



The Alpha's Shattered Bonds (Feral Hearts Saga #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My fated mate raised me, protected me—and shattered me with three words: “This is wrong.”

Seraphina:

Branded by my parents' sins, I was an outcast—until Tyler gave me refuge... and awakened a forbidden longing. One stolen night showed me what we could be. But by dawn, he'd chosen another, shattering my hopes.

My only act of defiance? Severing our bond and leaving.

Now, I have to return to clear my parents' name, only to find myself bound to Tyler's most trusted warrior.

Yet my heart still aches for Tyler, especially when his jealous gaze burns me with a forbidden thrill.

But this is more than just forbidden desire. Shadows stir, war looms. Every step pulls me closer to the truth... and to him.

Tyler:

Rejecting her was my burden. How could I claim the daughter of traitors while leading this pack?

But the moment she severed our bond and fled, I knew what I had lost.

Now she's back—tied to Logan, a rival unworthy of her. Watching him near her makes my wolf rage. I've vowed to protect her, not to let her choose another.

But war is coming. Seraphina's at the center of it. And no matter how far she runs, she'll always be mine.

A fantasy romance for readers who love age-gap longing, rejected mates, possessive Alphas, and the bittersweet ache of forbidden desire.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

Restlessness churned through me as I lay in the dark, caught between the blurry boundary between sleep and consciousness. Heat radiated through the sheets, clinging to my damp skin despite the night's chill.

In a daze, I saw a figure beside me, effortlessly handsome in his plaid shirt and jeans—Alpha Tyler. His presence was a mix of comfort and exhilaration. We were now in the kitchen, laughter mingling with the hum of an unseen warmth.

“Leave some for me,” I smirked playfully as he dipped his finger into the mixing bowl, tasting the chocolate.

Tyler arched a brow, challenge dancing in his bright blue eyes. “Fight me for it, Seffy.”

In a moment of reckless bravery that I hadn't known I possessed, I captured his finger with my lips, tasting the sweetness of chocolate and the undertone of cedar—Tyler's scent. He tasted even more delicious than I'd imagined. To taste him was something I'd yearned to do for a long time, an act of courage that sent a thrill through my entire being.

But Tyler's face suddenly blurred. My heart raced as an insatiable hunger ignited within me; I wanted to touch him more, to kiss him. I leaned closer, a breath away from surrendering to the moment, intoxicated by the thrill of our connection.

Just as I gathered the courage to act on my desire, I jolted awake, breathless and

disoriented, my heart thundering against my ribcage, amplifying the urgent secret I could no longer ignore.

Today was my nineteenth birthday, and the desires I'd kept hidden seemed intent on surfacing. The yearning I'd fought came crashing down like an avalanche; Tyler was my guardian, my alpha, but his presence ignited feelings I'd never dared act on.

The thick aroma of cedar lingered in the air, heightening my yearning. I blinked against the moonlight streaming through the window, illuminating my sanctuary—my bedroom at Alpha Tyler's house. That's right—I was home from Silver Moon University for the summer holidays.

Sitting up, I wrapped my arms around myself and accidentally brushed my nipple, sending an electric jolt coursing to my core. A gasp slipped from my lips, pleasure blooming within me, fueled by thoughts of Tyler's finger in my mouth.

I had fought these feelings for so long. A thirteen-year age difference loomed between us, making what I felt forbidden. But it wasn't just the age difference; Tyler had raised me since my parents passed. Despite my attraction toward him, I knew he couldn't be attracted to me.

But the desperate urges clawing at me made my hands move of their own accord. They returned to my breasts, kneading the softness and igniting a spark between my legs. I whimpered softly into the silence, yearning for the warmth of Tyler's body like never before.

In a haze, I suddenly understood: I'd come into my heat. This feeling was like nothing I'd ever experienced—an intoxicating blend of arousal and desperate need. I'd had health classes at school here in the Silver Moon Pack. My wolf was demanding her mate. As my fingers grazed the drenched fabric of my underwear, I knew exactly what I craved.

“Tyler...” His name slipped from my lips, laced with urgency, desperation rising as I surrendered to the intensity of this need. My fingers trembled as they sought the soft warmth between my thighs. My breath quickened, each caress igniting a fire that coursed through my veins. I imagined it was Tyler’s hands exploring me—strong, gentle, and possessive.

