copper tub. The hot water enveloped her body, releasing the tension in her muscles. Steam rose around her, carrying the scent of lavender and vanilla.

“This is absolutely ridiculous,” she whispered, sinking deeper into the water. “My new boss is some kind of royalty who rescued me from the fire and brought me to his castle. What is this, a fairy tale?”

She examined her arms and body, searching for burns or evidence of her close encounter with the flames. Strangely, her skin was unmarked, and other than her brief coughing fit, her lungs felt surprisingly clear and she was breathing normally. How had she escaped without injury? The memory of the fire rising unnaturally high from the stove haunted her. Just like on her birthday—flames that seemed to extend toward her rather than away.

She dunked her head beneath the surface, willing the water to wash away her troubling thoughts. When she emerged, she focused on the practical. Victor—or



whatever his name really was—had saved her life. At minimum, she owed him a thank you before finding her way back to reality.

After finishing her bath, she dried herself and slipped into the green sundress Deina had provided. The fabric felt luxurious against her skin, the cut somehow perfectly suited to her curvy figure. She examined herself in the ornate mirror. The dress complemented her pale skin and made her hazel eyes appear more green than brown. Her damp red hair hung in loose waves past her shoulders.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Deina waited with a silver brush in hand.

“May I?” she asked, gesturing to Helena’s hair.

Helena hesitated, then nodded, allowing Deina to guide her to a cushioned seat at a vanity table. Gentle hands worked through her tangles with surprising efficiency.

“So, when exactly can I meet this mysterious prince?” Helena asked, watching Deina’s reflection in the mirror.

“After your hair is dry, I’ll escort you to dinner,” Deina replied, her motions rhythmic and soothing. “He’s eager to see that you’ve recovered.”

Helena sighed. “I guess I can’t exactly refuse dinner with the man who saved my life, even if it is my new boss who lied about his identity.”

Deina’s hands paused momentarily before resuming their work. “I’m sure all your questions will be answered soon enough.”

Helena sat perfectly still as Deina’s nimble fingers worked through her long hair, applying gentle pressure against her scalp with each stroke of the brush. The rhythmic motion was almost hypnotic, and despite her confusion about the bizarre situation,

Helena found herself relaxing slightly.

“Would you like your hair up or down for dinner?” Deina asked, catching Helena’s gaze in the vanity mirror.

“Down is fine,” Helena replied. “Really, you don’t need to fuss over me.”

Deina smiled knowingly. “The Prince appreciates beauty. It would be a shame not to highlight yours.”

Helena felt heat rise to her cheeks. “I’m not trying to impress anyone. I just want answers.”

“And you’ll have them soon.” Deina set down the brush and reached for a small velvet pouch. She withdrew a collection of cosmetics that looked far more expensive than anything Helena had ever purchased.

“Is the makeup really necessary?” Helena shifted uncomfortably.

“Just a touch,” Deina insisted. “To bring out what’s already there.”

Helena sighed and allowed Deina to proceed, feeling increasingly out of her element. The chef in her was accustomed to practical ponytails and minimal makeup that wouldn’t melt under kitchen heat. This level of pampering was foreign territory.

Twenty minutes later, Helena barely recognized her reflection. Deina had applied just enough cosmetics to enhance her features without looking overdone. Her hazel eyes appeared brighter, framed by subtly darkened lashes, and her lips shimmered with a rosy tint. The green dress complemented her fair complexion and made her red hair look like living flames cascading over her shoulders.

“There,” Deina announced, stepping back to admire her work. “Simply radiant.”

Helena touched her face lightly. “I look like someone else.”

“No,” Deina corrected. “You look exactly like yourself—just enhanced.”

With gentle insistence, Deina guided Helena through the castle’s stone corridors. Their footsteps echoed against marble floors as they passed tapestries depicting forest scenes and fierce wolves. Suits of armor stood sentinel at regular intervals, their metal surfaces gleaming in the light of wall-mounted sconces.

“This place is massive,” Helena whispered. “How old is it?”

“Parts date back centuries,” Deina replied. “The Prince’s family has maintained it for generations.”

They approached a set of double doors carved with intricate woodland scenes. Two uniformed men stood guard, bowing slightly as Deina and Helena approached. With a synchronized movement, they pulled the doors open.

Helena stepped into a vast dining hall dominated by a long wooden table beneath a chandelier dripping with crystals. Candles illuminated the space with a warm, flickering glow. Her attention, however, fixed immediately on the man standing at the far end of the table.

Not Victor. Sol.

The same dark brown hair, short on the sides and fuller on top. The same neatly trimmed beard and mustache framing a strong jawline. The same broad shoulders beneath an impeccably tailored suit. The same man who’d flirted with her at the restaurant—who she’d thought was just some charming stranger.

His intense green eyes locked with hers across the distance, and Helena felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her body. He wasn't just looking at her, he was devouring her with his gaze, an unmistakable hunger in his expression tempered with something that resembled reverence.

"You?" Helena stopped cold, her hand flying to her chest. "You're the Prince?"

Sol remained silent, his eyes traveling slowly from her face down to her feet and back up again. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and his hands flexed at his sides. He looked like a predator barely restraining himself.

"What is this?" Helena demanded, finding her voice. "First you show up at my restaurant making me believe you're my new boss, then you somehow rescue me from the fire, and now I wake up in your castle? Are you stalking me or something?"

Sol still didn't answer but took a deliberate step toward her. His movements were fluid, almost too graceful for such a powerfully built man. The look in his eyes made Helena's breath catch—it was possessive, protective, and primal all at once.

"This isn't funny," Helena insisted, trying to ignore the way her heart raced at his approach. "I want answers. Now."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

EIGHT

SOL

Sol paced the length of the opulent dining room, his tailored suit accentuating his powerful frame. He could still feel the weight of Helena's unconscious body in his arms as he'd rushed her into the castle.

The events of the night replayed in his mind like a frenzied montage...

"Dammit, Joshua, drive faster!" he'd growled, his wolf clawing at the surface desperate to protect its mate.

The SUV had just barely stopped before Sol was out, cradling Helena against his chest. Mitesh's footsteps echoed behind him as they'd raced through the castle's grand halls.

"Get the doctor. Now!" Sol had barked at a startled servant.

The royal physician's words still rang in his ears. "Stress and exhaustion, Your Highness. No lingering smoke inhalation or burns. Let her rest."

Sol's fingers twitched at his sides, recalling how he'd traced Helena's unmarred skin, relief flooding through him. His Luna, unharmed by her own flames. It was a good sign, but it also meant she was completely unaware of her true nature.

"How the hell am I supposed to explain this?" he muttered.

A knock at the door interrupted his brooding. “Enter,” he commanded, his voice rough with anticipation.

Deina, Helena’s assigned personal servant, stepped in with a curtsy. “Your Highness, Lady Helena is awake and bathing. She’ll join you shortly.”

Sol’s wolf perked up at the news. “Excellent. How is she?”

“Confused but calm. She believes you to be her new employer.”

A low chuckle escaped Sol’s lips. “Of course, she does. That’s going to be an interesting conversation.”

As Deina excused herself, Sol found himself drawn to the elaborate table setting. Two places, intimately close. Crystal glasses caught the light from the chandelier, casting prism-like shadows across the crisp white tablecloth.

“You’ve waited centuries for this moment,” he reminded himself, straightening his jacket. “Don’t screw it up.”

His mind wandered to the upcoming revelation. How would Helena react to learning she had magical fire powers and was his destined mate? The Luna of the Sunflare pack.

Sol’s eyes flashed with determination. “She’ll accept it. She has to.” His wolf growled in agreement, already recognizing its other half.

The scent of cinnamon and vanilla suddenly filled the air, signaling Helena’s presence outside the dining room doors. Sol’s body tensed, every nerve ending alive with anticipation. He moved to stand near the head of the table, forcing himself to appear relaxed and in control.

“Show time,” he murmured, a smirk playing on his lips. Whatever happened next, one thing was certain – life for both of them was about to change forever.

Sol’s heart thundered in his chest as Helena entered the dining hall. Her fiery red hair cascaded past her shoulders, framing her pale face. The green sundress Deina had chosen hugged Helena’s figure perfectly, and Sol’s wolf stirred within him, eager to claim its mate.

“You?” Helena’s voice, laced with shock and suspicion, cut through the air. “You’re the Prince?”

Sol’s jaw clenched as he fought to maintain control. Every instinct screamed at him to cross the room and take her in his arms, but he held back, remembering Joshua’s warning about human customs.

“What is this?” Helena demanded, her hazel eyes flashing with a mixture of confusion and anger. “First you show up at my restaurant making me believe you’re my new boss, then you somehow rescue me from the fire, and now I wake up in your castle? Are you stalking me or something?”

Sol took a deliberate step forward, his movements fluid and predatory. He couldn’t help the possessive gleam in his eyes as he gazed at her. “Helena,” he began, his voice low and confident, “I assure you, this is no laughing matter.”

“I want answers. Now,” she insisted, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sol’s lips quirked into a half-smile. Her fire matched his own, and it only made him want her more. “And you’ll have them. But first, won’t you join me for dinner?” He gestured to the elaborately set table.

Helena’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not sitting down until you explain what’s going on.”

Sol sighed, running his large hand through his dark locks. Patience had never been his strong suit, but for her, he could try. “Very well. I apologize for the confusion at the restaurant. I had no intention of deceiving you. As for the fire, I couldn’t stand by and watch you perish in those flames.”

“That doesn’t explain why I’m here,” Helena pressed.

Sol’s eyes locked onto hers, intensity radiating from every pore. “You’re here because you belong here, Helena. With me.”

She scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s not stalking when the object of your desire is your fated mate,” Sol declared, unable to hold the truth back any longer.

Helena’s brow furrowed. “Fated mate? I don’t know what that means.”

Sol took another step closer, his deep voice lowering to a husky whisper. “It’s like soul mates, or love at first sight. Only infinitely more powerful.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Helena shot back, though Sol noticed the slight catch in her breath. “And it’s certainly not a reason to kidnap a woman!”

“Kidnap?” Sol’s eyebrows shot up. “Helena, you’re not a prisoner here. You’re my guest, my destiny.”

Helena shook her head, taking a step back. “This is crazy. I don’t believe in destiny or soul mates or whatever you’re talking about.”

Sol’s wolf growled within him, urging him to make her understand. He closed the distance between them in two long strides, stopping just short of touching her. “Then



let me prove it to you,” he murmured, his eyes searching hers. “Sit, enjoy this meal with me, and I’ll explain everything.”

For a moment, Helena seemed to waver, her gaze flickering between Sol’s face and the door. Sol held his breath, every muscle in his body tense with anticipation. He’d waited lifetimes for this moment. For her. He couldn’t bear the thought of her walking away now.

“I assure you,” he said, a smile spreading across his face, “our chef is one of the best. You’re in for a treat.”

As if on cue, servants entered with trays of steaming dishes. The aroma of perfectly seared meat and aromatic herbs filled the air. Sol noticed Helena’s nostrils flare, her resolve wavering.

“Well,” she said, her tone softening slightly, “I suppose I could stay for a quick bite.”

Sol’s smile widened as he pulled out her chair. “Excellent choice.”

As they settled into their seats, Sol found himself acutely aware of Helena’s proximity. Her scent was intoxicating. It took every ounce of his considerable willpower not to lean in and bury his face in the crook of her neck.

Instead, he focused on explaining more about his world. “Shifters, like myself, have a... heightened awareness, you could say. When we meet our fated mate, we know instantly through the mate bond.”

Helena raised an eyebrow, her fork paused midway to her mouth. “Mate bond?”

Sol nodded, his eyes intense. “It’s a bond deeper than anything humans experience. A connection between two souls no matter the distance or circumstance.” He paused

briefly, studying her face. “Also, if these true mates separate, they’ll never have children or be sexually satisfied again. That pleasure, that fulfillment, can only come from each other?—“

“Hold up a second,” Helena interrupted, setting down her fork. “What exactly is a shifter?”

Sol leaned back, a predatory glint in his eye. “My pack, the Sunflare pack, can all turn into wolves.”

“Pack?” Helena echoed, her brow furrowing.

“My community,” Sol explained, his voice taking on a note of pride. “As their alpha, I’m responsible for their well-being and protection.”

He paused, watching her carefully. “And you, Helena, are our Luna. The woman destined to lead the pack alongside me.”

Sol could see the moment it became too much. Helena’s eyes widened, her breath quickening. Through their nascent bond, he felt the fire and heat simmering inside her, threatening to boil over.

“Right,” she said, her laugh tinged with hysteria. “Wolves and Lunas and magical bonds, oh my. Next, you’ll be telling me Hogwarts is real.”

Sol knew he should tread carefully, but his wolf was relentless, pushing him to make her understand. “Don’t you believe it now?” he pressed. “Now that your powers have awakened? You’re one of us, Helena.”

The shock on her face was immediate. Sol felt the heat within her spike, panic rising like a shrill crescendo. He could practically see the flames dancing behind her hazel

eyes, begging for release.

His wolf howled in triumph. She was perfect, his fiery Luna. But the man in him recognized the fear beneath her bravado. He had pushed too hard and too fast.

“Helena,” he began, reaching for her hand across the table.

But she jerked away, her chair scraping against the floor as she stood. “This is completely insane,” she said, her voice trembling. “Wolves? Powers? Fated mates? Do you hear yourself?”

Sol rose slowly, his movements deliberate and non-threatening. “I know it sounds impossible,” he said, his tone gentle but firm. “But deep down, you feel it too. The connection between us, and the fire inside you begging to be unleashed.”

Helena shook her head, backing away. “No, I don’t feel anything except the urge to get as far away from here as possible.”

Sol watched Helena edge toward the door, his wolf snarling at him, demanding action. But centuries of control held him back. He took a deep breath, finally accepting his mistake as Mitesh’s words echoed in his mind: “Ease her into it, Your Highness. Humans aren’t accustomed to our world.”

“Helena, wait,” he said, stepping closer to her. “I know this is overwhelming, but there’s more you need to understand.”

She paused, her hand on the doorknob. “More crazy talk about wolves and magic?”

Sol’s lips twitched. Her inner fire certainly mirrored his own, even in disbelief. “Let’s talk about the fire at your restaurant.”

Helena's eyes widened. "What about it?"

"You weren't harmed, were you?" Sol took another tentative step closer, his eyes intense. "Not a single burn or scorch mark."

"I... no, but--"

"And the flames," Sol continued, "they felt familiar, didn't they? Like they were a part of you."

Her brow furrowed slightly. "How do you know that?"

Sol's wolf preened at her admission. "Because those flames came from you, Helena. Your powers awakened on your 30th birthday, didn't they?"

"My birthday..." Helena's voice trailed off. "There was another fire. With the candles. But that's impossible."

"Is it?" Sol challenged, his voice husky with emotion. "Deep down, you know it's true. You felt it both times, didn't you? The connection to the flames."

Helena's shoulders sagged slightly. "This is so insane," she muttered, but Sol could sense her resolve weakening.

"The Luna - that's you - carries latent elemental powers that awaken on her 30th birthday," Sol explained, taking another step toward her. "It's why you're here, Helena. You're not just a chef anymore. You're powerful. But that also makes you a target."

Helena's eyes snapped to his. "A target?"

Sol nodded slowly, thinking of Victor but deciding against mentioning him just yet. “There are those who would seek to use your abilities for their own gain. That’s why I brought you here. To protect you.”

Helena shook her head firmly. “This is too much. I don’t believe any of this. I’m leaving now.”

She turned the door handle to leave, and Sol’s control snapped. He couldn’t let her walk away. In two long strides, he crossed the short distance between them and grasped her wrist. “Helena, please-“

The moment his skin touched hers, Sol felt it again. The surge of heat and the crackle of energy in the air. Helena’s eyes widened in shock and anger.

“Let go of me!” she demanded.

Suddenly, flames erupted from her free hand, licking up the nearby curtains. His wolf howled at her magnificent power. But he forced his rational mind to focus on the situation at hand.

“Helena, calm down,” he urged, not releasing her wrist. “The fire won’t hurt you, but you need to control it.”

“I can’t!” Panic laced her voice as the flames spread.

Sol pulled her close, his body solid against hers. “Yes, you can. Feel the fire, Helena. It’s a part of you. Command it.”

Their eyes locked, green meeting hazel. Sol could feel her rapid heartbeat and smell the cinnamon and vanilla of her skin mixed with the smoky scent of her awakened powers. It was completely intoxicating.

“I...” Helena’s voice faltered.

“Trust yourself,” Sol murmured, his lips inches from hers. “Trust me.”

For a moment, the world stood still.

NINE

HELENA

The fire danced along the fabric of the curtains with hungry intensity, seeming to multiply and grow with each passing second. Helena's heart hammered against her ribs as the flames spread across the wall. How could Sol believe this was coming from her? Yet the evidence burned bright before her eyes.

His chest was firm against hers, radiating heat that rivaled the growing inferno around them. The scent of him—earth and spice with something wild underneath—flooded her senses.

Their eyes locked, and Helena felt something electric pass between them. His gaze held such certainty that for a moment, she almost believed him. His rapid heartbeat pulsed against her, matching her own frantic rhythm. The intensity in those forest-green eyes was completely intoxicating.

"I..." Helena's voice faltered. Words failed her as she stood trapped between the man who claimed to be her fated mate and the fire that supposedly came from within her.

"Trust yourself," Sol murmured softly, his full lips inches from hers. His breath warm against her face. "Trust me."

For a brief moment, the world stood completely still. Helena couldn't look away from him. She couldn't process the dual shock of the flames erupting from her hand and the overwhelming proximity of his body. His lips hovered so close to hers that the

smallest movement would bring them together.

He must have sensed she had no control—not over her newly awakened powers or her body’s response to him. Without breaking eye contact, Sol raised his right hand toward the flames while still holding her wrist with his left.

What happened next stole Helena’s breath.

With precise, fluid gestures of his fingers, Sol directed each tendril of fire. The flames peeled away from the curtains, stretching and curling through the air like living ribbons. They danced and wavered, then streamed across the room in a graceful arc, joining the flames already burning in the dining room fireplace.

The display was mesmerizing—beautiful in a primal way that stirred something deep inside her. Each flame obeyed his silent command, flowing like water but burning bright. Not a single ember strayed from the path he created.

She watched, transfixed, as the last of the fire left the curtains and settled into the fireplace. The fabric was singed black along the edges but no longer burning. The room quieted, the crackling of flames now contained to where they belonged.

“How did you...” she finally whispered, unable to finish the thought.

His mouth curved into a half-smile. “The same way you’ll soon learn to. The Sunflare pack has always had a kinship with fire.” His thumb traced small circles on the inside of her wrist. “It’s in our blood.”

“Our blood,” she repeated, the words strange on her tongue. Her mind raced, trying to reconcile what she’d just witnessed with everything she thought she knew about reality.



“Yes,” he said, his voice dropping lower. “Yours and mine.”

The fireplace flames suddenly flared higher as if responding to his words—or perhaps to the quickening of her pulse.

“I’m not one of you,” Helena protested, though the conviction in her voice wavered. “I’m a chef. I’m a normal human being.”

His eyes glinted. “No, Helena, you’re extraordinary. You always have been. Now your true nature is awakening.”

His certainty was both terrifying and thrilling. The flames in the fireplace danced higher again, matching the rhythm of her increasingly unsteady heart. Her thoughts spun in dizzying circles. She stared at the charred curtains, then back at the impossibly sexy man still gripping her wrist. His touch sent waves of heat rippling through her body that had nothing to do with fire.

“So, you’re saying I created that fire with my awakened powers? My true nature?” She pulled back slightly, but Sol maintained his hold. “No. You must have done something to make me do it. Some trick or?—“

“Impossible.” Sol’s voice cut through her protests with casual authority. “I cannot create fire, Helena. Only you can. I can merely control your fire.” His thumb caressed the inside of her wrist, sending shivers up her arm. “I am a complement to your power. Together, our abilities are stronger and more controlled than apart.”

The absolute certainty in his voice left no room for argument, yet Helena couldn’t wrap her mind around what he was saying. Her? Creating fire? It defied everything she understood about herself and reality.

“So let’s say, hypothetically, that I believe you.” She swallowed hard. “And I’m

starting these fires. Does that mean only you can control them? That I'm just some... walking fire hazard needing a handler?"

A warm smile spread across his face, making her stomach flip. "That's not what it means at all." His free hand came up to brush her hair back from her face. The casual intimacy of the gesture left her momentarily breathless. "You can learn to control the fire yourself. But only women are the bearers of creation fire. That's simply how it is among our kind."

Helena stood frozen, torn between wanting to flee and wanting to lean into his touch. She was acutely aware of his body so close to hers—the solid wall of his chest, the coiled strength in his arms, and the woodsy scent that clung to his skin. Every breath she took brought his scent deeper into her lungs, making her head swim.

His green eyes never wavered, watching her with an intensity that made her feel both exposed and protected. Heat pulsed between them, and Helena couldn't tell if it was her newfound powers or simple attraction. Perhaps both.

The dining room doors framed them like a portrait—the Alpha Prince and the woman he claimed was his Luna. The absurdity of it all bubbled up inside her. Twenty-four hours ago, her biggest concern had been getting through her busy workday unscathed as the owner and executive chef of her restaurant. Now, she stood in a castle with a man who supposedly turned into a wolf, who called her his mate, and who talked about elemental fire powers as casually as discussing the weather.

And yet...

The charred curtains stood as evidence she couldn't ignore. The way he had drawn the flames across the room—that had been real. The fire that had erupted in her restaurant kitchen both times—that had been real too.

Her breath hitched as his thumb traced another circle on her pulse point, his touch featherlight but commanding. A spark of something—desire, fear, power?—flickered deep inside her core. She felt it like a tiny flame, waiting to grow stronger.

Suddenly, her mind spun out of control as she tried to process everything all at once. Wolves. Lunas. Fated mates. Elemental fire powers. She gripped the doorframe to steady herself, the smooth wood cool beneath her fingertips. Her green sundress clung to her curves, suddenly feeling too thin and too revealing under his intense gaze.

“I can’t...” Her voice trembled. “This is way too much. Yesterday, I was just a chef trying to forget it was my birthday. Today, I’m setting things on fire with my bare hands and being told I’m the destined mate of a wolf prince.”

Sol leaned in impossibly closer, his tailored suit accentuating his broad shoulders and powerful frame. The crisp white shirt contrasted with his tanned skin, making his green eyes seem even more vibrant.

“I know it’s a lot to take in.” His voice was low and gentle. “But denying what you are won’t make it go away.”

“What I am? I don’t even know what that means anymore.”

She felt the panic rising again as she remembered the curtains igniting at her touch and the kitchen at the restaurant erupting in flames. Her heartbeat quickened, and with horror, she noticed the candles on the dining table flaring higher in response.

Sol noticed too, and suddenly, he wrapped his strong arms around her. The unexpected embrace should have felt invasive—they were practically strangers—but instead, Helena felt an immediate wave of calm wash over her. His body was warm, solid, and real. Something to anchor her in this storm of impossibilities.

“Breathe with me,” he murmured, his breath tickling her ear.

She did, matching her breaths to his, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest against hers. The candle flames settled, flickering at a normal height once more.

“How did you do that?” Helena whispered, not pulling away.

“I didn’t. You did.” His hands traced soothing circles on her back. “Your emotions fuel your power. When you feel calmer, the flames respond.”

Helena lifted her face to look at him. His expression was intent and watchful, but there was another thing there too—a heat that wasn’t from any fire powers.

“And why do I feel calmer with you?” she asked, heat rising to her cheeks.

His mouth curved up into that half-smile that made her stomach flip. “The mate bond. Even if you don’t accept it yet, your body knows. Your fire knows.”

His words should have sounded ridiculous, but standing in his arms, Helena couldn’t deny the connection between them. Every touch sparked something primal within her.

“But you kidnapped me,” she reminded him, though her voice lacked conviction.

“I rescued you,” he corrected, his hands sliding to rest at her waist. “From the fire, from enemies, and from a world that wouldn’t understand what you’re becoming.”

His face was millimeters from hers now. Helena knew she should pull away, demand to be taken home or call the police—any rational response to this situation.

“And what am I becoming exactly?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Mine,” he growled, the single word filled with such possession that she felt it reverberate through her body.

The fierce intensity in his eyes was her undoing. The fear, the confusion, and the overwhelming nature of everything faded into the background. In its place surged a hunger she had never experienced—raw, demanding, and urgent.