With every stroke, I envisioned his touch. “Tyler... Tyler...” I whimpered, the sound reverberating in the stillness around me, my voice trembling as I repeated his name like a prayer. It felt both liberating and intoxicating, this rhythmic movement fueled by the heat electrifying my body.

Suddenly, the door handle twisted, and in a heartbeat, he stood there—Alpha Tyler, framed in the soft glow of moonlight.

His tall silhouette and bare chest revealed a physique almost god-like. His short brown hair framed his striking blue eyes, capturing me with a ferocity that sent shivers racing down my spine.

“Seffy?” His voice was deep and rich, tinged with concern. “Are you having a bad dream?”

Protectiveness stamped across his features—my pack guardian. Thoughts flickered back to when I blew out the candle on my birthday cake today, wishing for nothing but Tyler’s love.

My lips parted with longing. The anticipation of tasting him made my mouth water. His proximity usually reined in my wicked thoughts, but tonight, the primal heat emboldened me—I didn’t stop touching myself, each movement now a shared secret between us.

“Seffy?” His voice came again, concern laced with confusion as I didn’t answer him.

I watched him halt, inhaling deeply as the scent of my arousal enveloped him. A low, primal growl rumbled from his throat, causing my core to clench as the sound told me his wolf was responding to me. Despite the moonlight spilling in, I felt no self-consciousness. Tyler's astonished gaze was entranced. I felt like one of the crystals on my altar—absorbing the Moon goddess's light, my body electrified with energy.

A new wave of clarity surged through me. My connection to the Moon goddess, Igaluk, wrapped around me, revealing truths I'd been blind to until now. What had once felt like a simple attraction to Tyler blossomed into something monumental. I realized it wasn't mere infatuation; it was the Moon goddess's blessing, whispering loud and clear that Tyler was my mate.

In a flash of insight, I understood that before, Igaluk hadn't deemed it right for me to know. My heart raced with the knowledge that my bond with Tyler was meant to be revealed at this precise moment. The ache within me screamed for recognition, urging me to embrace what was destined. My wolf panted with excitement, pushing me to invite my mate to claim us as I surrendered to the undeniable truth of our connection.

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But Tyler didn't move closer. In a moment of courage, I shot from the bed, closing the distance between us. Breathless, I said, "Tyler, I love you. I've always loved you." My heart thundered, heady joy swirling within me as I poured out everything I'd kept bottled up.

Astonishment washed over his features as his fingers brushed back my long hair, a tender gesture that sent a delicious warmth right down to my toes. "Seffy," he murmured, his voice rich with emotion. "I care about you... so much. You're like family to me."

The bittersweet words hung between us, but a pang of rejection twisted in my chest.

When I'd been fifteen, Tyler had taken me in. My father had been his beta. But he and my mother had enabled a rival pack to invade our territory. Their suicide, an escape from the retribution they feared, had meant Tyler was my only family.

Anger and frustration ignited inside me, burning brightly as I expressed my yearning. "That's not all you feel though, is it?" I demanded, a tremor in my voice. Could he really be so blind to the heat sizzling in the air between us?

"It's natural for a young wolf to have these instincts," he said. "But I'm not the one for you." His tone wavered slightly, betraying the uncertainty that simmered beneath his resolute facade.

He'd called me a young wolf. Did he think I was completely inexperienced?

"I've had relationships before—" I started.

With a low rumble, Tyler stepped closer, his hand finding my waist. A spark leaped between us, electric pulses shooting through my body. As I looked into his eyes, I caught a flash of possessiveness swirling in their depths, a fierce unexpected emotion that sent my heart racing. Was he jealous?

The realization hit me—his wolf was responding to mine, a primal acknowledgment of the connection we shared. The intensity of his gaze made my pulse quicken, a mix of exhilaration and apprehension coursing through me. I belonged to him, just as he belonged to me. The unspoken recognition of what we truly were to one another hung thick in the air.

"I've had relationships," I began, my heart racing as I met his gaze. "But they were distractions—nothing more. I thought I needed to resist this, but every time I was with someone else, all I could think about was you." I took a breath, feeling the weight of my confession settle between us. "I've done things... but I've never wanted

to go all the way with anyone but you.”

My resolve flared, and I added, “I’m not a teenager anymore, Tyler. I’ve grown up. I know now what I want, and it’s you.”