Her hands moved of their own accord, sliding up his chest to the nape of his neck. His eyes darkened at her touch, his pupils dilating as he watched her make her choice.

“Helena,” her name was a warning on his lips.

She didn’t heed it. Rising on her tiptoes, she pressed her mouth to his.

The moment their lips connected, something ignited between them—a spark that wasn’t caused by her newfound powers but by the chemistry that had simmered since their eyes first met in her restaurant. Sol responded instantly, one hand sliding into her hair, cradling the back of her head as he took control of the kiss.

His lips were firm and demanding, claiming hers with a hunger that matched her own. Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to her as though afraid he might pull away. But Sol showed no signs of retreating—quite the opposite. He backed her against the wall, his body pressing against hers, surrounding her with his heat and strength.

His lips soon left hers, trailing down her neck with a mix of hunger and precision that made her knees weak. His teeth grazed her skin, sending shivers down her spine, while his hands roamed her curves with a possessiveness that should have alarmed her but instead set her body ablaze. Every touch and every nip made her feel like she was combusting from the inside out.

“Sol,” she gasped, her voice breathless and shaky, her fingers tightening in the fabric of his suit jacket. “What are you?—“

“Just relax.” His voice was low and commanding, and it shut down her protest before it could fully form. “I’m showing you what our connection feels like. You’re mine, Helena. You’ve always been mine.”

His words should have sounded ridiculous, arrogant even, but the way he said them—so certain, so fiercely possessive—made her pulse race. She had never felt like this, like every nerve in her body was alive and on fire. It was as if he had unlocked something deep inside her, something primal and untamed she hadn’t even known existed.

One of his hands slid down to her waist, gripping her firmly as he pulled her closer, his lips never leaving her skin. The other hand cupped her breast, his thumb brushing over her peaked nipple through the thin fabric of her dress. Helena arched into his touch, a moan escaping her lips before she could stop it.

“You feel that?” he murmured against her neck, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through her. “That heat? That need?”

Her mind was a whirlwind of confusion and desire. She didn’t understand what was happening, but her body didn’t care. It responded to him instinctively, craving his touch, his heat, and his strength. She wanted to protest, to tell him this was too much and too fast, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, she found herself clinging to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as he continued to explore her with a confidence that left her breathless.

Suddenly, he pulled back slightly, his green eyes locking onto hers. The piercing intensity in his gaze made her stomach clench. “Do you trust me?”

She blinked, her mind scrambling to catch up. “I—I don’t even know you.”

“But you do,” he said, his voice firm but gentle. “Your body knows me. Your soul knows me. You just need to let your mind go and feel it.”

Before she could respond, he bent down and scooped her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing. She let out a surprised yelp, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck.

“Sol, put me down,” she said, though there was no real heat in her voice. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and a part of her was thrilled by this display of raw, alpha male strength.

“Not a chance,” he said, a smirk tugging on his lips as he carried her through the castle. “You’re all mine, Helena. And I’m taking you to where I can show you exactly what that means.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but the look on his face—determined, possessive, and just a little bit wild—silenced her. Instead, she found herself studying his face, the sharp lines of his jaw, and the way his dark hair framed his features. He was impossibly handsome, and the way he held her with such ease and confidence made her feel both protected and utterly claimed.

TEN

SOL

Sol carried Helena through the grand halls of his castle, his pulse thrumming with a rhythm that matched the certainty in his steps. Her body pressed against his chest, her warmth seeping into him, and the scent of her—cinnamon and something uniquely her—filled his senses. His wolf prowled under his skin, restless and eager, but he kept it in check. For now. She was his, and he'd waited centuries for this exact moment. He wasn't about to rush it.

She opened her mouth, likely to argue, but the look in her hazel eyes softened as she studied his face. He knew what she saw—the alpha in him, the man who'd waited lifetimes for her. She didn't fight him, didn't squirm or protest. Instead, she let her head rest against his shoulder, her breath warm against his skin.

The castle's stone walls blurred past as he moved with purpose, his feet carrying him toward the one place he'd envisioned her in since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. His chambers. The heart of his world. The door loomed ahead, and he kicked it open gently, the latch clicking shut behind them as he stepped inside.

He set her on her feet, her bare toes brushing against the plush carpet. The room was bathed in the soft glow of moonlight streaming through the tall windows, and the air was thick with anticipation. Sol locked the door, the sound of the bolt sliding into place echoing in the quiet.

Helena turned to face him, her long red hair tumbling over her shoulders and her



cheeks flushed. “This is...” she trailed off, her voice trembling just enough to betray her nerves. But there was something else in her eyes—desire, curiosity, and a spark that mirrored the fire he’d seen in her when she’d kissed him.

“Exactly what it’s supposed to be,” he finished for her, closing the gap between them. “You and me.”

Her breath hitched as he cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs brushing over the delicate curve of her cheekbones.

“Sol, I still don’t?—“

He kissed her, cutting off her words with a kiss that was all fire and need. Her lips were soft and yielding, and then suddenly they weren’t—she kissed him back with a fervor that sent heat coursing through him. Her hands slid up his chest, fingers tangling in the fabric of his shirt, and he groaned against her mouth.

“You’re overthinking this,” he breathed against her lips. “Stop thinking. Just feel.”

She let out a shaky laugh, her hands moving to the hem of his shirt. “You’re not exactly giving me a lot of room to think.”

“Good.” He tugged her closer, his hands sliding down to her waist. “You don’t need to think at all. You just need to trust me.”

Her fingers worked at the buttons of his shirt, and he let her strip it off, the fabric pooling on the floor. Her hands splayed across his chest, her touch sending sparks skittering across his skin. He could feel the intense heat radiating from her, the same heat that had ignited the flames in the dining room, and it only fueled the fire burning inside him.

“That’s really beautiful,” she whispered, her gaze tracing the intricate tattoo on his right arm that marked him as the Sunflare prince. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s a part of me,” he said, his voice rough. “Just like you are now.”

Her breath caught, and he took advantage of the moment, slipping the straps of her sundress off her shoulders. The fabric slid down her body, pooling at her feet, and she stood before him in nothing but lace and moonlight. His wolf growled low in his throat, and he let his gaze roam over her—every curve, every inch of pale skin, and every freckle that dotted her shoulders like stars.

“Sol,” she breathed, her voice trembling.

“Mine,” he said, the word a possessive growl. He pulled her flush against his body, his hands sliding up her sides and removing her lace bra as he kissed her again. This time, it was slow and deliberate, a promise sealed with his lips. She melted against him, her hands tangling in his hair, and he guided her backward until the edge of the bed pressed against her thighs.

He laid her down gently, her red hair fanning out across the dark sheets, and stared down at her. “You’re everything,” he said, his voice low. “Everything I’ve waited for.”

Her eyes searched his, and for a moment, he thought she might pull away, and might retreat back into the uncertainty that had plagued her since the fire in the dining room. But then she reached for him, her hands sliding up his arms, and pulled him down to her. “Show me,” she whispered against his lips. “Show me what it means to be yours.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. The world outside his chambers ceased to exist, and all that mattered was the woman beneath him, the fire that burned between them, and

the bond that was already weaving them together.

Sol's wolf was restless, coiled tightly beneath his skin, but he ignored its growling hunger. Helena's body was a masterpiece he intended to worship—every curve and every inch of her pale, freckled skin. He couldn't rush this. She deserved to be savored and to feel everything he could give her.

He kissed her mouth first, slow and deep, his tongue sweeping against hers in a rhythm that made her moan. Her hands tugged at his hair, pulling him closer, and he smiled against her lips. "You taste so sweet," he murmured, his voice low and rough.

She gasped as he soon kissed her neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there before trailing lower. Her full breasts heaved with each breath, her nipples already hard and begging for his attention. He took one into his mouth, laving it with his tongue, and her back arched against the bed as she cried out.

"Sol!" Her voice was a mix of surprise and pleasure, and it sent a surge of pride through him. He switched to her other breast, sucking and teasing until she was gasping, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Her body was so responsive, so eager, and it drove him wild. He could feel her heat through the bond, a fiery warmth that matched the flames she could summon, and it only made him want her more.

He trailed his mouth down her stomach, kissing and nipping at her skin, and she squirmed beneath him. Her hands moved to his hair again, tugging lightly, and he chuckled against her hip. "Impatient?" he teased, his breath hot against her skin.

"You're... you're driving me crazy," she gasped, her hazel eyes dark with desire.

"Good." He kissed the inside of her thigh, and she shivered as he pulled off her lace panties. "That's the point."

He soon settled between her thighs, her arousal already slick on her folds, and he groaned at the scent. She was intoxicating, and he was barely holding on to his control. He licked her slowly, savoring her taste, and she let out a broken moan.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, her thighs trembling. “Sol, that’s...”

He didn’t let her finish. He focused on her most sensitive spot, licking and sucking with a hunger that caused her to cry out. Her hips bucked against his mouth, and he held her down with one hand, his other teasing her entrance with his fingers. When he slid two fingers inside her, she came apart with a scream, her body convulsing with pleasure.

He didn’t stop. He kept licking her, kept thrusting his fingers inside her, and she whined, her hands clutching at the sheets. “Too much,” she gasped, but her body said otherwise, her hips grinding against his mouth as she came again.

He finally pulled back, breathing hard, and looked up at her. Her face was flushed, her hair a wild, fiery halo around her head, and she looked at him with a mix of awe and disbelief. “You’re... are all wolf shifters like that?” she asked, her voice trembling.

He smirked, crawling back up her body. “No,” he said, his voice low. “Just me. And only for you.” He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb brushing her bottom lip. “You are all mine, Helena. And I’m going to make sure you never forget it.”

He didn’t give her a chance to recover. Rising to his feet, Sol stripped off his slacks and boxers in one swift motion. His large cock sprang free, already eager for her. The air was cool against his heated skin, but nothing compared to the fire in her gaze as her eyes widened, her breath hitching audibly. Her reaction sent a surge of pride through him, his inner wolf preening at her awe.

“You’re... so big,” she whispered, her voice shaky but laced with excitement.

His lips curved up into a wolfish grin. “Only for you.”

He climbed back onto the bed, caging her body beneath his, his weight pressing her into the mattress. Her hands slid up his chest, and he shuddered at her touch as he captured her lips in another searing kiss.

She moaned into his mouth, and he felt her body arch against his. Slowly, he positioned himself at her entrance, the head of his cock brushing against her slick folds.

“Ready?” he murmured against her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed.

He entered her slowly, inch by inch, savoring the way her tight warmth enveloped him. She was perfect, so impossibly perfect, and her breath hitched as he stretched her, filling her completely. The sensation was intense, almost overwhelming, and Sol had to grit his teeth to maintain control. His wolf howled inside him, demanding that he claim her, but he forced himself to hold back. This was about her—about making her feel every ounce of pleasure she deserved.

“Oh my God,” she gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders. “Sol, you’re?—“

“Shh,” he murmured, kissing her again. “Just feel me.” He began to move, slow and deliberate, each thrust drawing a soft moan from her lips. Her body responded to his rhythm, her hips meeting his, and he could feel the intense heat radiating from her—fire and desire intertwined. It was intoxicating, and he wanted more. Needed more.

Her hands slid down his back, her fingers gripping his hips as she urged him on. “Faster,” she begged, her voice broken and pleading. “Please, Sol.”

He chuckled darkly, nipping at her neck. “Patience,” he teased, keeping his pace steady. Her frustration was palpable, and he loved the way she squirmed beneath him desperate for more. But he wasn’t done savoring her yet.

After a few moments of tormenting her, Sol finally gave in. He thrust harder and deeper, his grip on her hips tightening as he drove into her with a ferocity that made her cry out. Her body was on fire, her skin flushed with heat, and he could feel the flames of her power licking at the edges of their bond. She was his, in every way.

Her climax soon hit her hard, her body convulsing around him as she screamed out her pleasure. The sound was music to his ears, and the fire in her veins ignited his own release. With one final, deep thrust, Sol let out a guttural groan, spilling himself inside her with a shudder. The heat between them was overwhelming, a blaze that consumed them both, and for a moment, the world stopped.

When he finally came down from the high, Sol collapsed beside her, pulling her into his arms. Her body was still trembling, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

He nuzzled her neck, breathing in her scent. “You’re mine now,” he murmured, his voice rough with satisfaction. “And I’m never letting you go.”

She laughed softly, her fingers tracing the hard planes of his chest. “You’re impossible,” she said, but there was no bite to her words. Just the warmth of her smile and the fire in her eyes.

Sol grinned, brushing her hair away from her face. “You love it.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t argue, and that was all the confirmation he needed.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:32 am*

ELEVEN

HELENA

Helena woke to the unfamiliar weight of a muscular arm draped across her body. Her body cocooned in a warmth that had nothing to do with her newfound fire powers. She blinked in the gentle morning light filtering through heavy curtains, momentarily disoriented until the memories of the previous night rushed back.

Oh. My. God.

She had slept with a man she'd just met. A wolf shifter man who claimed she was his fated mate and the co-leader of his pack.

Helena studied Sol's sleeping face—the strong line of his jaw softened in slumber, and his dark lashes resting against his cheeks. His neatly trimmed beard had left the most delicious burn against her inner thighs, and the memory sent a fresh surge of intense heat through her body.

“This is so crazy,” she whispered to herself, careful not to wake him.

Her hand hovered over his intricate tattoo, tracing the air above the design without touching his skin. It was beautiful and powerful—just like him. For a woman who had built her life around routines and predictability, this sudden plunge into the supernatural felt like diving headfirst off a cliff.

And yet.

When Sol had touched her, something primal had flickered inside her. The connection between them seemed to transcend physical attraction. It felt like...coming home.

“Maybe there is something to this whole mate bond thing,” she murmured, her fingers finally making contact with his warm skin.

Sol’s eyes fluttered open immediately, his vibrant green irises fixing on her with an intensity that stole her breath.

“Good morning, Luna.” His voice rumbled from deep in his chest as he pulled her closer. “Having second thoughts already?”

Helena propped herself up on one elbow, her red hair cascading over her bare shoulder. “How did you know I was thinking about that?”

“Your face gives everything away.” His fingers traced her jawline. “Plus, it’s what any sensible human would think after learning they’re suddenly part of a world they never knew existed.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Only to me.” He captured a lock of her hair between his fingers, rubbing the strand as if testing its texture. “And for the record, I’ve never brought anyone to my bed before. Not in this castle.”

That revelation stunned her. “Never? But you’re?—“

“Hundreds of years old?” A crooked smile revealed the hint of a dimple. “When you’ve been waiting for your Luna, others pale in comparison.”



Helena's fingers found the sheets, twisting them. "I've never done anything like this. Slept with someone I just met."

"I'd hope not." His possessive tone should have irritated her, but instead it sent a thrill down her spine. "You've always been mine, Helena. Even before you knew it."

The conviction in his voice made her shiver. "I'm not completely convinced about all this Luna business, but..." She bit her lower lip. "I'm willing to stay. Today, at least. Learn about these powers before I start something else on fire."

Sol's eyes darkened with something primal. "And learn about me? About us?"

"That too." She couldn't help the flush creeping up her neck. "The sex was..."

"Earth-shattering? Life-changing? Cosmically ordained?" He grinned, rolling her beneath him in one fluid movement.

Helena laughed despite herself. "Your ego is the size of your castle."

"Not ego when it's facts." His lips brushed her collarbone, sending sparks through her body—literal sparks that danced across her fingertips. "Look at that. Your fire seems to respond to me."

Helena stared at her fingers in wonder. "Teach me how to control it. Please."

Sol's expression shifted to something more serious and more alpha. "I will. But first, I'll show you what it means to be part of the Sunflare pack. What it means to be mine."

The way he said "mine" should have set off all her independence alarms, but instead, it seemed to feel right in a way nothing else had before.

“Deal,” Helena whispered, sealing her promise with a kiss that threatened to ignite more than just her newfound powers.

Helena slipped out from beneath the silk sheets, acutely aware of Sol’s eyes tracking her every movement. She reached for her green sundress, feeling strangely shy despite their intimacy the night before.

“I could get used to this view,” Sol drawled from the bed, making no move to hide his appreciation of her naked form.

Heat bloomed across Helena’s cheeks. “Stop staring and get dressed. I’m starving.”

Sol chuckled, finally rising in one fluid motion that displayed his muscular physique to perfection. Helena tried—and failed—not to stare at his intricate tattoo spanning his upper arm, the mysterious symbols seeming to shift with the play of muscles beneath his skin.

“What does your tattoo mean?” she asked, pulling her dress over her head.

“It tells the story of our pack.” He came up behind her, his breath warm against her neck as he helped zip her dress. “I’ll explain it to you someday.”

The casual mention of “someday” sent an unexpected thrill through Helena. It implied a future together—something she wasn’t entirely convinced about yet, but couldn’t deny wanting for some strange reason.

When they entered the dining room, Helena’s chef’s instincts immediately kicked in at the spread before them. Platters of fresh fruit, pastries still steaming from the oven, and something that smelled divine simmering in a copper pot.

“Is that what I think it is?” Helena moved closer to the pot, inhaling deeply.

“Fig and cardamom compote. My chef remembered you mentioning your fondness for it last night.”

Helena blinked in surprise. “I barely mentioned it in passing.”

“Nothing about you is insignificant to us now, Luna.” The gravity in his tone made her stomach flutter.

As they ate, Helena couldn’t help comparing techniques with what she would have done. “This glaze on the pastries—I’d add just a touch more orange zest.”

“Perhaps you’d like to show him some time.” Sol’s eyes never left her face. “The kitchen is yours whenever you wish.”

“I’d like that,” she admitted, surprised at how natural it felt to imagine herself in this place.

After breakfast, Sol led her to a wood-paneled library where an older man waited, surrounded by ancient-looking books.

“Helena, this is Mitesh, my royal advisor and historian.” Sol’s hand rested possessively at the small of her back. “He’s going to help you understand your powers and your role as Luna.”

Mitesh bowed slightly, his eyes twinkling with wisdom. “It’s an honor to meet you, Luna. I’ve waited centuries for this day.”

“Centuries?” Helena’s eyebrows shot up.

“Indeed. The last human-born Luna was over three hundred years ago.” Mitesh gestured to the table laden with books. “Her story is detailed here, along with

everything we know about the fire powers you possess.”

Helena ran her fingers over an ancient leather-bound tome. “I must admit, this is all pretty overwhelming.”

“Well then, let’s start with the basics. The power that connects Alpha and Luna is sacred,” Mitesh explained, opening one of the books to reveal illustrations of flames intertwining with wolf silhouettes. “Your fire doesn’t just exist alongside Sol’s wolf—it enhances it and makes it stronger. And in turn, his presence will help you control your flames.”

Helena glanced at Sol, who watched her with that intensity that made her breath catch.

“When you claimed her last night,” Mitesh continued, seemingly oblivious to Helena’s blush, “the mate bond grew stronger. You’ll both notice changes in your abilities.”

Sol nodded. “I felt it this morning. My wolf is...more present and more powerful.”

After an hour of explanations that left Helena’s head spinning, Mitesh excused himself. Sol closed the book they’d been examining and took her hand.

“Enough theory for now. Let’s see the gardens.” His thumb traced circles on her palm. “Fresh air will help clear your mind.”

The summer air greeted them with a kiss of warmth as they stepped outside. Helena gasped at the sight of meticulously maintained gardens stretching as far as she could see—roses climbing stone walls, fountains sparkling in the sunlight, and hidden alcoves promising privacy.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Sol tucked her hair behind her ear. “Not as beautiful as you with the sun on your hair.”

Sol guided Helena through the immaculately maintained gardens. Her fingertips trailed over velvet rose petals and smooth stone balustrades as they walked. Each turn revealed another breathtaking view—sculptures nestled among flowering bushes and koi ponds glimmering beneath weeping willows. She couldn’t reconcile the man beside her with this fairy tale setting. A wolf prince with his own castle and gardens straight out of a storybook.

“Did you design all this?” she asked, gesturing at a particularly stunning arrangement of blue delphiniums.

“I’ve had centuries to perfect it.” Sol’s hand found her lower back, guiding her toward a stone path that led away from the formal gardens. “But the forest beyond—that’s where I feel most at home.”

As they ventured into the woods, Helena felt the shift in the air—cooler and richer with earthy scents. Sol moved with unmistakable confidence, occasionally glancing back to make sure she was keeping pace.

“Where exactly are we going?” She stepped over a fallen log, admiring how the dappled sunlight played across the forest floor.

“Somewhere you can practice without burning down my castle.” His eyes glinted with mischief. “Unless that was your plan all along?”

Helena laughed. “I think I’ve caused enough destruction for now.”

They soon emerged into a clearing where a stone fire pit sat at the center, surrounded by what looked like purposefully arranged seating logs. The space felt ancient—sacred, somehow—with the trees forming a perfect circle around them.

“Our ancestors have used this clearing for fire ceremonies for thousands of years.” Sol’s voice deepened with reverence. “I can’t think of a better place for you to connect with your power.”

Helena approached the fire pit cautiously, her palms suddenly warm with anticipation. “How do I start?”

Sol positioned himself behind her, his chest pressing against her back as he took her hands in his. “Close your eyes. Feel the heat beneath your skin.”

His breath tickled her ear, sending a delicious shiver through her body. Helena closed her eyes, suddenly aware of every point where their bodies connected—his hands cradling hers, his thighs against the back of her legs, and his chest expanding against her shoulders with each breath.

“Now picture the flames,” he murmured, “rising from your core, traveling through your veins to your fingertips.”

Heat bloomed inside her, not unlike the desire she’d felt in his bed, but wilder—more ancient. It gathered in her chest then raced down her arms in thrilling waves.

“I can feel it,” she whispered, her voice catching.

“Direct it toward the fire pit. Let it go, Helena.”

When she opened her eyes, flames danced from her fingertips, arcing gracefully into the pit where they caught the kindling. The fire roared to life, higher than she

expected, and Helena gasped in delight.

“I did it!”

“You did.” Pride colored Sol’s voice as he moved to stand beside her. “Now make it smaller. Imagine drawing the energy back toward you, just a little.”

Helena furrowed her brow, concentrating on the flames. They hesitated, then shrank to a more manageable size.

“Perfect.” Sol circled her, his green eyes reflecting the firelight. “Now move it to the left side of the pit.”

With a flick of her wrist, the flames shifted. Helena laughed in disbelief. “This is incredible!”

“You’re incredible.” Sol’s expression was intense and hungry—the alpha fully present. “My Luna is a natural.”

The possessive claim in his voice should have bothered her, but instead, it felt natural and correct—as if some part of her had been waiting to hear those words all her life.

Helena couldn’t contain her excitement at this moment. The power surging through her veins felt right, like finding a part of herself that had been missing all these years. Without thinking, she threw herself at Sol, her hands clasping his face as she kissed him with newfound confidence.

His response was immediate and consuming. One hand tangled in her red hair while the other wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against him. The kiss deepened, and Helena felt her fire respond, warming her skin from within. When they finally broke apart, both were breathing heavily.

“That was...” She traced her fingers over his jawline, feeling the perfect roughness of his beard beneath her fingertips.

“A proper way to celebrate.” Sol’s eyes gleamed with pride and something deeper, a hunger that made her stomach flutter. “Would you like to see something special? A place I’ve never shown anyone else.”

“Even after hundreds of years?” Helena teased, finding it easier to accept his impossible age now that she’d witnessed supernatural power firsthand.

Sol took her hand, his thumb brushing her knuckles. “This place has been mine alone. Until now.”

They ventured deeper into the woods, leaving the ceremonial clearing behind. Helena noticed how the forest seemed to part for Sol, branches bending away as if recognizing their alpha. The ground rose gradually beneath their feet, and the trees grew older, their trunks wider and more gnarled.

“How much farther?” Helena asked, ducking under a low-hanging branch that Sol held aside for her.

“Getting tired already?” His voice carried that teasing challenge that made her want to prove herself.

“Not even close.” She squeezed his hand. “Just curious what could be so special that the mighty alpha has kept it all to himself for centuries.”

“Patience.” He pulled her closer as they navigated a narrow path between two massive rocks. “Some treasures are worth the wait.”

The forest grew denser, the canopy overhead creating a cathedral-like filter for the



golden afternoon sunlight. Helena breathed in the scent of pine and earth, feeling strangely at home despite never having been much of an outdoorswoman before.