Yet still , Tyler remained motionless. Where he grasped my hip, longing simmered, making me feel like I’d combust. I needed his hands to explore my body, thrumming with aching need.

With each pulse of heat, my body’s power surged to the surface. Tyler’s nostrils flared, each inhale he took making his body shudder with more tension and... pleasure . My pheromones were enveloping him, a secret language that spoke directly to his primal heart. I thrilled to watch his body respond, his instincts taking control. His eyes, full of restraint before, now burned with desire.

“Are you sure?” His breath came hot against my face, his voice barely audible over the thrumming of my pulse.

But it was a last-ditch attempt to resist the force driving us together. I still sensed his conflict, the struggle between his doubts and the raw urge that consumed him. I surged forward, pulling him down to me, guiding his mouth to mine.

For a brief moment, his lips hesitated against mine, their firm press speaking of the conflict raging within him. I could feel his restraint tightening like a coiled spring, his wolf stirring restlessly beneath the surface, tempted by my proximity. My hands danced across the hard contours of his chest, but it was the small hum in the back of my throat that spoke loudest. The muffled sound seemed to spark something in him; he kissed me back, his resistance melting into the heat enveloping us. His arms encircled me, pulling me close against him. My aching breasts molded against his chest as I pressed myself closer. I moaned into his mouth as his fingers tangled in my hair. A low groan escaped him, sending shivers racing through me.

Every touch ignited sensations I had never known, heat cascading through me. My knees buckled as he picked me up, understanding my needs without a single word. I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling his erection straining against me.

The intensity between us was all-consuming. “I need you,” I begged, voice thick with desire. My tongue clashed with his in unchecked passion, and Tyler’s growl deepened as I tasted his need, too.

As he lowered me onto the bed, his hands found the hem of my nightdress. The sound of tearing fabric sliced through the air, and suddenly, I was laid bare before his ravenous gaze. His pupils were blown wide with desire, a burning azure that mirrored the brilliance of a glacier beneath the sun. His wolf surged just below the surface, primal urges feeding his actions.

The intense awareness of his attraction toward me flared through me, making me feel feral in a way I had never experienced. This was better than any fantasy I had conjured on the lonely nights I’d yearned for him. As he paused, I hooked my fingers beneath my panties, shimmying them down, determined to cast aside anything standing in our way.

Breath quickening, I reached for him, pushing down his pajama bottoms. A gasp escaped my lips as his erection sprang free. I marveled at the sight, anticipation and longing flooding my senses. Something about my reaction spurred Tyler on as he spread my thighs apart, fingers encountering my warmth as he slid a finger between my folds.

“Tyler,” I gasped, sinking back against the sheets as pleasure shuddered through me. As he drove two fingers deep inside, the sensation overwhelmed me; then, suddenly, his tongue danced over my sensitive clitoris. I writhed and moaned, teetering on the precipice of ecstasy—so close to the edge.

He sucked harder, and my whole body shook violently. I arched my back, my fingers tangling in his hair, crying out as pleasure surged through me. Fire coursed along my spine as my hips bucked with each thrust of his tongue. "Tyler, please," I begged, urgency mingling with desperate need, threatening to rob me of my sanity.

"What do you want, Seraphina?" he growled, his breath warm against my core.

Seraphina. He'd never called me by my full name before; I'd always been his endearing "Seffy." My full name resonated deeply within me, intensifying the anticipation coursing through my veins as I met his hungry gaze. "I want you to fuck me, Tyler." My command was charged with my wolf's fervent want.

Approval rumbled in his throat as he positioned himself between my thighs. He knew it was my first time and moved gently, but I was so slick with longing that he slid in easily. I gasped, feeling a fullness I'd never known; tinges of pain ebbed away, completely overwhelmed by the ecstasy of being with Tyler.

His forehead pressed against mine. "Are you okay?" His voice was low, concern tangling with desire. Even as his wolf drove him hard, he allowed me time to adjust to this new sensation. The tender care he extended filled me with warmth.

"Yes, fuck, you feel so good," I breathed, my tone sounding sultry even to my own ears. My walls clenched around him as if wanting to never let him go.

He groaned, sinking deeper, and I lost myself in the rhythm as my body bucked against him, craving more.

Sensing my growing need, he increased the pace, his cock stretching and filling me completely. Then came the electric sensation of his fingers stroking my clit, his mouth seeking out my nipples. The overwhelming pleasure sent me spiraling, wave after wave crashing through me as I called out his name.