“Listen,” Sol whispered, pausing their trek.

Helena held her breath, tuning her senses to the forest. At first, she heard nothing beyond the usual woodland sounds—breeze rustling leaves, distant bird calls—but then a new sound emerged: water, flowing fast and powerful.

“Is that a river?” she asked, following Sol as he guided her through a thicket of ferns.

“Something better.” His smile held secrets that made her pulse quicken. “We’re close now.”

As they climbed over a fallen log, Sol suddenly stopped, pulling Helena against his chest. His body tensed, alert in a way that reminded her this man was also a predator.

“What is it?” she whispered, scanning the trees.

“Nothing dangerous.” Sol’s lips brushed her ear, sending delicious shivers through her. “Just making sure we’re alone. This moment is only for us.”

### TWELVE

### HELENA

Helena followed Sol's lead through the final stretch of dense trees until they emerged into a hidden paradise. The sight before her stole the breath from her lungs. A small but powerful waterfall cascaded down moss-covered stone into a crystal-clear pool that seemed to glow with an otherworldly blue light. Lush ferns and wildflowers surrounded the grotto, creating a private sanctuary hidden from the world.

"This is..." Helena struggled to find adequate words.

"Mine." Sol's voice carried a possessive pride. "For centuries, this has been my retreat. No pack member has ever been here." He turned to face her, his green eyes reflecting the dancing water. "Until you."

Helena felt the weight of that admission. This wasn't just any secret spot—this was something deeply personal to him, a sacred space he'd kept to himself through countless years.

"Why show me?" she asked, trailing her fingers through a cascade of ferns.

Sol's expression softened. "Because you're my Luna. My true mate. What's mine is yours."

He began unbuttoning his shirt, revealing inch by inch the tanned skin and defined muscles beneath. The tattoo on his upper right arm seemed to shimmer in the dappled

light.

“What are you doing?” Helena asked, though the heat in her cheeks betrayed that she knew exactly what he was doing.

“Swimming.” His grin was pure mischief as he stripped down completely, his movements confident and without a hint of self-consciousness. “Join me.”

Helena hesitated. She’d never been one for skinny-dipping, but something about this moment—this magical, hidden place and this magnetic man—made her bold. With trembling fingers, she reached for the hem of her sundress and pulled it over her head.

Sol’s eyes darkened as they roamed over her curves. “Simply beautiful,” he murmured.

Before self-consciousness could creep in, Helena slipped off her remaining undergarments. The forest air kissed her skin, unexpectedly warm and inviting.

Sol extended his hand. “Together?”

Helena nodded, placing her palm in his. They approached the edge of the pool, toes curling around smooth stone.

“Cold?” she asked, eyeing the water with mild apprehension.

“The perfect temperature,” he promised, then added with a wink, “but I’ll keep you warm regardless.”

With a squeeze of her hand, they jumped. The water enveloped Helena in a surprisingly pleasant embrace—cool but not cold, refreshing after their forest trek.

She surfaced with a laugh that echoed off the stone walls surrounding them.

“You were right,” she admitted, pushing wet hair from her face. “It’s perfect.”

Sol swam closer, water droplets clinging to his eyelashes. “I’ve imagined bringing someone here for centuries. No one ever felt right until you.”

He splashed her playfully, breaking the intensity of the moment. Helena gasped in mock outrage and retaliated, sending a spray of water toward his face. Their laughter mingled with the sound of the waterfall as they chased each other through the crystal pool, their bodies slicing through the water with playful grace.

Minutes later, breathless and still grinning, Sol caught her by the waist. His hands, strong and sure, pulled her against him. The feel of their naked bodies pressed together underwater sent waves of desire through Helena that rivaled the ripples they’d created in the pool.

“I’ve waited lifetimes for you,” he murmured, his lips a breath away from hers. Water droplets traced paths down his beard as his eyes, dark with wanting, held hers.

Helena wound her arms around his neck, feeling the power in his shoulders. “I’m here now.”

The kiss was different from their others—deeper and more primal. It tasted of ancient promises and wild magic. Helena felt her fire stir within respond to his touch. Small wisps of steam rose around them from where her heated skin met his under the water.

Helena’s breath hitched as Sol’s lips soon trailed down her neck, his beard brushing against her skin in a way that made her shiver despite the heat radiating between them. Her thoughts swirled, a mix of disbelief and exhilaration. This is real. He’s real. He’s... mine.

The intimacy of the moment, the wild beauty of the grotto, and the sheer magnetism of the man holding her made her head spin. She tightened her arms around his neck, her fingers tangling in his damp hair as her legs instinctively wrapped around his waist beneath the water. His body pressed against hers, solid and warm, and she could feel the evidence of his desire against her thigh.

“You’re perfect,” Sol murmured against her skin, his voice rough with desire. His hands slid down her back, leaving trails of heat in their wake, before gripping her hips and pulling her tighter against him. “Every inch of you, Helena.”

She gasped as his lips found her collarbone, his teeth nipping gently before he soothed the spot with his tongue. “Sol,” she breathed, her voice trembling with both desire and wonder. “I’ve never... I mean...”

“I know,” he said, pulling back just enough to meet her gaze. His eyes were filled with a primal hunger that made her heart thud. “You’ve never felt this much desire and heat before. Neither have I, not like this. Not with anyone but you.”

His words seeped into her, warming her from the inside out. She brushed her hand along his jawline, feeling the stubble beneath her fingertips. “You’re not just saying that, are you?”

He chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that vibrated through her. “I’ve lived centuries, Helena. Trust me, I’ve had plenty of time to know what I want. And it’s you. Only you.”

Her cheeks flushed, but before she could respond, his lips captured hers in a kiss that was equal parts possession and worship. His tongue slid against hers, and she moaned, her fingers tightening in his hair. The water around them seemed to heat further, steam rising in curls as her inner fire responded to his touch.

His lips left hers, trailing down her neck and across her shoulder. Helena tipped her head back, her eyes fluttering closed as she surrendered to the sensations. His hands moved to her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her nipples, already hardened from the cool water and his attentions. She gasped as he took one into his mouth, his tongue swirling around the sensitive peak.

“Sol,” she breathed, her hands gripping his shoulders. “That feels... so good.”

He growled against her skin, the sound sending a thrill through her. “You taste like fire,” he murmured, switching to her other breast. His free hand slid down her side, leaving a trail of heat before slipping between her legs. Helena’s breath caught as his fingers brushed against her most sensitive spot, already throbbing with need.

“You’re so excited,” he said, his voice thick with desire.

She nodded, unable to form words as his fingers began to explore her, parting her folds with a gentle touch. Her hips rocked instinctively against his hand, seeking more. Sol watched her face, his eyes dark with hunger as he slipped a finger inside her.

Helena gasped, her legs tightening around him. “Sol...”

“Does that feel good?” he asked, his voice rough but tender. He added a second finger, his thumb circling her clit with precision.

“Yes,” she moaned, her head falling back as his fingers moved inside her, curling in just the right way. The water around them seemed to pulse with her heartbeat, the steam thickening as her body responded to his touch. “Don’t stop.”

“Never,” he promised, his lips brushing against her ear. “I’ll never stop making you feel like this.”

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as pleasure built within her, coiling tighter and tighter. “Sol, I’m...”

“Let go, Helena,” he urged, his voice a hungry growl. “Come for me.”

The command in his voice and the raw need in his eyes, pushed her over the edge. Her body tightened around his fingers, and she cried out as waves of pleasure crashed over her, leaving her trembling in his arms.

Sol held her close, his fingers slowing but not stopping until every last tremor had subsided. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “You’re amazing,” he whispered, his voice filled with awe.

Her chest heaved as she looked at him, her eyes still clouded with desire. “You’re... overwhelming,” she admitted, her voice shaky but filled with warmth. “In the best way.”

He grinned, that wolfish smile that made her heart skip a beat. “Good. Because I’m not done with you quite yet.”

His hands tightened on her hips as he pulled her toward the edge of the grotto pool, the water sloshing around them in gentle waves. The summer sunlight filtered through the canopy above, dappling their skin with golden light. Helena’s legs remained wrapped around his waist, her body pressed flush against his as he leaned back against the smooth stone edge of the pool. His eyes burned into hers, intense and unyielding, and she felt the heat of his skin even through the cool water.

“Ready for me?” His voice was low, a growl that sent shivers down her spine.

Helena nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. “Yes,” she breathed, her voice but a whisper. But Sol didn’t move, his gaze holding hers as if he wanted her to say it

louder, to demand it. Her lips curved into a small, defiant smile. “Give me what I need.”

He grinned wolfishly. “That’s my Luna.”

With a deliberate slowness that made her ache, he slid into her, his thick length filling her completely. She gasped, her head tilting back as pleasure rippled through her. The sensation was overwhelming, the perfect blend of heat and tension, and she tightened her legs around him, urging him deeper.

“Sol,” she moaned, her fingers gripping his shoulders. “Don’t tease me this time.”

He laughed, a deep rumble that vibrated through her. “Patience, Luna. I want to savor every second.”

But patience wasn’t something she had in abundance, not when his body was moving so slowly, drawing out every sensation until she was trembling with need. Her nails dug deep into his skin as she rocked against him, trying to take control, but he held her firmly, his grip unyielding.

“You’re so eager for me,” he said, his voice tinged with amusement. “But this is my pace right now. You’ll get what you need when I say so.”

Helena glared at him, though the heat in her eyes was far from anger. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re mine,” he countered, his voice dark with possession. He shifted his hips slightly, hitting a spot that made her gasp, her body arching against his. “See? I know exactly what you need.”

She couldn’t argue with that, not when pleasure was building inside her like a storm,



threatening to consume her. Her hands moved to his hair, tugging gently as she tried to coax him closer and faster. “Please, Sol. I can’t take it.”

He finally gave in to her pleas, and his pace quickened, Helena felt the world around them fade. His thrusts were hard and deep, each one driving her closer to the edge. She matched his rhythm, her body moving with a primal intensity she hadn’t known she possessed. Heat surged through her veins, her fire responding to the raw desire coursing between them. She could feel his heat too, not just in his body, but through their bond that was growing stronger with each passing second.

“Look at me,” he commanded, his voice rough with need.

She opened her eyes, meeting his gaze. His eyes were dark with desire, but there was also a tenderness in them that took her breath away. “I’m here,” she whispered.

“You’re my everything,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion. His pace became frantic, his body driving into hers with a ferocity that left her gasping.

The pressure inside her coiled tighter until it finally snapped, her body convulsing as pleasure exploded through her. She cried out as her inner walls clenched around him, the heat within her seeming to ignite, sending flames licking up her skin.

Sol let out a loud groan, and he thrust deep into her one last time, his own release hitting him with a force that left him shuddering as he spilled himself inside her.

For a long moment, they stayed like that, their bodies pressed together as the waves from their movements lapped against the edges of the pool. Helena’s head rested on Sol’s shoulder, her breath coming in ragged gasps. His arms were wrapped tightly around her, his heartbeat steady beneath her ear.

“That was...” she began, but words failed her.

“Mind-blowing?” he supplied, his voice tinged with amusement.

She laughed softly, her fingers tracing the lines of his tattoo. “I was going to say overwhelming again, but mind-blowing works too.”

He kissed the top of her head, his hands moving to cradle her face. “You’re my fire, Helena. My everything. Never forget that.”

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with a warmth that matched the flames inside her. “How could I forget?”

THIRTEEN

SOL

As Sol guided Helena back through the forest, his arm possessively encircling her waist, he savored the lingering scent of their lovemaking. Water droplets still clung to her long red hair, catching the sunlight filtering through the canopy, and her skin seemed to glow with a newfound radiance.

“I should really call Tyanna and the others,” Helena said abruptly, breaking the comfortable silence between them. “They must be worried sick about me. And I need to speak with Victor about the restaurant.”

The name sent a jolt through Sol’s system. His jaw clenched involuntarily, and his wolf stirred, bristling with territorial rage. He’d hoped—foolishly, perhaps—that their connection in the grotto would have pushed thoughts of her human life away, at least temporarily.

“Victor.” The name tasted bitter on his tongue. “You mean the snake who tried to steal you from me?”

Helena stopped walking, her hazel eyes widening. “What? Victor is my new boss. He just bought my restaurant.”

Sol’s nostrils flared. Of course, Victor would insert himself into her life that way—the cunning bastard had been planning this from the start.

“He’s dangerous, Helena. Far more than you realize.” Sol’s voice dropped to a low rumble. “There’s a reason he was exiled from our pack.”

“Wait—Victor is a wolf too?” Helena pressed her fingers to her temples. “This is... this is just too much. I need to call my coworkers. They’re like family to me. I need to know they’re okay, and I need to figure out what’s happening with my job.”

Sol’s wolf reared up inside him, demanding he assert his claim. The very idea of Helena returning to that restaurant—to Victor—sent a red haze across his vision.

“You won’t be returning to work,” he stated, the authority of centuries as alpha resonating in his voice. “Your place is here now, with me, with our pack. You’re the Luna.”

Helena’s jaw dropped, her expression transforming from confusion to indignation. “Excuse me? I never agreed to stay here permanently. I agreed to learn about my powers, not abandon my entire life!”

Sol felt a stab of genuine shock. In his hundreds of years, he’d never imagined his Luna would question her place by his side. It was fate, destiny—the natural order. Yet here she stood, her striking red hair seeming to spark with defiance, challenging him.

He opened his mouth to assert his will, to remind her of what it meant to be Luna, but something stopped him. A flicker of heat shimmered around her fingers—subtle, but unmistakable. Her emotions were stirring her newfound powers. His wolf urged him to dominate, to bend her to his will, but the man in him recognized the danger.

An uncontrolled flare-up here could set the entire forest ablaze.

Sol took a deep breath, reining in his alpha instincts with effort that made his muscles

tense. He watched as Helena's chest rose and fell with quickened breaths. How could he expect her to understand pack law and tradition in just one day when she had spent her entire life as a human, unaware of their world?

The heat emanating from her intensified, and Sol recognized he needed to tread carefully—not just for the forest's sake, but for the fragile bond forming between them.

Sol gritted his teeth, fighting the impulse to simply throw Helena over his shoulder and carry her back to the castle. But centuries of leadership had taught him that sometimes strength meant restraint.

“Helena.” He kept his voice steady, though a muscle twitched in his jaw. “You don’t understand the danger you’re in. Victor isn’t just some investor who bought your restaurant. He’s a rogue shifter—exiled from our pack years ago for attempting to seize power by force.”

Her eyes narrowed, and he felt a wave of heat pulse from her skin. Through their growing mate bond, Sol sensed her confusion, her fear, and beneath it all, a stubborn determination that both infuriated and impressed him.

“It’s not just Victor,” he continued. “Word will spread about you. A human Luna with fire powers who’s not properly claimed? Every power-hungry creature will come hunting for you. They’ll try to capture you, use you, and drain your power until there’s nothing left.”

“And you think locking me away in your castle is the solution?” Helena crossed her arms, her eyes flashing. “I’ve taken care of myself for thirty years. I don’t need some alpha male swooping in to run my life.”

He inhaled sharply. His wolf bristled at her defiance, but Sol forced himself to remain

calm. “This isn’t about controlling you. It’s about protecting what’s mine.”

“What’s yours ?” Her voice rose, and Sol detected the air around them growing warmer. “I am not a possession, Sol. We’ve known each other for a day. One day! Yes, we had sex—amazing sex—but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to abandon my entire life for you.”

Sol stepped closer, his eyes intense as he stared down at her. “Can you honestly tell me you feel nothing? That what happened between us meant nothing to you?”

Through their bond, he felt her heart rate accelerate, felt the surge of desire that belied her words even before she spoke them.

“It was just sex,” she said flatly.

Lie. The bond between them hummed with the deception. Sol’s nostrils flared as he detected both the falsehood and the dangerous spike in her emotional state. The scent of smoke tinged the air, though no flames had appeared yet.

“You’re lying.” He moved closer still, overwhelming her personal space. “I can feel it, Helena. The bond between us doesn’t lie, even when you do.”

Her pulse jumped—he could see it throbbing at the base of her throat, that delicate spot he’d kissed just an hour ago in the grotto. The memory sent heat coursing through his body.

“Fine. Maybe I felt something,” she admitted, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. “But that doesn’t change anything. You can’t just expect me to abandon my human life overnight because we have some mystical connection. My friends, my career—that’s real to me. This—“ she gestured between them, “—is still fantasy.”

Sol reached for her, his fingers grazing her cheek. “Your friends could visit. Your cooking—the pack would be blessed by your skills. Nothing says you must abandon what you love.”

He sensed her wavering, felt the flicker of longing through their bond. But just as quickly, it was replaced by a surge of frustration.

“You don’t get it,” she snapped, stepping back from his touch. “It’s not about what I’d be giving up. It’s about choice. My choice. You just announced that I won’t be returning to work like you have the final say in my decisions.”

The air around Helena shimmered, heat distorting the space between them. Sol felt alarm rising in his chest. Her emotions were feeding her power, bringing her dangerously close to igniting the forest around them.

“Helena,” he commanded, his voice low but firm, “you need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” she shot back, her hair seeming to float slightly as the heated air rose around her. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You think you can just order me around because you’re some alpha wolf prince!”

Sol clenched his fists, fighting his own nature. Every instinct screamed at him to assert control and to dominate this situation. Sol felt his wolf clawing mercilessly inside, desperate to break free. The primal creature had been patient—too patient—and now demanded action. A growl built in his throat, low and dangerous.

“You don’t understand what you’re risking,” he snapped, his voice taking on the commanding resonance that made lesser wolves cower. “Victor will hunt you down the moment you leave these grounds. He won’t be alone. There are others who would capture a Luna for her powers.”

Helena backed away, but Sol closed the distance in a single stride, towering over her.

“You’ll be taken, used, and discarded like trash when they’ve drained every ounce of power from your body. Is that what you want?” His voice rose with each word, centuries of authority pouring into his tone. “All because you’re too stubborn to accept what’s right in front of you?”

His wolf was practically snarling, pushing against the confines of his human form. Sol’s green eyes flashed with an inner glow as he gripped Helena’s shoulders.

“You’re running from me and your feelings because you’re scared. Scared of the connection between us, and scared of how powerful it is.” The accusation came out as a thunderous declaration. “Stop lying to yourself, Helena. Your human life is over. This is who you are now—the Luna of the Sunflare pack. My Luna.”

The moment the words escaped his lips, Sol knew he had made a catastrophic mistake. Shit. The rational part of his brain—the part that had led a pack for centuries—screamed at him to back down and to apologize, but his wolf was too far forward now and too dominant.

He watched Helena’s face transform, her shock giving way to raw fury. The temperature around them spiked dramatically. Her hazel eyes brightened until they glowed like molten gold, and her red hair seemed to float in the superheated air around her face.

“How DARE you?” Helena’s voice trembled with rage. “You don’t tell me who I am or what I feel!”

Sol sensed the imminent danger building—felt it through their bond and saw it in the shimmering air—but arrogance kept him rooted in place. Centuries as alpha had taught him many things, but backing down wasn’t among them.



“I’m just trying to protect you,” he insisted, his voice harsh with frustration and fear for her safety.

“I never asked for your protection!”

Her fury exploded outward in a sudden whoosh of flames that shot directly at him. Sol barely had time to register the blinding orange heat before it engulfed him.

Heat ripped through his body, but beneath it was something more startling—a connection to the flames themselves. They were Helena’s essence, her power, and through their bond, he sensed a path to control them.

Acting on pure instinct, Sol reached out with his mind, connecting to the fire through their mate bond. The flames hesitated, wavering around him as if confused by this new intrusion. Sol felt a strange intimacy as he manipulated Helena’s fire, a connection deeper than physical touch. The flames that should have consumed him instead responded to his will, twisting into an elegant vortex. His wolf prowled with satisfaction inside him—this was proof of their bond, undeniable even to her stubborn human mind.

With a mental push, he redirected their energy, swirling them away from his body and into a controlled spiral between them. The fire formed a perfect cyclone, dancing between them without touching either one.

He watched her expression transition from fury to astonishment, savoring the moment her anger gave way to wonder. Those hazel eyes, now reflecting the dancing orange light, were wide with disbelief.

“That’s not possible,” she whispered. “How are you?—“

“I told you, you and I are connected,” Sol said, his voice gentler now as he

maintained focus on the flames. “Your fire recognizes me as yours.”

The fireball rotated slowly, casting flickering shadows across Helena’s face. Sol shaped it further with his mind, condensing it into a perfect sphere that hovered at eye level between them.

“You could have killed anyone else with that outburst,” he said, not as an accusation but a statement of fact. “But not me. Never me.”

Fear crept into Helena’s expression, her earlier anger dissolving as she fully comprehended what she had done. “I could have hurt you,” she whispered, her voice cracking slightly.

“You need to learn more control,” Sol replied, his tone softening despite his wolf’s persistent urging to assert dominance. “Take this fire back, Helena. Put it out.”

She shook her head, backing away slightly. “I don’t know how.”

Sol stepped closer, the fireball moving with him. “Yes, you do. The power is yours. You created it, you can end it.”

Helena’s gaze shifted nervously between Sol and the flames. Her hands trembled at her sides. “I can’t?—“

“You can,” Sol insisted. “And you will.”

Her chin lifted defiantly, that spirit that had first drawn his wolf surging back. “Don’t order me around, Sol. I’m not one of your pack members.”

Sol flashed her a predatory smile. “No, you’re not. You’re my Luna—something far more powerful.”

He moved the fireball closer to her, watching her flinch slightly. “I’ll make you a deal,” he said, the negotiations feeling foreign on his tongue. As alpha, he had rarely needed to bargain. “Put out this fire, and I’ll let you call your friend—Tyanna, was it?”

Hope brightened Helena’s features. “You promise?”

“An alpha’s word is binding,” Sol replied with solemn certainty. “I never break my promises.”

Helena took a deep breath, her shoulders relaxing slightly. She reached toward the fireball, her slender fingers extended but stopping short of touching the flames.

“Focus on your connection to it,” Sol instructed. “Feel the heat as part of you, not separate from you.”

Her brow furrowed in concentration, and Sol felt a peculiar tug through their bond as if she were drawing energy back into herself. The fireball wobbled, shrinking slightly.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, his voice low and intimate. “Take back what’s yours.”

Sol watched transfixed as Helena closed her eyes. The fireball quivered, then rapidly contracted until it was no larger than an apple. With a final inward gesture of her hand, the flames winked out completely, leaving only a wisp of smoke that curled up between them.

“I did it,” she whispered, opening her eyes to look at him with newfound confidence.

Pride swelled in Sol’s chest—pride not just in her accomplishment but in her fieriness, her refusal to back down even when faced with his alpha nature. His wolf

recognized this as a worthy quality in their Luna, even if the man occasionally found it maddening.

“You’re a quick study,” Sol acknowledged, closing the remaining distance between them to cup her face in his hands. “That’s good. You’ll need to be.”

FOURTEEN

HELENA

Helena's legs trembled slightly as she and Sol walked up the steps of the castle. The lingering adrenaline from accidentally hurling fire at him still pulsed through her veins. Though her panic had subsided, knowing that he had such control over her flames.

"I still can't believe I didn't hurt you," she murmured, glancing at his perfectly intact form beside her.

Sol guided her through the massive wooden doors, his hand possessively pressed against her lower back. "My Luna could never truly harm me. Our powers are designed to complement each other, not destroy."

They paused in the grand foyer, its vaulted ceilings and ancient tapestries a constant reminder of how far removed she was from her small house and old life.

"I have some matters to attend to," Sol said, his eyes softening as they swept over her face. "Deina will bring a phone to your suite as promised. I trust you'll be comfortable while I'm occupied with..." He paused, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Prince business."

"Prince business," Helena repeated. "Right."

His fingertips brushed her cheek, then he turned and strode away, the confident set of

his shoulders and the fluid grace of his movement making her breath catch.

Several minutes and a few wrong turns later, Helena was back in her guest suite. When Deina arrived moments later with a sleek smartphone, Helena gratefully accepted it and walked into the living area away from Deina. Helena sank into the plush armchair and dialed the restaurant's number. She idly ran her fingers over the armrest as the phone rang.

"Ember & Spice, how can I help you?" Tyanna's familiar voice sent an unexpected wave of homesickness through Helena.

"Ty? It's me—Helena."