Moments later, Tyler spilled into me, igniting yet another wave of ecstasy that consumed everything once more.

As we lay trembling against one another, heartbeats racing in sync, my spirit soared with pure joy. Our love had finally surfaced, like the precious ores and herbs that emerged from the ice during summer here in our secluded pocket of Alaska. Every breath I took, saturated with Tyler's cedar scent and our shared passion, pulsed with wonder.

I thought of the dazzling possibilities in my future, but what I didn't imagine was how much pain awaited me.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

Uneasy anticipation twisted in my gut as I lingered at the edge of the Silver Moon Pack's gathering before Alpha Tyler's mansion. I sought a quiet spot, away from the flickering torches and the pack's notice. Nestled beneath the towering peaks of the Nuvuja Mountains, Nahachoh, our pack's town, glimmered like a jewel in the night.

Familiar figures—males donned in sharply tailored suits and females adorned in flowing dresses—congregated. My heart thudded against my ribcage as if threatening to burst through the delicate fabric of my midnight-blue gown.

Every summer, I reluctantly attended pack events. I'd give anything for this to just be one of the pack's seasonal celebrations, but tonight was different.

In the center of the lawn, a dais had been erected, where the commanding figure of Alpha Tyler stood. It was the figure beside him, Linda, the daughter of Elder Darius, that froze my blood. Her silver gown shimmered as if the stars had been called down to sheath her curves.

Elder Darius's voice now sliced through the night, and my gaze shot to where he stood before the pair. "We are gathered here this night to celebrate the sacred union of Tyler and Linda as mates."

Dread ricocheted through me, raw and visceral, snuffing out the flickering hope I'd managed to cling to over the day. "No," I whispered, shaking my head, my wolf bristling within.

“She’s still here then.” A discontented murmur slithered from nearby.

I froze, the prickling eyes of the pack deepening my feeling of being an outsider with each passing second. Without looking, I recognized Jackie’s voice, a middle-aged packmate. Heat prickled over my cheeks as I thought of the son she’d lost in the invasion my parents had permitted. Shame heated my skin.

“Should’ve stayed at university,” someone else remarked. My gaze fluttered to the back row of packmates, previously focused on the dais, now sneering at me. Beneath their contempt, I felt like a blemish marring the night’s beauty.

My thoughts swirled like a blizzard, leaving me disoriented and lost, each taunt cutting deeper into my heart. The murmurs of the Silver Moons around me added to the jagged pain ricocheting through me as I contemplated that Tyler was really doing this—he was committing himself to Linda. The air I inhaled felt frigid as my breathing shallowed. The place I’d always called home now felt hostile.

Uninvited memories jolted to life, tugging cruelly at my heart. My nineteenth birthday, only three weeks ago, came crashing back. I remembered my intoxicating heat cycle and the dizzying certainty that Tyler was my fated mate. The kiss I had initiated had drawn our bodies together, but instead of bringing us closer, making love had driven a wedge between us.

Afterward, Tyler’s regret had extinguished the passion we’d shared. Guilt had etched his features as he’d said, “Seffy, I can’t be with you. You’re the child of traitors. As alpha, I cannot honor this bond.”

Each word had cut deep, echoing the cruel whispers that had haunted me in the pack. Humiliation constricted my chest, a lump lodging in my throat. At the time, frustration and heartbreak had waged war. Despite the deep connection Tyler and I shared, my parents’ crime overshadowed it. Over the last few weeks, I’d managed to

convince myself that, in time, Tyler would come around. Yet, if anything, he'd been doing his utmost to distance himself from me these last few weeks. My chest clenched as I remembered how he'd asked me to call him Anatch —Uncle—since we'd been intimate. The word felt jarring, a deliberate attempt to redefine our bond as if a single title could erase the depth of what we had shared.

Then, this morning, in a daze, I'd listened to Tyler recounting his intention to stand beside Linda tonight in this ceremony. Now, as the ceremony continued, a fog of doom descended over my mind, suffocating the last wisp of hope. I wondered how long he and Linda had been planning this ceremony. The thought that he'd withheld this information pierced my heart like ice.

A thunderous cacophony of blessings erupted around me, drowning out my turmoil. In a time-honored tradition, the pack shouted out their blessings before the couple made their vows.