"Helena!" The sheer relief in Tyanna's voice made her stomach clench with guilt. "Oh my god, where are you? Are you okay? Everyone's been freaking out!"

"I'm fine, I promise." Helena tucked her legs underneath her, staring out the tall windows at the manicured gardens. "What about the restaurant? I heard it might've been completely destroyed."

"The restaurant's actually... surprisingly intact. The fire was huge but didn't do a lot of damage somehow. Strangest thing I've ever seen." Tyanna lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Kitchen needs some repairs, part of the dining room, too, but Victor's got construction crews coming in tomorrow. He's determined to stay partially open during the renovations."

Helena blinked in surprise. "You're kidding. I thought it would be a total loss."

"The man moves fast. Guess when you're that rich, things just happen."

"He's still there?" The way that Sol talked about Victor, she thought he was a villain

of everything good. But if that were the case, wouldn't Victor be hiding or at least not showing his face? Maybe Sol exaggerated a little. Or a lot. She could believe that Sol would be more than a little jealous of the attention Victor was giving her.

"Yeah," Tyanna replied. "He's the owner. Where else would he be? He's been asking about you nonstop, though. Where are you anyway?"

Helena bit her lip, turning to glance around the lavish suite with its four-poster bed and ornate furnishings. "I'm... safe. With a friend. I don't actually know exactly where." She laughed softly. "It sounds crazy when I say it out loud."

"A friend? Helena Divata, do you mean to tell me you're shackled up with some mystery man while we're all worried sick about you?"

Helena's heart skipped at Tyanna's strangely spot-on accusation. Before Helena could respond, she heard movement and muffled words in the background on Tyanna's end.

"Hold on," Tyanna said, her voice suddenly distant. "It's Victor. He wants to talk to you."

Before Helena could protest, a deep, smooth male voice came through the line. "Helena? Thank goodness you're all right. We've been concerned."

She straightened in the plush armchair, a flutter of unease washing through her. "Victor? How did everyone know I was missing?"

"When you didn't return after the fire, and weren't at the hospital..." He paused. "It doesn't matter. I know where you are now. You're at Sol Cadoret's castle, aren't you?"

Helena's breath caught in her throat. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Sol and I have a mutual acquaintance," Victor explained, his tone casual yet precise. "Small world, isn't it? When I heard you'd been possibly whisked away by a mysterious man, I made inquiries. I was worried about my executive chef."

Helena's fingers tightened on the phone. "That's... quite thorough for a new boss."

"Of course, I'd keep tabs on my employees, especially after such a catastrophe," Victor replied with a warm chuckle. "Besides, you're the previous owner. I need your expertise for a smooth transition of ownership. Not to mention, you're the one who knows that kitchen best."

The explanation made sense, loosening the knot in her stomach. She relaxed back against the cushions.

"The renovations will begin tomorrow," Victor continued. "But I need your guidance on the kitchen remodel. It's your domain, after all. I don't want to make changes you'd hate to work with. It's important to me that this restaurant does well, Helena. I want you and the entire staff to thrive."

Helena felt a small swell of pride. Despite everything that had happened, her professional opinion still mattered. This man sounded like he really cared. "I appreciate that. The layout was actually quite efficient, but there were a few things I would have changed if I'd had the budget."

"Exactly why I need your input. We have the budget now. I want to make it perfect for you to run."

The way he said it—as though her return was inevitable—made Helena pause. She glanced around the opulent suite, thinking of Sol and his intensity, and his conviction



that she belonged here. Yet her restaurant, her career, and her normal life all pulled at her.

“That’s... thoughtful,” she managed. “The hood system always needed upgrading, and the prep counter space was too limited.”

“See? Invaluable information. I knew I couldn’t do this without you.” Victor’s voice took on an edge of excitement. “The sooner we can meet to discuss the plans, the faster we can get Ember & Spice back to full operation.”

She felt torn between two worlds—the familiar comfort of her restaurant and the wild, magnetic pull of Sol and his castle. Her fingers traced the intricate pattern on the armchair, a world away from the stainless-steel counters of her kitchen.

“Are you still there?” Victor asked.

“Yes,” she said, gathering her thoughts. “Thank you for worrying about me. And for caring about getting the restaurant right.”

“If you’re feeling trapped, I could arrange transportation,” Victor said quickly, his voice smooth as silk through the phone. “I’m sure Sol has told you that you can’t leave. That you can’t see your friends anymore. Has he dictated for you to remain at his side for your safety?”

“Yes. How did you know that?” she asked, sitting straighter.

He sighed. “That’s one of the things I argued with Sol about. He thinks everyone is out to get him. That the world is made up of villains.”

That’s exactly what she thought just a minute ago.

Victor continued. “He thinks anyone not under his control is evil, and he’s brainwashed the pack to remain under his thumb. I tried to make him see reason, make him see what he was doing to our people, and he banished me from the pack for it.”

Indignation rose in her. “That’s not fair,” she said.

Victor chuckled. “One thing Sol isn’t, is fair. It’s his way or the highway. His ego is bigger than Texas.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ve noticed that.”

“So, anyway, I can send my driver to collect you. It would be no trouble at all. We’ll have you back in time for dinner with His Royal Highness...if that’s what you want.”

Helena gripped the phone tighter. This was her chance to escape back to normalcy. Back to the world of sizzling pans and aromatic spices rather than magical flames and paranoid wolf princes. Her gaze drifted back to the ornate windows where sunlight spilled across the medieval stonework.

A part of her—a frighteningly growing part—wanted to stay. Sol’s intense green eyes suddenly flashed in her thoughts, and the memory of his strong hands on her body sent heat rushing to her cheeks. The way he looked at her made her feel like the center of the universe.

But was that enough reason to abandon her entire life?

She twisted her red hair around her finger, weighing her options. Sol was clearly overprotective, maybe even possessive. His insistence that she belonged here and that she couldn’t return to her old life—it not only irritated her but it threatened her independence. He might be an alpha wolf prince, but she wasn’t some damsel to be

ordered around.

“Helena?” Victor prompted. “You still there?”

“Yes,” she answered, her mind finally made up. “I would appreciate that, actually. I need to get back to the restaurant.”

“Excellent. I can have someone there in...” Victor paused briefly. “An hour?”

Helena’s lingering guilt gnawed at her conscience. The restaurant fire—her fire—had endangered everyone’s livelihoods. “I need to make this right,” she murmured, more to herself than Victor.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “An hour sounds perfect.”

“Until then.” The line went dead before she could thank him.

Helena lowered the phone and exhaled slowly. She’d made her decision. The practical choice. The responsible choice.

The sound of porcelain clinking made her head snap up. There in the corner stood Deina, arranging a tea service Helena hadn’t noticed before. The woman’s face remained perfectly neutral, but her rigid posture spoke volumes.

Heat crept up Helena’s neck as she realized Deina must have heard everything. She hadn’t left the room at all. The woman’s silent presence made Helena feel like she’d been caught betraying a confidence.

Deina’s eyes, filled with something like disappointment, met Helena’s. “Are you

really leaving my lady?” Deina’s soft question cut through the silence.

Helena stared at Deina for a moment. “I won’t be gone that long.” Helena felt bad lying. She smoothed her hands over the soft fabric of her dress. “I’m needed at the restaurant to get it back on its feet. When it’s up and running, then I can spend more time here,” she said, hoping to ease Deina’s concern.

The sunlight filtering through the windows caught the copper highlights in her hair as she stood and paced toward the window. Outside, she could see members of Sol’s pack moving about the grounds, their easy confidence and grace marking them as something other than human. Were they here because they wanted to be or were they forced?

“Deina, do you have friends outside the pack?” Helena asked, pressing her fingertips against the cool glass.

“No,” Deina replied. “There’s no need for me to go out into the world. It’s a cruel place. I’m glad to stay here where it’s safe under the prince’s control.”

She turned to face Deina and nodded. “Of course, you would say that.”

Deina’s shoulders sagged slightly as she placed the silver tray on the side table with exquisite care. When she finally looked up, her eyes held a profound sadness that made Helena’s stomach twist.

“Many packs don’t ever find their Luna, my lady,” Deina said, her voice soft but steady. “But all packs always desire to find her. The Luna brings peace, stability, and power to all of them, including their alpha.”

Helena’s throat tightened as Deina continued.

“The Luna is a sign of future prosperity and good fortune.” Deina’s fingers trembled slightly as she adjusted the delicate china. “Alternately, a Luna leaving signals the opposite.”

Helena wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the weight of Deina’s words sinking into her chest. The woman’s devotion to Sol and the pack was palpable.

“I fear your leaving will be like a curse to all of us,” Deina whispered, meeting Helena’s eyes, “and to our alpha especially.”

The woman had figured out that she was lying about coming back to the castle. A flicker of guilt ignited in Helena’s chest, growing like one of her flames. She never wanted to cause harm to anyone—not Sol, not his people. The responsibility of being this mythical Luna figure felt crushing, pressing in on her from all sides.

“Don’t think that way,” Helena said, though her voice lacked conviction. “Things will work out for your pack, and for Sol, somehow.”

Deina bowed her head slightly and turned to leave the suite. At the doorway, she paused, her hand resting on the ornate handle.

“Thank you for everything, Deina,” Helena called after her, meaning it despite the awkwardness between them.

The door closed with a soft click, leaving Helena alone with her conflicted thoughts and the unsettling feeling that she might be making a terrible mistake.

FIFTEEN

SOL

Sol's pen scratched across the royal decree with precise, measured strokes. Centuries of leadership had honed his penmanship to perfection. The afternoon sun streamed through the study's stained glass windows, casting patterns of amber and ruby across the oak desk that had belonged to generations of Sunflare alphas.

The door suddenly burst open with such force that the ancient hinges protested. Joshua stood in the doorway with his chest heaving, his normally composed demeanor fractured.

"She's leaving." Joshua's voice cracked with urgency. "Helena is leaving. Deina just told me she called someone to come get her."

Something primal and possessive surged through Sol's veins. The pen snapped between his fingers, spilling ink across the document like spilled blood. "What?"

"She's in her suite now, waiting by the window. Some human is coming for her."

Sol was on his feet in an instant, his chair toppling backward. The wolf inside him howled, demanding action. "She can't leave. She belongs here."

"Sol, maybe you should?—"

But Sol was already rushing past his beta, his shoulders rigid with tension. The

rational part of his mind—the part that had governed a pack for centuries—was submerged beneath the tide of instinctive panic. His Luna was attempting to flee, and every fiber of his being rejected the very notion.

He took the grand staircase three steps at a time, servants scattering from his path like autumn leaves in a gale. Within seconds, he was standing outside the door to her suite.

Without knocking, Sol threw open the door to find Helena standing by the window, her red hair aflame in the afternoon light. The sight of her momentarily stole his breath—even angry, he couldn't deny her effect on him.

“Going somewhere?” The question rumbled from deep in his chest.

Helena turned, her hazel eyes widening briefly before narrowing. “Yes. Home. Where I belong.”

“You belong here.” His fists clenched at his sides. “With your pack. With me.”

“I never agreed to that.”

Sol prowled closer, the distance between them charged with electricity. “You think you can just walk away? After everything I’ve told you? After what we’ve shared?”

“I can, and I am.” Her chin lifted in defiance.

“Perhaps I should throw you in the dungeon until you come to your senses.” The words escaped before he could trap them, his temper flaring hot and bright.

Helena’s laugh was sharp as broken glass. “Right, because imprisonment is definitely the way to a woman’s heart. Very romantic.”

Sol could feel her anger building, the mate bond thrumming with the heat of her emotions. Yet, remarkably, no flames burst forth. She was controlling her fire, containing it through sheer force of will. Despite his fury, pride bloomed in his chest.

“Throwing me in a dungeon would only prove my point,” she continued, stepping toward him with fearless determination. “You’re controlling. You think you can dictate my life without my input. I won’t live that way, Sol. I won’t surrender my choices or my power over my own life—not to you, not to anyone.”

“This isn’t about control,” Sol growled, closing the short distance between them until he could see the golden flecks in her eyes. “This is about keeping you safe. I told you earlier in the forest that if you leave right now without my mate mark, you’re vulnerable. There are bad people out there who would use you, hurt you, even kill you for the power you possess.”

Helena’s eyes flashed, the gold flecks blazing like the fires she commanded. “Is that what this is really about? My powers?” She took a step back, creating a chasm between them that felt wider than any physical distance. “Maybe you just want me around to be a better and stronger alpha. Maybe this is all about your ego, which is pretty damn big already.”

The accusation hit Sol like a slap to his face. His wolf howled in protest desperate to break free and prove their devotion. For centuries, he’d ruled with strength and justice, never once using his position for personal gain. That she would think him capable of such manipulation cut deeper than any blade.

“You think I want to use you?” His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. His hands trembled with the need to touch her, to make her understand. “After all these centuries, you truly believe I’d manipulate my own mate for power?”

Sol turned away, running his large hand through his dark hair. When he faced her



again, he allowed her to see everything—all the raw vulnerability he'd never shown anyone in hundreds of years of existence.

“The only thing I care about is you, Helena. Just you.” He thumped his chest where his heart thundered against his ribs. “I’m upset because I can’t bear the thought of losing you or seeing you hurt.”

He moved closer, careful not to crowd her but unable to maintain the distance. “I’ve waited my entire life to meet my true mate. Centuries of existence, watching others find their other halves while I ruled alone.” His voice cracked with emotion he’d never allowed himself to show. “But I never imagined how intense these feelings would be until I met you.”

Sol reached out, his fingers stopping just short of touching her face. “You’re unlike anything I could have dreamed of. Your strength, your spirit—even your stubbornness.” A broken laugh escaped him. “I can’t imagine life without you now. I don’t want to live it if you’re not in it.”

His wolf pushed against his control, demanding he claim her properly, protect her, and never let her go. But Sol held back, understanding that this was her choice to make.

“I need you like I need oxygen, Helena. Not your power. You.”

Something shifted in Helena’s eyes—doubt giving way to something softer. Sol watched as unshed tears gathered, turning those hazel depths luminous. She didn’t speak, but her silence lacked the brittle anger of before. Her lips parted slightly as though words hovered there, waiting to be spoken. His wolf sensed the change, howling with renewed hope.

Sol’s control snapped. The raw vulnerability in Helena’s eyes, the soft parting of her

lips—it was too much. His wolf surged forward, primal and insistent, demanding he claim her and make her irrevocably his. He pulled her flush against his body and captured her mouth in a searing kiss.

Her lips were soft and yielding, and the taste of her—sweet and warm—ignited something feral within him. He pressed her body flush against his, his other arm wrapping around her waist to pull her closer. Her gasp of surprise only deepened the kiss, her hands instinctively rising to clutch at his shoulders.

“Mine,” he growled against her mouth, the word more a declaration than a question. His wolf howled in triumph, urging him to take, to claim, and to possess. But he held back, just enough to give her the choice even as his body screamed for more.

Helena’s fingers dug into his shoulders, her nails grazing his skin through the fabric of his shirt. She kissed him back with equal fervor, her fire sparking against his, their powers tangling in a heady rush of heat. Sol’s hands roamed her curves, tracing the flare of her hips, the dip of her waist, and the swell of her breasts. Every touch stoked the fire between them, their bond humming with intensity.

“Sol,” she murmured, her voice breathless. His name on her lips sent a jolt of desire straight to his core. He needed more—needed all of her.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her, her legs wrapping instinctively around his waist. Her laughter was a breathy sound against his skin, and it only fueled his hunger. He carried her to the bed, dropping her gently onto the soft covers before climbing over her, caging her with his body.

“Tell me you want this,” he demanded, his voice rough with need. He cupped her face, his thumb brushing her cheek as he searched her eyes.

Helena’s breath hitched, her hazel eyes darkening with desire. “I want you,” she

whispered, the words sending a surge of triumph through him.

His hands moved with purpose, stripping away the barriers between them—her dress, his shirt, everything discarded in a frenzy of need. Her skin was warm beneath his touch, soft and inviting, and he couldn't resist tasting her. His lips trailed down her neck, nipping at the sensitive spot just below her ear before moving lower, lavishing attention on the curve of her breast. Her moan was music to his ears, her fingers tightening in his hair as she arched into his touch.

“Sol,” she gasped, her voice trembling. “Please.”

He didn't need further encouragement. His hands settled on her hips, guiding her onto her stomach before pulling her up onto her knees. The position was primal and possessive, and his wolf reveled in it. He leaned over her, his chest pressed to her back, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

“You feel that?” he murmured, his voice a husky growl. “That's us. That's our bond. It's never going to break.”

Her answering whimper was all the affirmation he needed. He claimed her then, his hands gripping her hips as he moved with slow, deliberate strokes. The sensation was electric, their connection humming with each thrust. Helena's head lifted, her hair cascading down her back as she matched his rhythm, her soft cries driving him mad.

“Mine,” he growled again, the word a mantra and a vow. His hand slipped around her hip, finding her most sensitive spot, making her gasp and writhe against him. “Say it, Helena. Say you're mine.”

“Yours,” she cried, her voice breaking as she came undone, her inner walls tightening around him.

Her climax ignited his own, his body shuddering as he buried himself deep, the world narrowing to just the two of them. For a moment, there was nothing else—no pack, no power, and no past. Just Helena, warm and trembling in his arms, her fire entwined with his.

When the storm of passion subsided, he gathered her to his chest, her body fitting perfectly against his. His lips brushed her hair, his breathing still ragged. Satisfaction radiated through him as he closed his eyes, inhaling her scent—cinnamon and fire and something uniquely her. The wolf inside him purred with contentment.

“You’re magnificent,” he murmured against her temple. “I knew from the moment I saw you that we were meant for this.”

He felt her stir in his arms, her warmth shifting against him. For a moment, he thought she might be settling in closer, but instead, she gently disentangled herself from his embrace. His eyes snapped open, watching as she stood and reached for the green sundress that had been discarded on the floor.

“What are you doing?” The question came out sharper than he intended, his wolf suddenly alert.

Helena slipped the dress over her head, the soft fabric falling around her curves. “I’m getting dressed.”

“I can see that.” Sol sat up, the sheets pooling around his waist. “But why?”

She turned to him, her expression apologetic but resolute. “I have to go, Sol. The restaurant needs me.”

The words hit him like a physical blow. His mind struggled to process what she was saying. After what they had just shared—after he had bared not just his body but his

soul to her—she was still leaving?

“You’re joking.” His voice was low and dangerous. “Tell me this is a joke.”

Helena sighed, pushing her fiery hair back from her face. “I’m sorry, but I really do have to go. I have obligations to fulfill.” She straightened her dress, smoothing down the wrinkles. “You should understand that, being a leader yourself. Don’t you have obligations to your pack?”

Sol couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Did she just compare running a restaurant to leading a centuries-old pack of wolf shifters? Did she just equate cooking food with protecting lives?

“That’s not the same thing.” He rose from the bed, not bothering to cover his nakedness. Let her see what she was walking away from. “The pack is my life. My purpose. What you’re talking about is just a job.”

“It’s not just a job to me.” Her chin lifted in that stubborn way he was beginning to recognize. “These people are my pack. They depend on me . I can’t just abandon them because I’ve discovered I have some magical fire powers and a destined mate.”

How could she be so casual about this? How could she dismiss their bond—their destiny—so easily? His wolf howled in pain.

“You’re my Luna,” he said, his voice rough with raw emotion. “My true mate. I just told you I can’t live without you, Helena.”

She had the grace to look pained. “I know.”

Sol stood frozen, unable to process the enormity of her rejection. He had ruled a pack for centuries, commanded respect from the most powerful supernatural beings on the

continent, and yet this human woman had brought him to his knees with nothing but her indifference.

“So you’re just going to fuck me and leave?” The crude words felt foreign on his tongue, but the pain demanded expression. “After everything I’ve shared with you?”

“That’s not fair.” A flush crept up her neck. “What happened between us was beautiful, but it doesn’t change the fact that I have responsibilities.”

Sol laughed, a hollow sound devoid of humor. “Clearly, I don’t rank high among those responsibilities.”

“You don’t need me to take care of you, Sol. Other do.” Helena moved toward the door, pausing with her hand on the ornate door handle. “I’m sorry, Sol. I really am.”

Then she was gone, the door closing softly behind her.

Sol stood naked in the center of the room, the scent of their lovemaking still heavy in the air. His wolf raged and howled, demanding he chase after her, claim her properly, and force her to stay. But his body refused to move, locked in place by shock and hurt too profound for action.

For the first time in centuries, Sol Cadoret, Alpha Prince of the Sunflare pack, felt utterly powerless. His mate—his Luna, his other half—had walked away from him as if he were nothing more than a pleasant diversion. Not the center of her universe as she was of his.

He sank back onto the bed, the sheets still warm from their bodies. The wolf inside him wanted to howl its agony to the sky.

Instead, he sat motionless, staring at the door through which his heart had just walked

out.

SIXTEEN

HELENA

Helena's heart contracted as she turned the door handle of the guest suite. She quickly walked out before she could change her mind or before she could see his face. A tear slipped down her cheek as she closed the door behind her.

The grand staircase stretched before her, polished marble steps winding down to the grand foyer. Helena descended quickly, her knees weak. Each step took her farther from Sol, and each breath became harder to draw.

What am I doing? The thought pounded in her head with every step. He's unlike any man I've ever known. The way he looks at me and the way he treats me like I'm something precious...

By the time she reached the massive foyer, tears were flowing freely down her face. She wiped them away, but they kept coming, hot as the flames that had started all this.

The massive oak doors loomed ahead. Beyond them waited the car Victor had sent—a return to her old life, to the comfortable routine of chopping vegetables and crafting recipes. To normalcy.

But is that what I want anymore?

She paused for a brief moment, her hand on the ornate handle. Through the tall



windows flanking the entrance, she could see the black sedan waiting in the circular drive, engine running, headlights cutting through the evening darkness.

“You’re actually leaving.”

Helena turned to find Deina standing behind her, her face etched with concern.

“I have to,” Helena whispered. “This isn’t my world.”

“It could be,” Deina said softly. “I’ve seen how you look at him.”

Helena closed her eyes, remembering the feel of Sol’s hands on her body, the way he’d coaxed pleasure from her she’d never known was possible. The way his eyes darkened when she challenged him, and the protective fierceness that radiated from him like heat.

“I don’t belong here. I’m a chef, not a—a supernatural queen.”

“You’re both,” Deina insisted. “I’ve never seen the Prince like this. In his hundreds of years of existence, he’s never looked at anyone the way he looks at you.”

Helena’s hand fell from the door. “I don’t even really know him.”

“But you feel it, don’t you? The connection?”

Helena nodded, another tear slipping down her cheek. “That’s what scares me.”

The car horn sounded outside. Reality calling.

Helena drew a deep breath and pulled the door open. “I need to go now.”

The early evening air hit her tear-stained face as she stepped outside. Helena walked down the circular driveway toward the sleek black sedan waiting for her, each step widening the distance between herself and the castle. Between herself and Sol. Her throat tightened as she forced herself not to look back. If she did, she might never leave.

The sunset cast elongated shadows across the manicured grounds, painting everything in warm oranges and deep purples. The sight was breathtaking, but all Helena could think about was the warmth of Sol's skin against hers not too long ago.

A tall and willowy blonde woman dressed in a crisp black pantsuit stepped out from the driver's side of the car. She smiled professionally and opened the rear door for Helena.

"Miss Divata? I'm Kinna. Mr. Sulick sent me to bring you back to the restaurant."

Helena gave her a slight nod as she slid into the back seat. "Thank you."

As the car pulled away, Helena finally allowed herself one backward glance. The castle stood proudly against the darkening sky, its stone walls catching the last rays of sunlight. Something inside her chest pulled, an invisible thread stretching painfully as they drove away.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" Kinna's eyes met Helena's in the rearview mirror. "I've never seen anything like it. Like something out of a fantasy novel."

"It is," Helena agreed, her fingers twisting in her lap. "How long have you worked for Victor?"

"Just a few months. He's very particular about who handles his transportation." Kinna navigated the winding road through the dense forest surrounding Sol's estate.

“You’re lucky to have been invited there. I’ve heard rumors about the place, but seeing it in person...” She whistled softly.

Helena stared out the window, watching the trees rush by. How strange that just days ago, she’d been a normal chef with normal problems. Now she was fleeing from a castle after sleeping with a wolf prince who claimed she was his destined mate.

And I can apparently start fires with my emotions. The thought made her heart beat a little faster.

After about twenty minutes, Kinna slowed the car and pulled onto a secluded turnout where another vehicle waited—a gleaming silver luxury SUV.

“Why are we stopping?” Helena asked, apprehension creeping up her spine.

“Just a quick change of cars,” Kinna explained, parking alongside the SUV. “Security protocol, Mr. Sulick said.”

Before Helena could question this further, the driver’s door of the SUV opened, and Victor stepped out. In his tailored navy suit, he looked every inch the successful businessman, but something in his smile made Helena’s skin prickle.

“Helena, dear.” Victor approached as Kinna opened her door. “I thought I’d come meet you personally. After everything you’ve been through, it seemed only right.”

Helena reluctantly stepped out of the sedan, instinctively wrapping her arms around herself against the evening chill. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Victor’s gaze swept over her, lingering for a moment too long. “I couldn’t trust your safe return to just anyone. You’ll be coming with me now.” He gestured toward the SUV, its engine purring quietly in the gathering dusk.

“I thought we were going back to the restaurant,” Helena said, not moving toward his vehicle.

“We are.” Victor’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “But first, we have matters to discuss.”

A cold knot formed in Helena’s stomach. She hesitated at the edge of the road. Something felt wrong, yet she couldn’t place what exactly. Maybe it was just the stress of everything—discovering her powers, leaving Sol, and the intensity of the last few days catching up with her. With a deep breath, she climbed into the SUV’s passenger seat, the cool leather chilling her skin.

“I’m surprised you didn’t just come to the castle yourself,” she said as Victor slid behind the wheel. “Seems like an unnecessary detour.”

“I had some business in the area, and Kinna had to hurry to get to another pickup.” His eyes slid over to her, lingering on the curve of her neck before moving back to the road.

Helena shifted uncomfortably, tugging at her borrowed dress. The way he stared at her made her feel like an ingredient to be consumed rather than appreciated.

“I’ve been thinking more about the restaurant,” Victor said, guiding the SUV onto the main road. “With your expertise, we could make it extraordinary. Like I mentioned earlier, I’m prepared to invest in any upgrades you think the kitchen needs.”

“Really?” Helena raised an eyebrow, remembering how dismissive he’d seemed during the tour the other day. “That’s... very generous.”

“Top-of-the-line equipment, imported ingredients—whatever you require.” His knuckles whitened slightly on the steering wheel. “Your culinary vision is exactly

what I've been looking for.”

“That’s quite different from how you acted before the fire,” she said cautiously.

Victor chuckled, a sound that didn’t match the intensity in his eyes. “The fire was clarifying for me. Made me realize what matters.”

They drove deeper into the forest instead of toward the city, the trees closing in around them. An uneasy warmth began to simmer beneath Helena’s skin, the familiar heat that preceded her flames.

“I’ve actually been following your career for years,” Victor continued, his voice smooth as oil. “Your fusion of traditional techniques with unexpected flavor combinations—it’s why I bought your restaurant in the first place. You were the draw, Helena, not the business.”

The heat beneath her skin intensified. There was something predatory in the way he spoke her name like he was tasting it.

“In fact,” Victor continued, his hand suddenly moving to rest on her knee, “I’d be willing to sign the restaurant back over to you.”

“What?” Helena stiffened, her eyes fixed on his unwelcome touch.

“I’d remain a silent investor, but creative control and ownership would be yours. All yours.” His fingers moved slightly up her thigh. “We just need to work very closely together.”

The meaning behind his words started to crystallize, sending a rush of anger through her veins. Heat surged beneath her skin responding to her emotions, fury calling to fire. This wasn’t generosity—it was a proposition.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘very closely’?” Helena’s voice was dangerously quiet, the temperature in the car noticeably rising.

Helena’s fingers dug into the leather seat as Victor’s hand rested heavily on her thigh, his implication hanging in the air between them. Her mind scrambled to interpret his words in the most innocent way possible.

“You mean you want to be in the kitchen with me? Collaborating on menus?” she asked, finding it difficult to keep her voice steady.

Victor’s laugh was cold and hollow, echoing in the confined space of the luxury SUV. “Oh, Helena. I’m not interested in recipes or restaurant operations.” His fingers traced small circles on her leg. “The collaboration I’m proposing has nothing to do with cooking—at least not the kind that happens in a kitchen.”

The car felt increasingly warm as her emotions stirred the fire within her.

“I know what you are,” Victor continued, his voice lowering to a husky whisper. “I saw what you did at the restaurant. That fire didn’t start from a kitchen accident.”

Helena’s heart thundered in her chest. Sol’s warning crashed through her mind like thunder: There are bad people out there who would use you, hurt you, even kill you for the power you possess.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, trying to shift away from his touch.

“Don’t play coy. It doesn’t suit you.” Victor’s grip tightened on her thigh. “Such remarkable power, and in a human, no less. Do you have any idea what we could accomplish together?”

Helena glanced out the window, panic rising as she realized they were deep in the forest, miles from any main road. The trees closed in like prison bars, their branches scratching at the darkening sky.

Why didn't I listen to Sol? Why was I so stubborn?

"We're not going to the restaurant, are we?" Her voice sounded small even to her own ears.

Victor smiled, his teeth gleaming in the dim light of the dashboard. "You'll be staying with me from now on. Somewhere private where we can explore the full extent of your abilities without interruption."

"So what was all that talk about Sol being paranoid. That he was trapping me to stay with him."

"It's all true," he replied. "And I'm doing the same. You didn't plan on going back to the castle, did you?"

She looked away. He was right. She hadn't planned on going back. But she hadn't thought Victor was as bad as Sol said.

"You lied to me," she said. "All of our phone conversation was just to get me to leave."

"And you did." He grinned. "You should've listened to your prince."

"I see why he kicked you out of the pack."

His hand clinched on her upper thigh, and Helena's stomach churned with disgust. Heat flared under her skin, racing through her veins like lava.

“Don’t touch me,” she warned, the leather seat beginning to warm beneath her palms.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said casually as if discussing the weather. “I have big plans for us, Helena. We could be the most powerful couple this world has ever seen.” He licked his lips, his eyes hungry and calculating. “Of course, that depends on your willingness to do exactly what I demand. But I promise you’ll enjoy it—eventually.”

Bile rose in Helena’s throat. Not only was he planning to use her powers, but his intentions went beyond that to something far more violating. The heat inside her surged, responding to her fury and fear.

Sol was right. He was right about everything.

“I’d rather burn this car to the ground than let you touch me again,” Helena hissed, feeling the first sparks of fire ignite at her fingertips. The sensation was becoming familiar now—a tingling warmth that gathered in her core and spread outward, seeking release.

Victor’s expression hardened. “That’s not how this works. You don’t have a choice anymore.” His hand moved higher still. “You foolishly walked away from your protector. Now you belong to me.”



SEVENTEEN

SOL

Sol sat naked on the bed, staring blankly at the door Helena had just walked out of. The sheets underneath him still held her scent—cinnamon and vanilla. His chest felt hollow like someone had carved out everything inside him with a dull knife.

Centuries of living, and nothing had prepared him for this particular pain.

“Fuck this,” he growled, surging to his feet. His wolf scratched at his insides, raging at the abandonment. He snatched his pants from the floor and yanked them on, followed by his shirt, which he buttoned with shaky fingers.

She’d taken him to heights he’d never known existed, then walked away like he meant nothing to her. He shrugged on his suit jacket, his hurt crystallizing into something harder, something that burned through his veins like liquid fire.

“She really just walked out,” he muttered, straightening his cuffs with unnecessary force. “On me. Her mate. Her fucking alpha.”

He slammed his fist into the wall, leaving a spiderweb of cracks in the plaster. The pain barely registered.

Yet even through his rage, understanding flickered in his mind. Helena had built a life before him—a career she’d worked hard for, people who depended on her. As alpha, hadn’t he made countless sacrifices for his pack? Hadn’t he put duty above personal

desires for centuries?

“Damn stubborn woman,” he growled, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips despite everything. Her strong will was part of what drew him to her, that fire that matched his own.

She wouldn’t come back on her own. Not Helena. Too proud and too passionate—too much like him.

Sol stormed from the room, his footsteps echoing down the stone corridor. Staff members scattered at the fury radiating from their alpha.

“Who saw her last?” he demanded of the first person he encountered.

“Deina was with her, my Prince,” a young servant replied, backing away.

Sol found Deina in the kitchen, supervising dinner preparations. She looked up as he entered, her eyes widening at his expression.

“My Prince?—“

“Who took her?” The words came out as a growl.

Deina wrung her hands. “A woman I’d never seen before. Tall, blonde. Human, I believe. She arrived in a black sedan.”

“Must be the friend from the restaurant. Tyanna.” Sol paced, his mind racing. “Did Helena say anything before she left?”

“Only that she needed to return to her old life.” Deina hesitated. “She seemed... conflicted.”

Sol stopped pacing. Something tugged at his awareness—a faint pulse of emotion that wasn't his own. Fear. Uncertainty. Their mate bond, newly formed but growing stronger by the day, stretched between them like an invisible thread.

“Something's wrong.” His wolf surged forward, senses sharpening. “She's afraid.”

The realization hit him hard. He'd let her walk out and straight into danger, too wrapped up in his own wounded pride.

“Ready my car,” he barked, already moving toward the door. “And call Joshua. Tell him I'm heading into the city.”

As he stalked through the castle halls, Sol's muscles tightened. Helena might have walked away from him, but he would never abandon her. Whether she accepted it yet or not, she was his Luna, his mate, his everything.

And alphas protected what was theirs.

Sol slammed the castle's massive front doors behind him, his entire body vibrating with tension. His fire-red convertible sports car purred at the bottom of the stone steps, the engine running and ready for him. Normally the sight of his prized possession brought him a flicker of pleasure, but tonight all he felt was dread.

“Out of my way,” he growled at the servant who'd brought the car around, shoving a hand through his dark hair as the young wolf scrambled aside.

Sol slid into the leather driver's seat, the rich smell doing nothing to calm him. Helena's fear echoed inside him like a distant cry for help, the mate bond pulsing with an intensity that startled even him.

“Hang on, Luna,” he muttered, pressing the accelerator to the floor. The car shot

forward, tires spitting gravel.

The road stretched before him, winding down from the castle grounds toward the distant city. Even at night, the route was familiar enough that his mind could focus on Helena. Each mile increased his certainty that something was wrong.

“This is what you get for letting her walk,” he berated himself, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. “Two hundred years of waiting for your Luna, and you let her just leave.”

His wolf was desperate to break out and track her by scent. But transforming would waste precious time.

The lights of the city bloomed ahead, the urban sprawl a stark contrast to his ancestral lands. Sol wove through traffic with dangerous precision, ignoring honking horns and shouted curses.

He screeched to a halt outside Helena’s restaurant, parking across two spaces without a second thought. The place stood dark and empty, the windows reflecting only the streetlamps outside. The “CLOSED” sign hung limply on the door.

“Dammit.” He slammed his palm against the steering wheel.

He pulled out his phone and dialed Joshua. His beta answered on the first ring.

“Any sign of her?” Joshua asked without preamble.

“Restaurant’s closed. Everyone’s gone.” Sol jumped out of the car, prowling the perimeter of the building. “I need her address. Now.”

“Working on it.” Joshua’s voice was steady, the perfect counterbalance to Sol’s rage.

“My contact at city records owes me a favor.”

Sol paced outside the restaurant, breathing deeply to catch any hint of Helena’s scent on the evening breeze. Nothing.

“Got it,” Joshua said finally, reciting an address across town.

Sol hung up without another word, leaping back into his car. He drove like a man possessed, cutting through side streets and running yellow lights.

The modest two-story house at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac looked as unremarkable as possible. No lights shone from within. Sol parked haphazardly and approached the door, every sense heightened.

He knocked hard enough to rattle the hinges. “Helena!”

Silence answered him.

He pressed his nose to the doorframe, inhaling deeply. Her scent lingered faintly but stale. Days old.

“Fuck.” His patience snapped like a dry twig.

One powerful kick splintered the door near the lock. It swung open with a protesting creak. Sol strode inside, switching on lights as he went.

The house was neat and modest, everything in its place. The kitchen gleamed with professional-grade equipment—clearly Helena’s domain. A small dining table stood by a window, a single chair tucked neatly underneath. The sight squeezed something in Sol’s chest.

“How long have you been eating alone?” he murmured, trailing fingers over the back of the chair.

Upstairs, her bedroom smelled most strongly of her. Sol stood in the doorway, momentarily overwhelmed by the concentrated scent. Her bed was made with military precision, a soft blue comforter pulled tight. Botanical prints hung on pale walls. On the nightstand, a small potted herb—basil, he thought—reached toward the window.

Everything spoke of order and calm, so unlike the chaos he’d brought into her life. Yet through their bond, he felt only escalating fear. No feeling of homecoming. No relief at returning to this ordered life.

Sol moved methodically through each room, breathing deeply, searching for clues. His wolf prowled beneath his skin, agitated and ready to hunt.

That’s when he caught it—the faintest whiff of something familiar and unwelcome. Sol froze, and his nostrils flared as he recognized the scent. Victor. The bastard’s cologne hung in the air like a toxic cloud—expensive, pretentious, with undertones of wolf that no human would detect.

“Son of a bitch,” Sol snarled, his fist connecting with the nearby wall. The pain didn’t register through the fury boiling his blood.

“I told you,” he growled as if Helena could hear him. “I told you he’d come for you.”

Sol pulled his phone out of his pocket and punched in Joshua’s number, his breathing ragged.

“He’s got her,” Sol barked the moment Joshua answered. “Victor has Helena.”

“You’re certain?” Joshua’s voice was calm but tense.

“His stench is all over her house. Recent. Strong.” Sol saw a framed photo of Helena—she was laughing in a kitchen, flour dusting her cheek, that radiant red hair pulled back. His chest constricted. “We need to find them. Now.”

“Sol, listen to me. Come back to the castle first. We need a plan.”

“Plan?” Sol spat the word like poison. “My plan is to rip out Victor’s throat and bring my Luna home.”

“And that’s exactly why you need to come back first,” Joshua countered. “Victor’s not stupid. He’s planned this. If you rush in alone?—“

“He has my Luna!” Sol roared.

“Exactly.” Joshua’s voice hardened with authority, the voice of a beta who knew when to stand firm. “And rushing in blind is the fastest way to get her killed. Victor knows you. He’s counting on you to be impulsive.”

Sol’s jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached. The rational part of him—the part that had led the Sunflare pack for centuries—knew Joshua was right. Victor was dangerous precisely because he was calculating. He’d been exiled for attempted coups. If Victor had Helena, it wasn’t a simple kidnapping—it was a trap for him.

And if Sol triggered that trap... He couldn’t bear to imagine Helena being caught in the crossfire.

“I can have our pack searching every property Victor owns while you’re driving back,” Joshua continued. “We’ll be ready to move the moment you arrive.”

Sol shut his eyes tightly, his wolf howling in protest at moving away from the scent trail. But beneath his fury, the unfamiliar feeling of fear gnawed at him—fear for Helena. Her terror still pulsed through their mate bond, faint but unmistakable.

“She’s afraid about something,” he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. “I can feel it.”

“She’s strong and smart,” Joshua reminded him. “She survived twenty-nine years without knowing her powers. And now that she does, she’s powerful.”

Sol remembered the fire in her eyes when she’d thrown her fire at him in a fitful rage, and the determination in her shoulders when she’d insisted on leaving him. She was powerful, indeed. His wildfire—His Luna.

“I’m on my way,” Sol finally conceded, every instinct screaming against it. “Have everything ready.”

He hung up and took one last look around Helena’s home, committing her scent to memory, stoking the fire of his rage. The mate bond tugged at his chest, pointing like a compass toward his Luna.

“I’m coming for you,” he promised the empty room. “And when I find you, I’ll never let you out of my sight again.”

Sol stormed out to his convertible, gunning the engine so hard the tires screamed against the pavement. The wind whipped through his hair as he accelerated well beyond the speed limit, his fingers tight on the wheel.

The highway back to the castle stretched before him, each mile away from Helena’s and Victor’s scent trail torture for his wolf. But Sol forced himself to focus on the strategy, and on what they’d need to find her.



“Hold on, my Luna,” he murmured as the castle finally appeared on the horizon, its stone towers looming against the night sky. “Your alpha is coming.”

EIGHTEEN

HELENA

Victor steered his silver luxury SUV down a deserted gravel road surrounded by an endless canopy of trees. Helena's heart pounded erratically as they drove farther and farther down the road away from civilization.

The trees parted suddenly, revealing a clearing dominated by an ancient barn. The structure looked like something out of a horror movie—weathered wood gone silver with age and portions of the roof sagging dangerously. Helena's stomach dropped as she counted four vehicles parked haphazardly near the entrance.

“Your restaurant staff thinks you’ve taken a much-needed vacation,” Victor said conversationally as he parked. “Amazing what people will believe when you wave enough money at them.”

The engine died, and with it, Helena's last hope of an easy escape. Victor circled the vehicle and opened her door with a mockery of chivalry. His fingers closed around her upper arm—not painfully tight, but firm enough to make his intentions clear.

“I suggest you behave,” he murmured, his breath uncomfortably hot against her ear. “My associates aren’t as patient as I am.”

The barn's massive doors groaned as Victor pushed them open. Helena blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim interior. What she'd expected to be an empty, decrepit space had been transformed into some kind of makeshift headquarters. Generator-powered

lights hung from the rafters, illuminating a space filled with high-end camping furniture, equipment, and about a dozen people who fell silent as they entered.

“The Luna has arrived,” Victor announced, his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

A cheer went up from the assembled group—all men, Helena noted with growing unease. They varied in age and appearance but shared the same hungry look in their eyes that Victor had. None appeared armed, but their muscular builds and confident stances suggested they didn’t need weapons to be dangerous.

“Sit,” Victor commanded, guiding Helena to a folding chair in the center of the room. “Make yourself comfortable. We have much to discuss.”

Helena complied, her mind racing as she assessed her situation. She wasn’t restrained, which meant she could still use her powers if necessary. The heat simmered within her, ready to be called forth. But to what end? She had no idea where they were, how many more of Victor’s people might be lurking nearby, or what would happen if she failed in an escape attempt.

If she set this place on fire, could she control the flames or would they spread into a forest inferno that would torch thousands of acres and destroy communities in the process? How many lives would be lost because of her?

Sol, she thought desperately, closing her eyes for a moment. If you can hear me, if this mate bond is real... I need you.

She felt foolish immediately. Was she really trying to send telepathic messages to a man she’d walked away from an hour ago? A man whose existence had upended her entire life in the span of days?

And yet, she couldn’t deny the connection she had felt with Sol. That pull, that

inexplicable rightness when they were together. Something stirred in response to her silent plea—not an answer, exactly, but a warmth that couldn't be attributed to her fire powers.

“Something you'd like to share?” Victor asked, noticing her wistful expression.

Helena straightened, meeting his gaze directly. “Just wondering how long you think you can keep the Luna of the Sunflare pack captive before her alpha comes looking.”

Victor's smile was cold. “Oh, I'm counting on it.”

One of the men approached with a bottle of water, offering it to Helena with a slight bow. She hesitated, then accepted it, using the opportunity to scan the room more thoroughly. Two exits—the main doors they'd entered through, and a smaller one at the back. At least fifteen feet of open space in all directions around her chair. If she needed to make a move, she'd be exposed from every angle.

“Don't worry about poison,” Victor said, misinterpreting her hesitation. “You're far more valuable to us alive.”

“Valuable how?” Helena asked, twisting the cap off the water bottle but not drinking.

“You'll see soon enough.” Victor let out a hollow laugh.

A chill ran down Helena's spine. Sol, she thought again, more urgently. Please... find me.

Victor paced in deliberate circles around Helena's chair, his polished shoes clicking against the wooden floor with each step. Her skin crawled as he moved behind her, just out of sight. The heat inside her chest flared with her growing uncertainty and fear.

“You know, I felt it the moment your powers awakened,” Victor announced, his voice rich with self-satisfaction. “It was like a beacon in the night. Every shifter in the region would have sensed it.” He moved back into her field of vision with a smug smile that made Helena’s fingers clench around the water bottle. “But unlike our dear Prince Sol, I had the resources to act immediately.”

Helena remained silent, watching as Victor spread his arms in a theatrical gesture toward his followers.

“Money opens doors that teeth and claws cannot. I had you located within hours.” He chuckled, clearly enjoying his moment of triumph. “Buying that pitiful restaurant was simply the most efficient way to gain access to you. A chef is nothing without her kitchen, after all.”

The casual way he dismissed her career—her passion—sent a surge of heat coursing through Helena’s veins. The water in the plastic bottle began to warm between her fingers.

Victor continued, oblivious to her simmering rage. “I had it all planned. I’d introduce myself as your benevolent new boss, earn your trust, and then gently guide you toward understanding your new nature.” His expression soured. “But then that fire erupted. You have remarkable power, my dear, but such poor control.”

Helena felt her cheeks flush with anger as Victor spoke of her as though she were a misbehaving child.

“I didn’t anticipate Sol finding you so quickly. That was... unfortunate.” Victor’s face hardened momentarily before his self-satisfied smile returned. “But not insurmountable. You see, I know Sol’s weakness—he’s arrogant enough to believe that simply being your ‘fated mate’ entitles him to your loyalty.”

The water in the bottle began to bubble. Helena set it down carefully on the floor, trying to control the fury building inside her.

“But I knew better.” Victor stooped to her eye level, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. “I knew that appealing to your sense of duty—your attachment to that little restaurant and the people who depend on you—would be more effective than any mystical bond.”

He straightened, smoothing his expensive suit jacket. “And here you are. Just as I planned. Your devotion to your career made you so wonderfully predictable.”

Every word he spoke was like gasoline on the fire building inside Helena. She had spent years building her reputation in that kitchen. Years perfecting her craft, leading her team, and creating a place that felt like home. And this man had bought it on a whim and manipulated her connection to it, all to use her for some power play against Sol.

“You really thought all this through, didn’t you?” Helena finally spoke, her voice dangerously soft.

Victor’s smile widened, mistaking her question for begrudging admiration rather than the gathering storm it was.

“I always do. Sol may have his pack and his royal heritage, but I have vision.” Victor turned to face his followers. “In the end, the game goes to the player with the better strategy.”

Helena closed her eyes for a split second, swallowing the inferno that threatened to engulf her. The heat pulsed through her veins like molten lava, begging for release, but she knew that unleashing it now would be catastrophic. Thirteen against one weren’t odds she liked.

Breathe. Just breathe. She let the air fill her lungs slowly, imagining the oxygen cooling the fire inside her rather than feeding it.

When she opened her eyes again, Victor was watching her with undisguised fascination. His gaze made her skin crawl, but she forced herself to meet it steadily.

“What exactly do you want with me, Victor?” Helena asked, proud of how level her voice sounded. “You’ve taken some excessive measures to get me here.”

Victor’s lips curved up into a smile that never reached his eyes. “They’re not excessive at all when you consider what I stand to gain.” He clasped his hands behind his back, resuming his slow circle around her chair. “You, my dear, are the key to everything I’ve wanted for centuries.”

“Which is?”

“The complete and utter destruction of Sol Cadoret and his pathetic reign over the Sunflare pack.” The venom in his voice made Helena flinch involuntarily. “He has no right to that power. No right to that castle. And certainly no right to you.”

Helena’s heart stuttered suddenly. The memory of Sol’s touch, Sol’s scent, and Sol’s voice washed over her unexpectedly.

“I’m going to use you—your beautiful, devastating fire—to burn him to the ground,” Victor continued, oblivious to her reaction. “I’ll march you right into that castle, and you’ll unleash your flames on their precious alpha.”

His followers murmured their approval, their eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“And after Sol’s charred corpse lies at my feet, those wolves will have a choice,” Victor leaned in close, his breath hot on her cheek. “Accept me as their new alpha or

join their former leader in death.”

The image Victor painted sickened her—Sol’s strong body lifeless, his green eyes forever closed, and his warm touch forever lost. Something fierce and primal rose in her chest, different from the fire. This wasn’t her power, this was something ancient. Something that roared at the very thought of Sol being harmed.

I love him.

The realization hit her with stunning clarity, washing over her like a tidal wave. It wasn’t just physical attraction or the brief intimacy they had shared. It was deeper and more fundamental—as though recognizing Sol inside her blood and awakening something that had been dormant inside her all along.

This is the mate bond.

“You’re very quiet,” Victor observed, eyeing her with suspicion.

Helena looked up at him, seeing him clearly now for what he was—not just a kidnapper or an arrogant businessman, but an existential threat to the man she loved. To the pack, she hadn’t realized she already considered hers.

“I’m just processing,” she replied carefully. “This is a lot.”

“You’ll have a little more time to adjust to the idea,” Victor waved dismissively.

Helena nodded slowly, fighting to keep her expression neutral while her thoughts raced. In the deepest part of her being, something shifted—a sensation like puzzle pieces clicking into place. The initial spark she’d felt with Sol had kindled into something unbreakable. Every fiber of her being now vibrated with the certainty that he was hers, and she was his.



I walked away from him, she thought with a pang of regret. I denied what he knew from the beginning.

Sol had recognized it instantly—the certainty of their bond, the inevitability of their connection. His wolf had known. And now, finally, her human heart had caught up.

Helena's stomach knotted as Victor paced around the barn, his shoes clicking rhythmically against the wooden floorboards. She had been quietly trying to formulate an escape plan, mentally mapping the exits and tracking the men, when Victor suddenly slammed his fist against a wooden post.

"I'm tired of this waiting game," he announced, his voice echoing through the barn. "Sol should have found us by now."

Helena kept her expression neutral, but her heart leaped. Sol was looking for her. The knowledge warmed her from within, separate from her fire powers. The connection thrummed between them, invisible but undeniable.

Victor raked a hand through his perfectly coiffed hair, mussing it slightly. "The beloved Alpha Prince isn't as clever as his reputation suggests." His mouth twisted into a sneer. "Too self-absorbed to even track his own Luna properly."

His followers laughed, a discordant chorus that sent chills through Helena's body.

"Change of plans," Victor declared, gesturing dramatically. "We're not waiting for him to stumble upon us anymore. We're taking the fight to him tonight."

Helena's breath hitched. The timeline was accelerating too quickly. She needed more time.

"But, Victor," one of the men spoke up, "the castle's defenses?—"

“Are nothing compared to the power we now possess,” Victor cut him off, pointing at Helena with an unsettling gleam in his eye.

Helena forced herself to remain still, though every instinct screamed at her to run. The fire inside her chest stirred, responding to her fear and anger.

Victor crouched before her chair, bringing his face uncomfortably close to hers. His cologne—expensive but applied too liberally—made her nostrils flare.

“You see, my dear Luna,” he said, the endearment dripping with mockery, “I’ve always preferred the direct approach. Why wait for Sol to come to us when we can surprise him in his own territory?”

His fingers reached out to trace along her jawline. Helena jerked back, her fire surging dangerously close to the surface.

“Don’t touch me,” she warned, her voice low.

Victor’s eyes widened momentarily before his lips curved into a delighted smile. “Oh, there’s that fire. Save it for Sol, won’t you?”

He stood and addressed his followers. “Pack up. We leave in thirty minutes.”

As the men scrambled to follow his orders, Victor turned back to Helena. “I suppose I should tell you your role in all this.”

Helena raised an eyebrow, trying to appear uninterested while her mind raced for solutions. “Let me guess. I’m the bait.”

“So much more than bait.” Victor laughed, the sound hollow and cold. “I’m going to offer Sol a trade—you for his position as alpha.”

Helena couldn't contain her scoff. "And you think he'll just agree to that?"

"Of course not," Victor replied, his tone suggesting she was simple-minded for even asking. "That's when you come in. When he refuses—and he will refuse—I'll have you employ your newfound powers." He made a dramatic gesture with his hands, mimicking an explosion. "One fiery embrace from his Luna, and the mighty Sol Cadoret becomes nothing but ash."

Helena had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. Victor had no idea that her fire couldn't hurt Sol. He didn't understand the true nature of their connection. And most importantly, he had no idea that the very bond he was trying to exploit made it impossible. The irony was almost delicious.

"You seem awfully confident," she said carefully, not wanting to reveal her advantage.

"I've waited centuries for this opportunity." Victor's eyes gleamed with malice and anticipation. "Sol took everything from me. My rightful place. My dignity. Now I'll take everything from him, including his precious Luna."

Something fierce and protective rose in Helena at his words. She might have only known Sol for days, but the bond between them was undeniable and growing stronger by the minute. Even now, miles apart, she could feel him—a steady, warm presence in the back of her mind.

"You'll never be half the alpha Sol is," she said quietly.

Victor's face contorted with rage. "We'll see about that when he's burning at your feet."

The sound of a vehicle arriving came from the front of the room.

“Ah,” Victor smiled, “my insurance policy is here.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I want to make sure you do what I tell you,” Victor sneered.

The front door opened and Tyanna stumbled in with her hands bound.

Everything just changed.

NINETEEN

SOL

After what seemed like hours, Sol's convertible finally roared up the castle's long driveway. He barely remembered to put the car in park before leaping out and striding toward the front entrance, his shoulders squared with determination that belied the chaos churning inside him.

Joshua waited in the royal study, but one look at his face and Sol knew the news wasn't good. The normally confident beta looked uncharacteristically defeated, papers scattered across the antique oak desk.

"Tell me you found something," Sol growled.

Joshua shook his head. "Nothing solid. It's like the bastard vanished. I've called every contact we have, checked all known properties?—"

Sol slammed his fist on the desk, sending a decorative letter opener clattering to the floor. "He's a fucking millionaire! People with money leave trails!"

"Not this one. At least not obvious ones." Joshua rubbed his temples. "The homes we know about are empty. His business headquarters showed no unusual activity. His known associates claim they haven't seen him in weeks."

Sol paced the length of the study, the wolf inside him demanding to get out. "He can't just disappear with my Luna."

Something shifted inside him then—a warm pulse through the mate bond that made him stop mid-stride. Fear, yes, but underneath it... something else. A sense of determination and... what was that? A warmth directed toward him? His heart skipped a beat.

“She’s alive,” Sol said, his eyes widening. “And she’s fighting.”

“You can feel her differently now?” Joshua straightened.

Sol touched his chest where the sensation centered. “It’s stronger than before. It’s like...” He searched for the right words. “Like she’s acknowledging the bond.”

Pride swelled in his chest. His Luna was proving every bit as fierce and intelligent as he’d known she would be. The connection felt sharper—a beacon he could follow with her pointing the way.

“I can track her faster because she’s helping me now,” Sol declared, striding toward the door. “We’re hunting tonight.”

Joshua nodded, falling in step behind him. They had barely reached the castle’s rear entrance, ready to strip and shift, when the sound of running footsteps made them turn. A young pack member—Eli, barely sixteen—sprinted toward them, his eyes wide with urgency.

“My Prince!” the boy called out, skidding to a halt before them. His chest heaved with exertion, sweat beading on his forehead.

“What is it?” Sol demanded, the alpha authority rumbling in his voice.

The boy straightened immediately, responding to the command. “My Prince, I... I think I know something...”

“What do you know?” Sol demanded, stepping closer to the young pack member.  
“Tell me everything.”

Eli straightened his shoulders, still breathing hard. “I was patrolling the eastern boundary like you ordered last week. I climbed the ridge to get a better view and?”

“Skip to the important part,” Sol growled.

The boy swallowed. “A pack of wolves, at least thirteen, maybe more. They’re moving through the forest toward our territory from the east. And one of them—a big gray—had something on his back. Two females. One with red hair.”

Sol’s heart thundered in his chest. Helena. His Luna.

“How far?”

“Three miles, maybe four. They’re moving fast, but carefully. Trying to stay hidden.”

Joshua stepped forward. “Victor’s making his move. Bringing the fight to us.”

“Good. Let him come to me,” Sol said, a savage grin spreading across his face.

A thrill of anticipation rushed through Sol’s blood. His wolf clawed and growled beneath his skin desperate to get out for the chance to tear into Victor’s throat. But the alpha leader in him knew better. This wasn’t just about his revenge—his entire pack was at stake. And Helena.

“Joshua, issue the silent alarm. I want every able-bodied shifter ready for battle in five minutes. Position half our forces in the forest—hidden—and half defending the castle grounds.”

Joshua nodded sharply and sprinted away.

Sol turned to Eli. “You did well. Now get Mitesh and the elders into the safe room with the children.”

The boy’s face fell. “But I can fight?—“

“You’ve already proven your worth today. Now do as I command.”

As the boy ran off, Sol closed his eyes, focusing on the mate bond. The connection felt like a taut string between them, vibrating with Helena’s emotions—fear mingled with determination. He sent his own feelings through the bond—strength, courage, and a promise.

I’ll protect you always, Luna.

The castle and the adjacent territory erupted with activity after Joshua issued the silent alarm. Pack members poured from doorways and across the castle grounds, some already stripping down to shift. Sol strode toward the main courtyard where his fighters were assembling.

“Victor thinks he can take what’s mine,” Sol announced, his voice carrying across the yard. Every head turned toward him, eyes bright with loyalty and fierce determination. “He’s coming to our home with an army at his back and my Luna as his prize.”

A low, collective growl rose from the gathering.

“But he’s forgotten something important,” Sol continued, rolling his shoulders as power radiated from him in waves. “This is Sunflare territory. We are the flames that consume all who threaten what’s ours.”



The courtyard filled with shouts of agreement and wolf howls piercing the evening air.

Mitesh hurried unexpectedly to Sol's side, clutching an ancient leather-bound book. "My Prince, if Victor has the Luna, we must?—"

"He won't have her for long," Sol cut him off. "Position our best archers in the eastern towers. I want a clear shot if Victor tries to use Helena as a shield."

The old advisor nodded. "And what of you?"

Sol's eyes flashed golden as his wolf pushed forward. "I'll lead the ground force personally. Victor's mine."

"Be careful," Mitesh warned. "If he's managed to tap into any of the Luna's power?—"

"He hasn't," Sol insisted, feeling the bond pulse inside him. "She's fighting him. I can feel it."

As his pack organized around him, Sol stepped away for a moment, staring toward the eastern forest where Helena would soon appear. The mate bond thrummed strong, a connection that couldn't be severed by distance or circumstance.

"Hold on just a little longer, beautiful," he whispered into the evening air.

Sol's muscles tightened as Victor finally approached with his makeshift army. He counted twelve shifters—all now in human form and dressed in hastily donned clothes—fanned out in a semi-circle behind their leader. In the distance, he saw a familiar-looking female was being guarded. If he was correct, she was a coworker of his Luna. Victor's way of controlling Helena.

In their center stood Helena, her magnificent red hair blazing like a beacon in the moonlight. Her hands weren't bound, which struck Sol as overconfident on Victor's part.

The sight of her ignited something primal in Sol's chest. His wolf snarled beneath his skin, begging for release to tear into the man who dared touch what was his. His muscles coiled with the effort of restraining his shift as Victor sauntered forward, a smug grin twisting his face.

"Evening, Your Highness," Victor called out, his voice dripping with false cordiality. "Beautiful castle you've maintained. I'm looking forward to redecorating."

"You have exactly ten seconds to let my Luna go before I tear your throat out," Sol growled.

Victor laughed, placing a possessive hand on Helena's shoulder that made Sol's vision flash red. "Always the diplomat. I have a proposition that might interest you more than suicide."

Sol's eyes locked with Helena's. Despite her situation, she didn't look frightened—instead, her hazel eyes blazed with a determination that made his heart swell with pride. Their mate bond hummed between them, stronger than ever.

"I'm offering a simple trade," Victor continued. "The Luna and her friend for your abdication. Step down as alpha, acknowledge me as the rightful leader of Sunflare, and they walk free." A smile twisted his lips. "Refuse, and we burn every pack member in sight."

Sol felt his pack bristle around him, barely containing their rage. His wolf demanded blood.

Then he felt it—a warm pulsing sensation through the mate bond. Helena gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head, her eyes communicating volumes. Through their connection, he sensed an unexpected emotion: confidence. Not fear, not desperation, but absolute certainty.

Trust me. I have a plan.

The message wasn't words exactly, but intentions and emotions flowing through their strengthened bond. She knew something he didn't.

Sol straightened to his full height, power radiating from him in waves that made even Victor's wolves shift unconsciously backward.

“You bring twelve pups to my doorstep and expect me to hand over centuries of leadership?” Sol laughed, playing for time while scanning Helena's posture for clues. Her hands were relaxed at her sides and her stance solid. “You always were delusional, Victor.”

Victor's face darkened. “I brought more than wolves. I brought your precious Luna, who's going to fuel my ascension.”

“Really?” Sol raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth lifting in a dangerous smile. “Because from where I'm standing, you brought me a gift.”

The confidence in Helena's eyes confirmed what Sol suddenly understood with crystal clarity. Victor hadn't tamed her fire—he had delivered a weapon right into the heart of his operation. A weapon bonded to Sol's soul, who now silently promised him she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Last chance,” Victor snarled. “Abdicate or watch your pack die.”

Sol crossed his arms, his eyes never leaving Helena's. "I think we both know that's not going to happen."

Victor leaned into Helena and put his hand on her lower back, whispering something into her ear. Sol's enhanced hearing caught fragments—"burn him"... "show your power or your friend dies"—but not the entire command. His muscles tensed, every instinct demanding he tear Victor apart for daring to touch Helena. Yet Helena's gaze never wavered, her eyes locked with his in a silent plea: Trust me. Follow my lead.

Through their strengthening bond, Sol felt her resolve—steady and unwavering. His wolf paced inside him, bristling at being asked to stand still when its mate was in harm's way. But Sol forced himself to wait. In the two centuries of his life, waiting had never been his strength. But for Helena, he would.

"I have to get nearer to him," she said loudly to Victor. "Have him within my grasp to make sure he burns completely. Then you'll let Tyanna go."

Victor chuckled, glaring at Sol. "Absolutely, Luna."

Helena stepped forward, each movement deliberate as she crossed the invisible line separating Victor's makeshift army from Sol's pack. Behind him, Sol sensed Joshua and the others tensing, ready to attack at his signal. He raised a hand slightly—hold.

Every step she took toward him made Sol's heart pound harder. Her red hair caught the moonlight, creating a halo of fire around her face. In that moment, despite the danger surrounding them, he found himself struck by how perfectly she embodied everything a Luna should be—fierce, determined, and courageous.

When Helena reached him, she leaned in close, her lips nearly brushing his ear. The scent of her—vanilla and cinnamon with a hint of smoke—wrapped around him like a warm blanket.

“Victor wants me to burn you to ash in exchange for Tyanna living,” she whispered hurriedly, her breath warm against his skin. “He doesn’t know your connection to my fire—that my flames can’t hurt you. When I hug you, act like you’re fighting it, at first, then take control and throw a ring of fire around Tyanna to protect her.”

Sol gave an almost imperceptible nod, pride surging through him at her cleverness. “My brilliant Luna,” he murmured back.

She stepped back just enough to meet his eyes again, a hint of mischief dancing behind the determination in them. “Ready to play with fire, Alpha?”

The corner of Sol’s mouth twitched ever so slightly. “With you? Always.”

Helena wrapped her arms around him then, pressing her body against his. The feel of her curves against him made his blood heat instantly despite the danger surrounding them. Sol enfolded her in his embrace, savoring the contact while watching Victor over her shoulder. The exiled wolf’s face twisted with triumph, thinking his plan was working.

Fool , Sol thought. You never understood our pack’s true connection to fire.

He felt the change in Helena’s body as she summoned her power—a subtle warming of her skin and her heartbeat accelerating against his chest. Then came the flames, erupting from her fingertips and racing across his back, engulfing them both in a spectacular inferno that cast dancing shadows across the clearing.

Sol let her fire wash over him, feeling its caress like the touch of a lover rather than the deadly force Victor expected. Through their embrace, he could feel Helena’s momentary fear—this was new territory for her—but he sent reassurance through their bond as he began to exert his control.

The flames responded to his will, dancing and swirling around them both without burning either of them. Sol directed the fire to spiral dramatically around their bodies while maintaining the illusion that he was struggling.

With a subtle shift of his muscles, Sol guided the fire upward, creating a massive column of flame that illuminated the night sky. He threw a ring of fire around Tyanna, making the wolf guard yelp and jump away. The power flowing between him and Helena was intoxicating, their bond strengthening with every heartbeat as they shared control of the elemental force.

Victor's shocked gasp was audible even through the roar of the flames. "Impossible!" he shouted.

Suddenly, a strangled howl tore through the night as Victor shifted, his human form giving way to his gray wolf. Sol watched as raw fury burned in the exiled wolf's eyes, driving him forward in a headlong charge directly at them.

Perfect, Sol thought, reveling in the predictability of Victor's reaction. The wolf had always been ruled by his emotions—a weakness that Sol had anticipated from the start.

Sol relinquished his hold on the flames with a confident smile, feeling the swirling inferno respond to Helena's command as if it had always belonged to her. Pride surged through him as he watched his mate control the elemental force with newfound precision. She was magnificent—her red hair whipping around her face, and her eyes ablaze with purpose as the fire danced at her fingertips.

"You're mine now, Victor," Sol growled, his voice deepening as the shift began.

His body contorted, his bones cracking and reshaping as he surrendered to his wolf's demand for release. The transformation took mere seconds—his human form giving

way to the massive black wolf that was his true nature. Sol's wolf stood taller than any normal wolf, muscles rippling beneath midnight fur, his green eyes now glowing with golden fury.

Victor's charge faltered momentarily at the sight of Sol's imposing wolf form, but rage drove him forward again. Sol met his attacker head-on, their bodies colliding in a tangle of snapping jaws and raking claws. The sound of snarling wolves filled the night air as Victor's pack rushed to join the fray, only to be met by Sol's warriors surging forward to protect their alpha and Luna.

Through the chaos of battle, Sol remained focused on Victor, his powerful jaws snapping dangerously close to the gray wolf's throat. Victor was quick, but Sol was stronger, his movements enhanced by the power flowing through his bond with Helena. He could feel her—fear, determination, and something else... a fierce protectiveness that matched his own.

A ball of fire streaked through the air, striking one of Victor's wolves as it lunged for Sol's flank. The wolf yelped and retreated, fur singed. Sol's wolf lips pulled back in what could only be described as a savage grin.

Helena stood her ground at the center of the battlefield, directing plumes of flame with surgical precision—never harming Sol's pack members but creating barriers of fire to separate and disorient Victor's forces. Each time she unleashed her power, Sol felt a corresponding surge of strength, the mate bond channeling her energy into his muscles, his reflexes, his very being.

My Luna is a warrior, he thought with fierce admiration, dodging Victor's attempt to tear into his shoulder.

Victor fought desperately, but Sol could sense his growing panic. The exiled wolf had gambled everything on Helena's fire destroying Sol—not empowering him. Around

them, Victor's makeshift army was being systematically dismantled by the combined might of Sol's pack and Helena's flames.

With a powerful lunge, Sol finally gained the upper hand, his massive weight slamming Victor to the ground. The gray wolf thrashed beneath him, but Sol's paws pressed down with unrelenting force, pinning his enemy to the earth. Their eyes locked—Sol's burning with centuries of righteous fury, and Victor's wide with the sudden realization of his failure.

You threatened what's mine , Sol's wolf snarled internally, his jaws opening wide.

In one swift, decisive movement, Sol closed his teeth around Victor's throat. A quick, powerful clench of his jaws ended the exile's life and with it, the threat to his pack and mate. Sol released his enemy and raised his blood-flecked muzzle to the night sky, letting loose a triumphant howl that echoed through the forest.

As Victor's leaderless wolves scattered, Sol turned to find Helena standing amid the chaos, her fire now extinguished. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she watched him pad toward her, his black fur gleaming in the moonlight. The bond between them pulsed stronger than ever, carrying his pride, his relief, and his boundless love for her.



TWENTY

HELENA

Helena stood tall and victorious in the clearing after the battle with Victor and his small army. The fire that had moments ago danced along her fingertips and blazed across the castle grounds had disappeared, leaving only scorched earth and the acrid scent of smoke.

Her eyes found Sol's wolf form across the clearing, magnificent and powerful, his black fur gleaming like polished onyx under the moon's glow. He padded toward her with a predator's grace, each step purposeful and precise. Helena's heart hammered in her chest, but not from fear. A strange, primal recognition coursed through her.

"You're beautiful," she whispered as he approached.

Sol's wolf form stood taller than any natural wolf, powerful muscles rippling beneath his thick coat. His green eyes – the same piercing emerald as his human form – seemed to see straight into her soul. The connection between them pulsed like a living thing, carrying emotions that didn't need words: pride, relief, and something deeper that made her throat tight.

Sol's wolf nudged her hand with his muzzle before turning, clearly wanting her to follow. She walked beside him, matching his pace as he led her away from the chaos and into the castle gardens. The night air felt cool against her skin after the heat of battle, and the scent of roses and jasmine replaced the smell of smoke and blood.

In a secluded corner of the garden, Sol stopped near a stone bench. Helena watched in fascination as his form shimmered and changed, bones and muscle rearranging until the man she knew stood before her, gloriously naked in the moonlight. Without embarrassment, he reached behind the bench and pulled out a bundle of clothes – a simple T-shirt and jeans – and dressed quickly.

The silence between them felt too heavy for Helena to bear.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurted out, her voice cracking. “For leaving you. For not believing you. For everything.”

Sol took a step toward her, his expression unreadable. “But you came back.”

“I didn’t have much choice,” Helena laughed nervously, then sobered. “But I would have. Eventually. When Victor told me what he planned to do to you, something... broke open inside me. It was like someone turned on a light in a dark room. Suddenly I could feel you – here.”

She pressed her hand to her chest over her heart. “The mate bond you talked about. I felt it, Sol. Everything you tried to tell me from the start. That unbreakable connection, that soul-deep recognition. It hit me all at once, and I knew I was meant to be with you.”

Sol’s eyes blazed with intensity. “And now?”

“Now I know where I truly belong.” Helena stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat from his body. “With you. With the pack. As your Luna.”

Sol laughed and cupped her face with one large hand, his touch gentle despite the strength she knew he possessed. “Those words are worth fighting a hundred battles to hear.”

“I should have said them sooner.” Helena leaned into his touch. “I was just?—“

“Scared. I know.” His thumb brushed her lower lip. “Any sane person would be.”

“Are you calling me crazy now?” A small smile tugged at her mouth.

“No. Brave,” Sol corrected. “The bravest woman I’ve ever known.”

He dipped his head, claiming her mouth in a kiss that started gently but quickly blazed into something more primal. Helena melted against him, her body recognizing its missing piece. When they finally pulled apart, both breathless, Sol pressed his forehead to hers.

“Welcome home, Luna.”

Helena smiled, feeling the rightness of it settle into her bones. “Home,” she agreed. “It has a nice ring to it.”

Sol wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to his chest. “Helena,” he murmured, “will you become my Luna in every way tonight and accept my mate mark?”

Her pulse quickened at the question, the weight of it settling in her chest. She knew what it meant—the bond, the commitment, the forever. A part of her still marveled at how quickly her life had spiraled into this moment, but the other part, the deeper part, felt the undeniable rightness of it. She loved him. She wanted him. She wanted this.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice steady despite the lump in her throat. “It’s time.”

His eyes darkened with a mix of relief and desire. “Come with me. There’s a place where this is meant to happen.”

He led her through the castle grounds and into the forest. The moon bathed the path in a silvery glow, and the air smelled of earth and pine. Helena's nerves buzzed with anticipation, but Sol's presence beside her was grounding.

They soon reached a clearing, and Helena stopped in her tracks, her breath catching. The space was magical, bathed in moonlight with soft moss covering the ground and the trees forming a natural canopy. It felt ancient and sacred as if it held the echoes of countless unions before theirs.

"This is where the alphas of the Sunflare pack have claimed their Lunas for centuries," Sol said, his voice warm with pride. "And tonight, it's our turn."

Helena turned to face him, her heart swelling with emotion. "It's perfect."

Sol stepped closer, his eyes locking onto hers, and began to undress her with deliberate, unhurried movements. His fingers brushed her skin as he slid her dress off her shoulders, letting it pool at her feet. He then removed her lace bra and panties with the same deliberate slowness. The night air kissed her bare skin but she didn't feel cold. Not with the way his hungry gaze made her heat from the inside out.

She reached for him, her hands trembling slightly as she pulled his shirt over his head. His chest was solid and warm, and the intricate tattoo on his arm caught the moonlight perfectly as if it was designed for this exact moment. When they were both bare, he took her hand and gently guided her down onto the soft moss.

"You're breathtaking," he murmured, his voice thick with reverence.

He settled over her, his weight pressing her into the ground in the most delicious way. His lips found hers in a slow, deep kiss that left her dizzy with want. His hands roamed her curves—her hips, her waist, her breasts—as if memorizing every inch of her.

When he pulled back, he began trailing kisses down her neck, his tongue flicking against her skin in a way that made her shiver. “Sol,” she breathed, her fingers tangling in his hair.

“I’m going to take my time with you,” he said, his voice a low growl that sent a thrill through her. “Tonight, every moment is ours.”

He kissed a path down her body, his lips and tongue worshiping her skin. When he reached her thighs, he spread her legs gently, his breath hot on her most intimate place. Helena’s pulse raced, her body already humming with anticipation.

His tongue flicked against her folds, and she gasped, her back arching off the ground. But he didn’t rush. His movements were slow and deliberate as if savoring every sound she made. He licked and teased, drawing out her pleasure until she was squirming beneath him, her hands fisting in the moss.

“Please,” she begged, her voice breaking. “I need more.”

Sol chuckled against her skin, his breath deliciously hot on her most sensitive spot. But he obeyed and he quickened his pace. His tongue focused on her sensitive nub while his fingers slipped inside her, curling in a way that had her crying out for more.

The pleasure built, hot and intense, until it shattered her. Her orgasm ripped through her with a force that left her breathless. She cried out her pleasure, the sound echoing into the night, and he didn’t stop, drawing her through the waves until she was trembling beneath him.

When he finally pulled back, he kissed her thigh, his eyes glowing with satisfaction. “Mine,” he breathed, his voice a husky whisper.

Helena’s heart swelled with love and desire, her body still humming from his touch.

“Yours,” she whispered, reaching for him.

She pulled him up on top of her until his body caged hers. His weight pressed her into the soft moss, the cool earth beneath her contrasting with the heat radiating from his skin. His eyes locked onto hers, and she felt the intensity of his gaze like a physical touch.

“Are you ready?” Sol’s voice was low, rough with desire, but there was a tenderness there too. His hand brushed her face, his touch achingly gentle.

Helena’s heart pounded with excitement, anticipation, and something deeper—something that felt like coming home to him. She nodded, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions swirling within her. “Yes. I’m ready.”

Sol’s lips curved in a slow, triumphant smile, and he kissed her deeply, his tongue tangling with hers in a slow, sensual dance. When he pulled back, he positioned himself between her legs, his hips pressing against hers. Helena’s breath caught as she felt the hard length of him against her, hot and insistent.

He entered her slowly, inch by glorious inch, stretching her, and filling her completely. The stretch was a delicious burn, a perfect ache that made her gasp and arch into him.

“God, you feel incredible,” Sol growled, his voice rough with restraint as he buried himself fully inside her.

Helena’s nails dug into his shoulders, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. “Move,” she whispered, her voice trembling with need. “Please.”

Sol obeyed, his hips rocking against hers in slow thrusts that drew out every bit of pleasure. Each movement was deliberate, calculated to drive her wild, and it was

working. Helena's moans filled the clearing, her body tightening around him with every stroke.

"You're so tight," Sol murmured, his breath hot on her neck. "So perfect for me."

Helena's body arched into his as he began to move deeper and harder, hitting a spot inside her that made her see stars. She couldn't think and couldn't breathe—all she could do was feel. The pleasure built and built, coiling tighter and tighter until she was on the edge, clinging to him for dear life.

"Sol," she begged. "Please... more."

Sol's growl was primal and possessive, and he snapped his hips forward with a force that stole her breath. His pace quickened, his thrusts becoming faster, deeper, and more urgent. The sound of their bodies crashing together filled the night air, a symphony of need and desire.

Helena's world narrowed to the feel of him inside her, the heat of his body against hers, and the way he seemed to know exactly how to push her higher and closer to the edge. Her fingers wrapped in his hair, tugging him down for a searing kiss as she felt the first sparks of her orgasm begin to ignite.

"I'm close," Sol warned, his voice strained. His hands gripped her hips, pulling her even tighter against him. "When you come, I'm going to bite you."

Helena's breath hitched at his words, but she nodded, her body trembling with anticipation. "Yes," she whispered. "Do it."

The moment her orgasm hit, it was like a firestorm, white-hot and all-consuming. She cried out, her body arching off the ground as the pleasure tore through her in waves. Sol let out a guttural growl, his hips slamming into hers one last time as he followed

her over the edge.

As he came inside her, his teeth sank into the tender skin of her shoulder. The sharp sting of pain was quickly replaced by a strange, tingling warmth as he licked the wound, sealing the mate mark. Helena's body shuddered from the intensity, her fingers gripping him tightly as the bond between them solidified, locking them together in a way that felt eternal.

Sol's lips moved to hers, capturing her in a deep, lingering kiss as they both came down from the high. When he finally pulled back, his eyes were soft, filled with a warmth that made Helena's chest ache.

"You're all mine. Now and forever," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Helena melted against Sol's body, savoring the weight of him pressing her into the moss, the delicious ache between her thighs, and the lingering pleasure still rippling through her. The bite mark on her shoulder throbbed with a strange, pulsing heat that seemed to spread through her entire body.

"And you're mine," she whispered back, brushing her fingers along his jaw.

Then it hit her—a wave of sensation so intense, it stole her breath. Heat bloomed from the mate mark, racing through her veins like liquid fire. Her skin tightened, muscles clenching involuntarily.

"Sol—" Her voice caught, panic fluttering in her chest. "Something's happening."

Sol's eyes widened with understanding. He rolled to her side, keeping one strong arm wrapped around her. "It's all right, Helena. Your wolf is waking."

Helena's body arched as another spasm gripped her. Her bones felt too large beneath



her skin, her senses suddenly overwhelmed. The scent of moss and earth and Sol intensified until she could distinguish each individual note. The stars above seemed impossibly bright, and the slight breeze against her skin almost unbearable.

“I don’t—I can’t—“ Her words dissolved into a gasp. “Am I dying?”

“No.” Sol’s voice was firm and commanding. His hand stroked her hair, anchoring her. “You’re becoming. Your wolf has always been inside you, sleeping. My mate mark woke her.”

Helena’s heart pounded so hard she feared it might burst from her chest. Something wild and ancient stirred beneath her skin, stretching, pushing against her human form. Not painful exactly but terrifying in its unfamiliarity—like her body belonged to someone else.

“I don’t know if I can control it,” she whispered, trembling.

Sol rested his forehead against hers, his green eyes steady. “You don’t need to control it yet. Just feel it. Welcome her.”

“What if she doesn’t like me?” The question slipped out, revealing her deepest fear.

Sol’s laugh was low and rich. “She is you, Helena. The fiercest part of you that’s been waiting to emerge.” His thumb stroked her cheek. “And she’s going to be magnificent.”

### TWENTY-ONE

#### SOL

Sol watched Helena's body quiver on the moss beneath them. The moonlight caressed her naked form as the transformation took hold. Her pale skin rippled with an inner energy that called to something primal within him. He had witnessed countless transformations over his centuries of existence, but nothing had prepared him for the raw beauty of watching his Luna embrace her true nature for the first time.

"Just let go, Helena," he murmured, sliding his hand through her fiery hair as she clenched her jaw against the change. "Don't fight what's meant to be."

Her hazel eyes widened with a mixture of wonder and terror. "It feels like I'm being torn apart and put back together."

"Your body is reshaping itself to accommodate your wolf." Sol's thumb traced the curve of her cheek, his touch deliberately firm and grounding. "She's always been there waiting for this day."

Helena's spine arched suddenly, a gasp escaping her lips as her limbs began to elongate and reshape. Sol's wolf howled inside him, desperate to join her, to guide her through this sacred transformation.

"My bones—" she choked out.

“Are adapting to your true form.” Sol’s voice remained steady despite the range of emotions battering his heart. Pride. Desire. Fierce protectiveness. “Breathe into it.”

The first patches of fur emerged—not the common gray or brown he might have expected, but a vibrant reddish-brown that shone in the moonlight like living flames. His chest swelled with satisfaction. Of course, his fiery Luna would have a coat that matched her spirit.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, shifting to give her space as her form continued to change. “Your wolf knows what to do even if you don’t.”

Helena’s eyes flashed with momentary panic as her face began to elongate. Sol recognized that moment—the point when human consciousness struggled against the animal emerging.

“I’m here.” He pressed his forehead gently against hers while he still could. “I’ll always be here.”

A soft whimper escaped her transforming throat, not quite human anymore but not yet fully wolf.

“Don’t be afraid of her strength,” Sol whispered. “Your wolf is the part of your soul that survived centuries of dormancy just to find me. The part that knew how to wield fire before your mind understood what was happening.”

Helena’s body convulsed one final time, and Sol moved back further, giving her the space needed to complete the transformation. Where his mate had lain moments before, a stunning wolf now stood on unsteady legs, her coat the color of autumn leaves touched by sunset.

Sol’s breath caught in his throat. Even in his wildest dreams, he couldn’t have

imagined her wolf would be so perfect—sleek and powerful with intelligent hazel eyes that remained unmistakably Helena’s.

“Look at you,” he breathed, unable to contain his awe. “The legends didn’t do you justice.”

Helena wobbled slightly, her head swinging to examine her new form with evident shock. She attempted a step forward and nearly toppled, unfamiliar with her four-legged stance.

Sol laughed, the sound echoing through the clearing. “Just like watching a pup find their legs.”

Her eyes narrowed at him, that familiar flash of indignation unmistakable even in her wolf form.

“Time for me to join you,” Sol decided, letting his own shift take him.

The change was as natural as breathing to him after centuries of practice. His bones reshaped, muscles redistributed, and skin gave way to his midnight-black fur in one fluid motion. Where the naked man had stood, the alpha wolf now emerged—larger than any other wolf with powerful shoulders and piercing green eyes that retained their human intelligence.

Sol approached Helena slowly, circling her with deliberate steps, letting her scent him properly as a wolf. Her nose twitched, taking in his familiar yet now different scent.

She attempted to mimic his movements, her steps becoming steadier with each passing moment. Her instincts were awakening, guiding her into this new reality.

When she finally approached him, pressing her muzzle against his neck in a gesture

of trust and connection, Sol felt a completion he'd waited lifetimes to experience. His Luna. Finally whole in every way.

Sol's wolf stood proud, watching his mate soon find her bearings in her magnificent new form. He'd never seen a wolf with a coat quite like hers—russet and flame-like, catching moonbeams as she moved. Pride surged through him, centuries of waiting crystallized into this perfect moment.

Follow me.

He projected the thought through their mate bond, feeling a surge of satisfaction when her ears perked up in response. The telepathic connection between wolves was one of the sacred gifts of their kind, and feeling it snap into place with her confirmed what he already knew—she was his.

Where are we going? Her thoughts came tentatively, unfamiliar with this form of communication.

To run as we were meant to. Together.

Sol took off with powerful strides, glancing back to ensure she followed. Helena's movements were cautious at first, her coordination improving with each bound as her wolf instincts took over. Within minutes, she was racing alongside him, her paws finding purchase on the forest floor with increasing confidence.

He led her deeper into the woods, through ancient paths his ancestors had traversed for generations. The moonlight filtered through the dense canopy, dappling their fur as they ran. Sol felt freer than he had in centuries, the weight of waiting for his Luna finally lifted from his shoulders. This was what completion felt like—running with his mate under the stars that had witnessed his loneliness for far too long.

You're a natural, he sent through their bond, watching as she leaped gracefully over a fallen log.

Her wolf responded with a burst of unbridled joy that flooded their connection. It feels like I've done this my entire life.

Because part of you has been waiting to do exactly this since before you were born.

They raced through a meadow, tall grasses swishing against their flanks. Sol deliberately slowed, allowing her to overtake him, watching the powerful muscles of his mate work beneath her flaming coat. The sight stirred something deeply primal in him.

The peaceful night run was interrupted by the sound of approaching paws. Sol's ears flattened slightly as he detected the scents of his pack members—Joshua, Deina, and three others. While part of him understood their curiosity to meet their Luna in wolf form, another more possessive part bristled at the intrusion.

Five wolves emerged from between the trees, approaching cautiously. Joshua's gray form led the small group, his head lowered slightly in deference to his alpha.

They've come to welcome their Luna, Sol explained to Helena, feeling her momentary uncertainty.

Joshua circled Helena first, sniffing respectfully at a distance. When Deina approached too closely, nose extended toward Helena's neck, Sol's massive black form inserted itself between them, a low warning growl rumbling in his chest.

Mine, his wolf projected powerfully enough that all present could feel it. You may greet her but remember your place.

The other wolves backed away slightly, showing proper submission by lowering their heads. One by one, they approached more cautiously, offering quick reverent sniffs before retreating to a respectful distance.

They're just curious, Helena's thoughts carried amusement. You don't have to be so territorial.

I've waited two centuries for you, Sol replied, pressing his muzzle possessively against her neck. Forgive me if I'm not ready to share.

The pack wolves withdrew after paying their respects, understanding their alpha's desire for privacy with his new mate. When they disappeared back into the trees, Sol nudged Helena playfully, breaking the tension.

Race you to the clearing, he challenged, taking off through the trees.

Helena gave chase, her speed impressive for a first shift. When she caught up to him, she nipped at his flank, darting away before he could react. Sol's wolf delighted in this game, this old dance of pursuit and retreat that was as old as their kind. They chased each other through moonlit glades, playful growls and yips breaking the silence of the forest night.

As the moon reached its zenith, Sol noticed Helena's pace slowing, her movements becoming less fluid as fatigue set in. First shifts were exhausting, and he knew she needed rest.

Time to head home, he decided, guiding her with gentle nudges back toward the castle. You've done remarkably well for your first run.

He led her along the path that would bring them to the private entrance of their chambers. As the castle came into view, standing majestically against the starlit sky,

Sol felt a deep satisfaction settle in his bones. His Luna had completed her transformation, their bond was cemented, and the future stretched before him filled with promise rather than endless waiting.

Sol watched with awe as her wolf form melted back into her human shape with unexpected ease. Most first-time shifters struggled with the return journey, yet his Luna slipped back into her skin as naturally as breathing.

“You’re a wonder,” he told her, not bothering to hide the pride in his voice after he shifted back. “Most wolves struggle for hours their first time shifting back.”

Helena stood naked before him, her pale skin luminous in the moonlight, a slight flush coloring her cheeks as she glanced around the castle grounds. “Is anyone going to see us like this?” She attempted to cover herself with her hands, her eyes darting toward the shadowed windows of the castle.

Sol’s chest swelled with possessive pleasure at the sight of her nude form—all lush curves and fiery hair cascading down her back. “This entrance is for us alone. No pack member would dare approach without permission.” He stepped closer, his voice lowering. “Besides, you’re mine to see.”

He watched her throat bob as she swallowed, her hands slowly dropping away from her body. The trust in that simple gesture made his wolf rumble with satisfaction.

“Still,” Sol added, closing the distance between them, “I’ll ensure no eyes fall on what belongs to me.”

Before she could respond, he swept her into his arms, cradling her body against his chest. The feel of her soft skin against his sent heat coursing through him, but he tempered his desire. There would be time for that later.



“I can walk, you know,” she protested, though her arms instinctively wound around his neck.

“I’m aware of your capabilities,” Sol replied, pushing open the heavy wooden door with his shoulder. “I simply prefer to carry what’s mine.”

The private entrance led directly to their royal chambers, bypassing the main hallways where pack members might be wandering even at this late hour. As Sol carried her through the dimly lit passage, he reveled in how right she felt in his arms—this woman who had transformed his centuries-long existence in mere days.

“Do you always get your way?” Helena asked, her fingers absently tracing the pack tattoo on his upper arm.

“Always.” He didn’t bother to mask the arrogance in his tone. “I’m the alpha.”

Her laugh vibrated against his chest. “I suppose I’ll have to get used to that.”

“You’re the Luna,” he reminded her, kicking open the door to their chambers. “You’ll find you get your way quite often as well.”

The royal bathroom awaited them—a massive space of marble and gold fixtures, dominated by a shower large enough for ten people. Sol finally set Helena down, reluctant to release her even for a moment.

“I think this bathroom is bigger than my entire house,” she marveled, running her hand along the smooth countertop.

“As it should be.” Sol turned on the shower, steam quickly filling the space. “Nothing but the best for my mate.”

He guided her into the shower, watching with hungry eyes as water cascaded down her curves, dampening her flame-red hair until it darkened to deep crimson. Sol followed, crowding her against the tiled wall, needing to feel her skin against his.

“Tonight was...” Helena seemed to search for words, her hands coming to rest on his chest.

“The beginning,” Sol finished for her, capturing a droplet of water from her collarbone with his thumb. “The beginning of everything.”

They washed each other slowly, hands gliding over soap-slicked skin, learning each curve and plane. Sol found himself memorizing the constellation of freckles across her shoulders, the exact weight of her breasts in his palms, and the way her breath caught when he touched certain places.

When they finally emerged, wrapped in plush towels, exhaustion was evident in Helena’s drooping eyes. Sol led her to his—their—massive bed, pulling back the covers.

“Rest now,” he murmured, dropping his towel and sliding between the sheets. “Your body needs recovery after your first shift.”

Helena hesitated only a moment before abandoning her own towel and joining him. Sol immediately pulled her against him, arranging her so her head rested on his chest, and his arm secured around her waist.

“Is it always going to be like this?” she asked, her voice already heavy with approaching sleep.

“Like what?” Sol brushed his lips against her damp hair.

“So... intense. So right.”

Her simple response threatened to undo him. After centuries of emptiness, the completeness he felt with his Luna in his arms in their bed was almost painful in its perfection.

“Yes,” he promised, tightening his hold. “Always.”

Her breathing deepened as sleep finally claimed her, but Sol remained awake a while longer, savoring the weight of her against him and the scent of her skin mingling with his. His Luna finally understood what she was, and what they could be together. She was finally home.

### TWENTY-TWO

#### HELENA

Helena woke to sunlight streaming through the massive windows of Sol's bedroom—now their bedroom. The sheets smelled of him, that woodsy spice that made her heart flutter. She stretched, her muscles pleasantly sore from their night of running through the forest on four legs instead of two.

Her wolf. She actually had a wolf inside her.

She rolled over to find Sol watching her with those impossibly green eyes, a half-smile on his lips. His tattoo on his right arm shimmered in the morning light as he reached out to brush hair off her face.

"I can hear you thinking," Sol said, his voice still rough with sleep. "How does it feel being a wolf shifter?"

Helena felt her cheeks flush. "Strange. Wonderful. Like I've discovered a part of myself that's always been there, but I never knew to look for."

"Your wolf is simply beautiful." He traced the line of her collarbone with his fingertip. "Red like your hair. Like fire."

The memory of shifting, of feeling her bones transform and her senses sharpen beyond anything humanly possible, made her shiver. "Will it get easier? The changing?"

“With practice.” Sol’s hand slid possessively around her waist, drawing her closer. “But you’re a natural, Luna.”

Luna. The title still felt foreign, but less so than before. After facing Victor, after feeling the fierce protectiveness toward Sol and his pack—her pack now—Helena couldn’t deny the mate bond anymore or her place by Sol’s side.

Sol reached for his phone on the nightstand, his muscled arm stretching across her vision. He punched in a number and brought it to his ear.

“Mitesh,” he said, his voice shifting from the intimate tone he used with her to something more commanding. “Gather the pack at the castle tonight. Ballroom. We’re making the Luna announcement official.”

Helena caught snippets of Mitesh’s excited response before Sol ended the call and tossed his phone aside.

“A celebration?” She propped herself on her elbow. “For me?”

Sol’s smile bordered on wicked. “For us. For our pack.” He cupped her face gently. “But before that, there are some people you need to meet properly.”

“Who?”

“My sister Claire and her family. You met Joshua in wolf form last night. He’s my beta and Claire’s husband.”

Helena’s eyebrows rose. “The man who helped you rescue me from the fire at my restaurant is your brother-in-law?”

“The very same.” Sol’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Claire is eight months pregnant

with their fourth. They already have twin boys, Finn and Filip—absolute terrors, both eight—and a girl Emma, who’s six.”

Helena tried to imagine the formidable Joshua as a father of three—soon to be four—wild children. “They live here? At the castle?”

“No. They live in a house on the territory.” Sol captured her hand and pressed his lips to her palm. “Claire will be so thrilled to meet you. She’s wanted me to find my Luna for decades. Said I was getting too broody.”

“Decades,” Helena breathed, still adjusting to the reality of Sol’s age. “And now you’ve got me, a chef who only just figured out she’s a wolf.”

Sol’s expression grew serious and intense. He moved with predatory grace, suddenly looming over her, his arms bracketing her body.

“Not just any wolf.” His voice dropped to a growl that sent heat rushing through her veins. “Mine.”

The possessive declaration should have concerned her. Instead, it felt so right. Just like the way his lips felt so right when they suddenly crashed down on hers, claiming her with a kiss that promised forever.

That afternoon, Helena followed Sol through the winding paths of the castle grounds toward the shimmering blue pool nestled in a corner of the massive backyard. Her heart fluttered with a strange mix of excitement and nervousness. Meeting Sol’s family felt momentous—more so than any job interview or culinary competition she had ever faced.

“Relax,” Sol murmured, his hand warm against her back. “They already love you.”

Helena smoothed her sundress, a delicate floral pattern that complemented her pale skin and red hair. “How could they? They haven’t even met me yet.”

“You’re my Luna.” Sol’s voice carried that possessive edge that made her heart race. “That’s enough for them.”

As they rounded a hedge of tall boxwoods, the sounds of children’s laughter filled the air. The expansive pool area came into view where a statuesque blonde woman reclined on a lounge chair, her belly swollen with pregnancy, while a tall man with Joshua’s unmistakable features tended to a massive grill.

Two identical dark-haired boys cannonballed into the pool, sending sprays of water everywhere while a little girl with blonde pigtails carefully arranged a row of toys along the pool’s edge.

“Uncle Sol!” The little girl spotted them first, abandoning her toys and racing toward them. Her face lit up like sunshine.

Sol swept the child into his arms with practiced ease, twirling her around. “How’s my little princess Emma?”

The transformation in Sol took Helena’s breath away. Gone was the fierce, domineering alpha, replaced by a doting uncle with a gentle smile and tender touch.

“Is she your wife now?” Emma asked bluntly, pointing at Helena with undisguised curiosity.

Helena felt her cheeks warm as Sol grinned. “This is Helena, and not quite. She’s my mate.”

The boys, dripping wet, had scrambled from the pool and circled them like excited

puppies. “Can you really make fire?” one asked, eyes wide with fascination.

“Finn! Filip! Give the woman some space,” Claire called, pushing herself up from her chair with some effort. Joshua immediately appeared at her side, supporting her with quiet strength.

Claire waddled over, her smile genuine and warm. “I’m Claire. Sorry about the chaos. We’ve been waiting forever to meet you.” She embraced Helena like a long-lost sister.

Helena hugged her back, finding herself instantly comfortable with Sol’s sister. “Thank you for having me.”

“About time this one settled down,” Joshua said, clapping Sol on the shoulder while shooting Helena a conspiratorial grin. “He’s been a grumpy bastard for centuries.”

“Language,” Claire reminded him with a playful swat, nodding toward the children.

Helena couldn’t help but laugh. She had been afraid all morning that they would be stiff or formal—this was royalty, after all—but they were wonderfully, refreshingly real.

Throughout the afternoon, Helena watched Sol with his family. He tossed the boys into the pool, their shrieks of delight echoing across the grounds. He listened seriously to Emma’s detailed explanation of her toy arrangement. But most touching was how he hovered near Claire, constantly checking if she needed anything, adjusting her umbrella for better shade, and bringing her fresh lemonade before she even asked.

“He’ll be an amazing father,” Claire said quietly, catching Helena watching Sol as he demonstrated the perfect cannonball to his nephews.



Helena's heart skipped. Children. With Sol. The image came unbidden—a little boy with Sol's green eyes and her red hair, and a tiny girl with her own stubborn determination and Sol's strength.

"You think so?" Helena asked, unable to keep the yearning from her voice.

"I know so." Claire patted her hand. "I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. Like you're the sun and moon and stars all wrapped up in one package."

As the sun dipped toward the horizon, painting the sky in shades of amber and rose, Helena found herself reluctant to leave the comfortable bubble of family warmth. The afternoon with Sol's family had filled a void she hadn't realized existed in her heart.

"We should get ready for tonight," Sol announced, his hand finding the small of Helena's back. The casual touch sent a flicker of heat through her. "The pack is gathering in the ballroom at eight."

Claire's eyes lit up with excitement. "The official Luna announcement! Oh, Helena, you're going to love it."

"Is it very formal?" Helena asked, suddenly apprehensive. She'd never been one for elaborate celebrations, preferring the controlled chaos of her kitchen.

Joshua chuckled. "For these wolves? They'll be howling by midnight."

"But, yes," Claire added, "it starts with some ceremony. Tradition matters to the Sunflare pack."

Sol guided Helena away from the pool with gentle insistence. "Don't worry. I've arranged everything. Deina is waiting in the east wing suite to help you prepare."

As they walked through the castle's stone corridors, Helena felt the weight of what was about to happen. Tonight, she would officially become Luna to hundreds of shifters—creatures she hadn't known existed a week ago.

"You're thinking way too hard," Sol murmured, stopping at an ornate door carved with intricate wolves and flames. "I can practically hear the gears turning."

"Just thinking how fast everything happened." Helena twisted her fingers together. "Less than a week ago, I was just Helena the chef. Now I'm supposed to be some kind of wolf queen?"

Sol tipped her chin up with one finger, his green eyes blazing with intensity. "You're not 'supposed to be' anything. You already are the Luna. Tonight just makes it official to everyone else."

The confidence in his voice steadied her racing pulse. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his lips lingering against her skin.

"Deina will help you get ready. I'll meet you at the grand staircase at quarter to eight."

The suite Sol led her to was breathtaking—a sitting room flowing into a bedroom larger than her entire house, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the forested estate. Deina waited inside with an array of beauty products and, hanging on an ornate wardrobe door, the most stunning gown Helena had ever seen.

"Is that for me?" she breathed, approaching the emerald creation. The silk caught the light like liquid fire.

"Custom made for the Luna," Deina confirmed with a proud smile. "The Prince commissioned it the day after he met you."

Helena's heart skipped. "He was that certain?"

"Alpha wolves always know their mates," Deina said simply as if that explained everything. Maybe it did.

The next hour passed in a flurry of preparations. Helena soaked in a scented bath before Deina styled her red hair in an elegant updo with tendrils framing her face. The emerald gown fit as if created by magic, hugging her curves before flaring gracefully at her hips. The color made her hazel eyes seem brighter and complemented her pale skin perfectly.

When Deina fastened a delicate diamond and emerald necklace around her throat, Helena barely recognized the woman in the mirror—regal, confident, and powerful.

"You look every inch the Luna," Deina whispered, a hint of awe in her voice.

Helena took a deep breath and smoothed her hands over the silk. "I just hope I don't trip down these stairs."

At precisely quarter to eight, Helena approached the grand staircase. The castle buzzed with activity below, voices and laughter echoing through the halls.

Then she saw Sol.

He stood at the base of the stairs, a dark statue of masculine perfection in his black tuxedo. His hair was brushed back, emphasizing his strong jaw and the neat trim of his beard. When he looked up and saw her, his expression transformed from polite waiting to raw hunger.

Helena's heart hammered as she descended one step at a time, careful not to catch her heel in the gown's flowing train. Sol's eyes never left her face, even as others began

to notice and whisper.

“You are stunning,” he said when she reached him, his voice a husky growl that sent shivers racing down her spine. He lifted her hand to his lips, his eyes still locked with hers. “Every man will envy me tonight. Every woman will wish she were you.”

“I doubt that.” Helena’s cheeks flushed. “But thank you for the gown. It’s beautiful.”

“You’re what makes it beautiful.” Sol placed her hand on his arm. “Ready to meet your pack, Luna?”

With a deep breath, Helena nodded. “As I’ll ever be.”

Sol guided Helena through the massive double doors of the royal ballroom, his hand warm and possessive around hers. The vast room opened before them, glittering with crystal chandeliers that cast rainbow prisms across the polished marble floor. Helena let out a small gasp at the sheer number of people—shifters—waiting inside.

Hundreds of faces turned toward them, conversations dying mid-sentence as every eye in the room fixed on her. Helena felt a momentary panic rise in her chest, the instinct to flee almost overwhelming. Sol must have sensed her tension because his grip on her hand tightened slightly, anchoring her in this moment.

“They’re staring,” she whispered, fighting the urge to fidget with her gown.

“Of course, they are.” Sol’s voice was low, meant only for her ears. “They’ve waited centuries for you.”

As they walked forward, the crowd parted like water, creating a path to a raised dais at the front of the room. Helena kept her chin high despite the butterflies in her stomach. A week ago, the most intimidating audience she’d faced had been a

restaurant full of food critics. Now she was walking through a sea of supernatural creatures who expected her to be their queen.

The dais held two ornate chairs that might as well have been thrones, carved with intricate wolves and flames. Sol guided her up the three steps, then turned to face the assembly, his hand never leaving hers.

“My pack,” his voice resonated through the hall without effort, commanding and powerful. Helena felt a shiver run through her at the authority in his tone. “For centuries, I have served as your alpha, guided by the ancient ways of the Sunflare. Today, I stand before you completed.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“The Moon Goddess has blessed us with what many packs never receive—a true Luna.” Sol lifted Helena’s hand to his lips, his eyes blazing with pride. “Helena Divata accepted the mate bond willingly and bears my mark. The fire of our ancestors burns within her.”

The whispers grew louder, excitement building like electricity in the air.

“Would you show them?” Sol asked her privately, his voice dipping into that intimate register that made her heart race.

Helena swallowed hard. She had only shifted once, and that had been in the privacy of the forest clearing. The thought of transforming in front of an audience made her palms sweat.

“I’m not sure—“ she began.

“Trust your wolf,” Sol whispered. “She knows what to do.”

Drawing a deep breath, Helena closed her eyes. She reached for that wild, new part of herself—the creature that had been dormant all her life until Sol's bite awakened it. The transformation came easier this time, her body remembering the way. Heat rippled through her, bones shifting and muscles contracting. The beautiful emerald gown fell away as her form changed, her consciousness expanding into something primal and powerful.

When she opened her eyes, the world had transformed into sharper scents and sounds. She stood on four legs, her coat a brilliant russet red that gleamed in the chandelier light. The pack gasped collectively, then erupted in cheers and howls of approval.

Sol's hand—now a paw as black as midnight—nudged against hers. He had shifted beside her, his massive wolf form radiating strength and protection. She felt his pride wash over her like a warm wave through their strong mate bond.

You're magnificent , his thoughts touched hers.

Without planning it, Helena threw her head back and released a howl that rang clear and true through the ballroom. The pack responded, humans and wolves alike, their voices joining in a primal chorus that seemed to shake the very foundations of the castle.

With a playful nip at Sol's ear, Helena leaped from the dais and darted through the crowd, which parted respectfully for her. She raced through the corridors, the exhilaration of acceptance and belonging flooding through her veins. She was Luna. She was mated. She was home.

Back in their royal chambers, she shifted smoothly into human form, her whole body tingling with the afterglow of transformation and triumph. As she slipped into a robe, she knew with bone-deep certainty that no one like Victor could ever touch her now. The entire pack would defend her to their last breath—not because she was powerful,

but because she was theirs. And they were hers.

Later that evening, Helena slipped through the glass doors to their private balcony, the cool night air kissing her heated skin. The celebration had been magical—hundreds of shifters dancing, feasting, and howling their approval of their new Luna. She had never felt so accepted and so wanted, and yet a tiny part of her still felt adrift.

Leaning against the stone balustrade, Helena gazed at the vast forest bathed in moonlight. The estate sprawled before her, beautiful and wild—much like the new life she had inherited. Her fingers traced the mate mark on her shoulder, still sensitive to the touch.

“What happens to Helena the chef now?” she whispered to the stars.

A memory flickered to life suddenly—Lorelei’s shocking phone call a month ago. How could she have forgotten something so momentous? Her best friend from college calling in a daze, babbling about turning into a white wolf and finding her mate, an alpha named Draken from the Moonshadow pack.

Helena had thought Lorelei was joking at first. Then she had worried her friend had joined some bizarre cult.

“I can’t believe I didn’t remember that,” she murmured, the irony hitting her. Helena had been so overwhelmed by her own supernatural awakening that she had completely forgotten her best friend had experienced the same transformation.

Determined, she summoned Deina, who appeared almost immediately.

“Luna, what may I do for you?”

“I need a phone, please. There’s an important call I need to make.”

When Deina returned with the device, Helena wasted no time dialing a number she knew by heart. After three rings, a familiar voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Lorelei! God, I feel terrible. I just realized?—“

“That we’re both supernatural wolf queens now?” Lorelei laughed, the sound warm and familiar. “I’ve been waiting for your call since I heard the news today from Draken. Something about the Sunflare Luna awakening and her name being Helena Divata. You always did have to do everything I did.”

Helena slid down to sit on the cool stone, relief washing over her. “How are you handling all this? The powers, the pack, being mated to an alpha? Do you miss your old life?”

“It was overwhelming at first,” Lorelei admitted. “But, Helena, I’ve never been happier. Draken is everything to me, and the pack feels like the family I never knew I needed. Plus, I’m still designing buildings—just with a few earth-moving shortcuts now.”

“You’re still working as an architect?” Hope bloomed in Helena’s chest.

“Of course! The Luna isn’t just a pretty ornament on the alpha’s arm. Our powers and perspectives make us valuable leaders. Draken says my strategic mind helps balance his instinctive one.”

Helena twirled her hair. “I miss my kitchen.”



“So build one. A spectacular one. Cook for your pack. Start a restaurant on pack territory. Sol would move mountains for you—I’m sure a commercial kitchen isn’t out of the question.”

The possibilities unfurled before Helena like a map to a future both strange and wonderful. “It’s really possible to have both worlds?”

“It’s not just possible, it’s necessary,” Lorelei said firmly. “We’re stronger because we bring our human experiences to our Luna roles. And Helena? I’m so happy we’re in this together. Wolf queen best friends—who would have thought?”

Warmth spread through Helena’s chest. “We’ll have to get the packs together sometime.”

“Absolutely. Though I warn you, my white wolf could definitely take down your russet one,” Lorelei teased.

They laughed together, and for the first time since her transformation, Helena felt truly grounded.

After saying good-bye, Helena tilted her face to the moon, breathing deeply. The scent of pine and night-blooming flowers filled her lungs, along with something else—the distinctive cedar and smoke scent that was purely Sol.

“Planning to howl at the moon without me?” His deep voice rolled over her like velvet as he stepped onto the balcony.

Helena turned, drinking in the sight of him. He’d loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of tanned skin and the edge of his pack tattoo. Her mate. Her Alpha. Her home.

“I was just talking to Lorelei. Did you know she’s the Luna of the Moonshadow pack?”

Sol’s eyebrows rose. “Draken’s mate? That’s your college friend?” He moved closer, his powerful frame blocking out the moonlight. “Small world.”

“She just helped me see that I don’t have to choose between my old life and this one.” Helena stepped into his space, placing a hand on his chest. “That I can be both your Luna and still be Helena the chef.”

Sol’s green eyes darkened as he wrapped his strong arms around her waist. “I would never ask you to be less than who you are. Everything you are is what makes you mine.”

“I was afraid I’d have to give up cooking.”

“Give up?” Sol chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest and into hers. “Our pack would riot if they lost the chance to taste your food. My kitchen is yours to command, Luna.”

Helena felt tears prick her eyes. “I’m so lucky to have found you.”

“I’m the fortunate one,” Sol murmured, his thumb brushing across her cheek. “I’ve lived centuries waiting for a woman who could match my fire.”

His mouth claimed hers then, demanding and possessive. She melted against him, her body igniting with the familiar heat that only Sol could kindle.

### EPILOGUE

Helena waddled through the gleaming doors of her old restaurant, one hand supporting her enormous belly while the other rested in the protective grip of her mate. Nine months pregnant with what felt like a litter of wolf pups inside her, she had insisted on making this trip despite Sol's initial objections. The scent of seared butter and caramelized onions hit her nose immediately, triggering a wave of nostalgia so powerful, she had to blink back tears.

"Easy there, my Luna," Sol murmured, his fingers tightening around hers as he steadied her. "These hormones of yours are making the temperature rise in here." He nodded toward the small candles on the nearest table, which had flared dangerously high for a moment.

Helena took a steadying breath. "Sorry. It's just... being back here feels like visiting an old friend."

The restaurant looked better than she remembered—Tyanna had redecorated with warm copper accents that complemented the exposed brick walls. The lunch rush was in full swing, tables filled with chattering patrons enjoying Marco's creations.

"Helena!" Tyanna squealed, abandoning her conversation with a customer to rush over. Her eyes widened at Helena's prominent belly. "Look at you! You're absolutely glowing! And huge! Are you sure there's just two in there?"

Helena laughed, rubbing her stomach where one of the babies had just delivered a particularly enthusiastic kick. "Some days I think there might be an entire pack."

“My pups,” Sol said with unmistakable pride, his hand sliding possessively around Helena’s waist. “Strong already.”

Tyanna led them to a reserved table in the corner—the best in the house with a perfect view of both the dining room and the open kitchen where Marco was orchestrating culinary magic.

“How’s Alina working out?” Helena asked, easing herself carefully into the chair Sol held for her.

“Your pack member is a godsend,” Tyanna gushed. “The organizational skills of that woman! Our profits are up fourteen percent since she took over management.”

Helena beamed with pride. Creating connections between her two worlds had become her specialty over the past nine months. “I knew she’d be perfect.”

Sol’s hand remained on her shoulder as he scanned the restaurant with the vigilance of an alpha protecting his pregnant mate. His green eyes missed nothing, cataloging exits and potential threats with military precision. Helena had long stopped finding his overprotectiveness annoying—especially since she’d learned the pack tradition that dictated pregnant Lunas were never to be left unguarded.

Marco emerged from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. “The queen returns!” he announced, bending to kiss Helena’s cheek. “And looking like she swallowed a watermelon—or two!”

“Watch yourself,” Sol growled, though there was no real heat behind it. He’d grown accustomed to Helena’s former colleagues and their familiar ways, even if he still bristled at other men touching her.

“Ignore him,” Helena laughed. “The closer we get to the due date, the more wolfish he’s becoming.”

Marco grinned. “I’ve prepared something special for you—no spice, I promise.” He winked and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Helena settled against the cushioned chair, contentment washing over her. The twins shifted restlessly inside her, responding to her emotions as they always did. Nine months ago, she couldn’t have imagined this life—mated to a wolf prince, carrying his children, and balancing her culinary passion with leading a supernatural pack. Now, she couldn’t imagine any other path.

“Feeling happy today?” Sol asked softly, his thumb tracing circles on her shoulder.

“Completely.” Helena tilted her head back to look at him. “Though I’m looking forward to not waddling everywhere and being able to see my feet again.”

Sol’s smile was predatory and possessive. “You’re beautiful like this. Round with my pups.” His hand slid to her belly, warm and strong. “My Luna, my world.”

A sharp twinge made Helena gasp, different from the usual kicks and stretches. Sol tensed immediately, his nostrils flaring.

“What is it?” His voice dropped to that familiar authoritative tone.

“Nothing,” Helena assured him, though uncertainty flickered through her. “Just practice contractions. Dr. Lyra said they’re normal.”

Sol looked unconvinced but relaxed marginally. “We’re heading back after lunch. No arguments.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Helena teased, though privately she agreed.

Helena savored the last bite of the wild mushroom risotto, letting the earthy flavors linger on her tongue. Marco had outdone himself, putting together a feast that catered

perfectly to her pregnancy cravings while still showcasing his culinary artistry. Though she had left this life behind, she appreciated how her old world and new one had begun to intertwine.

“That was incredible,” she sighed, dabbing her lips with the napkin. “I’ve missed his cooking.”

Sol’s fingers traced lazy patterns on her wrist. “Not as good as yours though.”

Helena smiled, knowing he meant it. She’d begun cooking again three months into her pregnancy, unable to stay away from the kitchen. The pack had been enthusiastically supportive, especially when she’d started incorporating her fire magic into her techniques.

Tyanna emerged from the back, holding a small package. “A little something for the babies,” she said, handing it to Helena. “From all of us.”

Helena unwrapped the gift to find two tiny chef’s hats embroidered with flames and the restaurant’s logo. Her eyes welled with tears.

“Damn these hormones,” she laughed, wiping her eyes. “Thank you. We’ll hang them in the nursery.”

Sol settled the bill despite Tyanna’s protests, leaving a tip that made Helena’s eyebrows rise. For someone centuries old, he’d adapted remarkably well to modern customs—especially generous tipping.

After final hugs and promises to bring the twins for a visit once they arrived, Sol guided Helena outside to where his gleaming fire-red convertible waited. Helena still got a little flutter in her stomach every time she saw him with the car—all that raw masculine power behind the wheel made her wolf purr with appreciation.

“Need help?” Sol asked, his hand steady at her lower back.

Helena shook her head. “I’ve mastered the art of lowering this whale-sized body into a sports car.”

Sol growled playfully as he helped her in any way. “My beautiful Luna.” His eyes darkened with desire as he leaned in to steal a kiss.

The engine roared to life beneath his touch, and Helena felt her body respond reflexively. There was something positively primal about the way his tanned hands gripped the steering wheel, and the way his muscles flexed as he shifted gears. The wind tousled his dark hair as they accelerated onto the highway, and Helena couldn’t help staring at his profile—the strong jaw, the sexy beard, and the intensity in his eyes.

“You’re staring,” he noted without looking at her.

“Can’t I appreciate my ridiculously handsome mate?”

His lips curled up into that crooked smile that never failed to make her heart race. “Appreciate all you want.”

Helena’s phone rang, interrupting the moment. “It’s Mom,” she said, glancing at the screen.

“Helena, sweetheart! How are you feeling?” Her mother’s voice came through the car speakers.

“Like I’m housing a circus in my uterus,” Helena replied, wincing as one of the twins delivered a particularly powerful kick. “They’re active today.”

“Well, considering who their parents are, I’m not surprised. Fire-wielding wolf babies

are bound to be energetic.”

Helena smiled, still amazed at how well her mother had taken the revelation about her supernatural status. After the initial shock—and a few singed curtains during the explanation—her mom had embraced Helena’s new life with open arms.

“Sol taking good care of you?” her mother asked.

“I guard her with my life,” Sol answered before Helena could, his tone deadly serious despite the casual conversation.

Helena rolled her eyes fondly. “See what I deal with? Alpha male overprotectiveness 24/7.”

They were turning onto the long drive that led to the castle when Helena felt something shift inside her. A warm gush of fluid suddenly soaked the car seat beneath her.

“Mom, I need to call you back,” she said abruptly, ending the call as she stared down in shock. “Sol?—“

He had already noticed, his nostrils flaring as he picked up the scent. His entire body tensed, his hands gripping the wheel so tightly his knuckles whitened.

“Your water broke.”

Helena nodded, a mixture of excitement and terror flooding through her. “The seats?—“

“Forget the seats,” Sol growled, accelerating with enough force to push her back against the leather. “My mate and pups come first.”



A contraction rippled through her abdomen—mild but unmistakable. This was really happening.

“They’re coming,” Helena whispered, her hand finding his thigh as their castle came into view. “Our babies are coming.”

Helena gripped the door handle as Sol accelerated up the winding driveway to their castle, the tires kicking up gravel beneath them. Another contraction rolled through her body, sharper this time, and she instinctively pressed her hand against her swollen belly.

“How far apart?” Sol demanded, his voice tight with concern as he maneuvered the sports car with one hand while the other reached for his phone.

“About fifteen minutes, I think.” Helena tried to maintain her composure, but fear and excitement battled within her. After months of preparation, reading every book on wolf shifter births, and countless conversations with Dr. Lyra, the reality of bringing two new lives into the world struck her with full force.

Sol barked commands into his phone, his usual authoritative tone amplified by urgency. “Lyra, it’s time. Meet us at the birthing suite. Now.” He didn’t wait for a response before ending the call and accelerating faster.

Helena watched the castle grow larger through the windshield, its ancient stone walls never looking more like home than in this moment. “I hope everything’s ready,” she murmured, mentally checking off the birthing plan they’d meticulously crafted.

“Everything has been prepared for weeks.” Sol’s hand found hers, warm and steady. “My Luna will have the best care and the best environment, everything she needs to bring our pups safely into this world.”

The possessive edge in his voice made her inner wolf purr despite the discomfort. It

still amazed her how quickly that part of herself had integrated after their mating.

When they reached the entrance, Joshua was already waiting, alerted by Sol's call. Before Helena could even reach for her door handle, Sol had circled the car and scooped her into his arms.

"I can walk," she protested weakly, though the protective warmth of his chest felt wonderfully secure.

"Not while I have strength in my body." His eyes flashed with determination as he carried Helena's pregnant frame through the grand foyer, pack members parting respectfully before them.

Dr. Lyra met them at the birthing suite, a warm, welcoming room they'd transformed from one of the castle's chambers. The walls were painted in soothing earth tones with special flame-resistant materials that Helena had insisted on after a particularly emotional prenatal appointment had resulted in spontaneous fire bursts.

"How are we feeling, Luna?" Dr. Lyra's calm voice immediately soothed Helena's frayed nerves.

"Like I'm about to push two wolf pups out of my body," Helena quipped, wincing as Sol placed her gently on the bed.

Sol didn't leave her side for a moment as she changed into the soft nightgown Deina had laid out. His steady hands supported her through each movement, his eyes never leaving her face. Helena caught glimpses of the fearsome alpha in the tight set of his jaw, and in the way he snapped commands at the servants bringing additional towels and water.

When the next contraction hit, stronger than before, Helena gasped and reached for Sol. His hand enveloped hers instantly.

“Breathe with me,” he commanded, demonstrating the pattern they’d practiced for months. “Like this.”

Helena followed his lead, locking her eyes on his. This man, this powerful shifter who had lived for centuries, looked genuinely terrified despite his efforts to appear in control. The thought that she could rattle an ancient alpha wolf brought a small smile to her lips between breaths.

“Something amusing you?” His eyebrow arched, but his thumb never stopped its soothing circles on her palm.

“Just thinking how the great Alpha of the Sunflare pack looks like he might shift and run for the hills.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “Never. My place is here with you.”

The hours that followed blurred together for Helena—waves of pain punctuated by moments of clarity. Sol remained her anchor, his strength flowing into her through their mated bond. He coached her through each contraction, his voice a steady cadence in her ear.

“You’re doing beautifully,” Dr. Lyra encouraged as she checked Helena’s progress. “The first pup is ready to make an appearance.”

Helena felt an overwhelming urge to push, her body taking control. The primal force of childbirth consumed her, and she channeled her fire magic inward, using it to strengthen herself rather than letting it burst outward. Sol’s face remained inches from hers, his forehead pressed against her temple.

“Push, my love,” he whispered fiercely. “Bring our son into this world.”

With a final, powerful effort, their first child slipped into Dr. Lyra’s waiting hands.

The room filled with the strong, indignant cry of a newborn wolf pup in human form.

“A son,” Dr. Lyra announced, placing the red-haired infant on Helena’s chest. “With his mother’s fire.”

Tears streamed down Helena’s face as she gazed at the tiny perfect being—his father’s green eyes blinking up at her from a face framed by wispy red hair. Sol’s hand trembled as he touched his son’s cheek with reverent gentleness.

Before Helena could fully process the miracle in her arms, her body reminded her that they weren’t finished. Their daughter arrived minutes later, her dark hair and fierce grip making Sol laugh through his own tears.

“She has your strength,” Helena whispered as their daughter clutched her finger with surprising force.

Sol cradled their son against his chest, the powerful alpha reduced to awed silence by seven pounds of newborn. “And he has your fire,” he murmured, gazing at the downy red hair. “Perfect balance.”

Helena looked from her daughter’s face to her son’s, then up at Sol. The fierce love that flooded her bond with him nearly overwhelmed her senses. After a lifetime of searching for belonging and happiness, she had finally found her true home—not in a place, but in the family they had created.

“Our little pack,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Sol leaned down to press his lips to hers, their children nestled safely between them. “Our everything.”