“May Igaluk smile on you!” packmates shouted, voices rising like a symphony. Others shouted blessings in the ancient language of the goddess, their merry tones feeling like dark magic as they cut into my heart like curses. “Lianait ! Akuluk !”

Jolted from my daze, I faltered forward. My mate bond strained in protest, and my wolf howled in desperation. Tyler was really taking another mate, disregarding our connection. Despite my hurt, I couldn't stand silent.

Woken by my packmates, a cry escaped my lips. “Tyler!” Raw and imploring, my heart thumped in my chest, begging him to look at me. But he just stood there, oblivious, eyes locked onto Linda. Her radiant smile seemed to hold him fast, as if he were already bound to her.

I opened my mouth to shout again, but nothing emerged. My throat tightened, and tears threatened. The only thing my cry succeeded in drawing was further hostility

from the pack.

Logan, a wolf about my age—one of the young wolves who had bullied me most ruthlessly as a teenager—noticed me. His wide features sharpened as he recognized me. “You’ve got some nerve showing up,” he snarled. “You should’ve been banished.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks as other Silver Moons glowered at me, their judgment seeping into me like venom. The familiar pinpricks of disgrace flushed over my hot skin. Once again, I was reminded of my parents’ betrayal, destined to plague me.

“Child of traitors,” Tyler’s words echoed, a haunting reminder of the shadows that tainted me, reinforcing the reason Tyler had refused me as his mate. As I stood there, pain squeezing my heart, the realization cut deep: Tyler didn’t feel our mate bond as I did. If he did, he wouldn’t be able to endure this pain and take another woman as his mate.

Panic threatened to claw me apart. I had withstood years of longing. One memory surged back to me with blinding clarity, and I closed my eyes.

Seventeen years old, I sat cross-legged on a camping mat, the chill of the evening air nipping at my cheeks. It felt like a mere whisper compared to the torment I’d endured back in Nahachoh. The laughter of Logan and his friends echoed in my mind, a cruel bell tolling my isolation. “I can’t wait to escape to Silver Moon University,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else.

Beside me, Tyler leaned closer, his eyes sparkling with warmth and sincerity. “They’re just jealous of you.”

I tried to huff out a laugh, but it came out more like a breath of frustration. “Hardly.” My shoulders slumped as I imagined the moment I could leave this place behind—the

packmates who looked at me and only saw the daughter of traitors.

Tyler picked up a stick, poking at the fire, sending sparks twirling up into the night sky like fireflies. “They are, Seffy. You’re brave and strong. I think they’re intimidated by you.”

His words sent a flutter through my chest, a mix of embarrassment and surprise. I turned my gaze to the ground, attempting to mask my reaction with a skeptical expression.

“You are, Seffy. You’re as strong as the Great Wolf up there,” he said, pointing to the constellation he’d mapped out for me time and again. “As fierce as the Hunter,” he continued, tracing another starry figure with his finger. “And you have a heart as big and loyal as the twins who are always together,” he added thoughtfully, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, yet his blue eyes remained serious and sincere.

Caught off guard, I felt my breath hitch in my throat. The weight of his gaze pierced through my defenses as if he could see straight into my very soul, into all my insecurities that had been festering since my parents’ betrayal. In that moment, I realized I had begun to wear that burden heavily, believing there was something disloyal within me due to the pack’s suspicion.

Yet, as he spoke, something inside me began to ease. I had spent so long insisting I didn’t care about the cruel remarks from Logan and his trolls, but Tyler’s voice—warm and inviting like the campfire beside us—sparked a flicker of light along my skin. It unraveled the weight of my grief, allowing feelings of isolation to dissolve in the cool night air.

For several moments, we sat in companionable silence. The only sound was the crackling of the fire and the gentle whispers of the wind through the trees.

Underneath that vast expanse of night, beneath a blanket of stars shimmering like diamonds, I felt a warmth blossoming in my chest—a feeling of something deeper than friendship.

In that sacred space, away from the taunts of the pack, my heart expanded with a sense of belonging I had never felt before. Leaning my head against Tyler's shoulder, I closed my eyes, letting the world fade away.

The deep truth of our connection had been quietly burgeoning within me for some time, forming a stark contrast against the fleeting romances I had entertained at Silver Moon University. I remembered the tender touches and sweet words from those boyfriends and how, each time they leaned in, I closed my eyes, desperately searching for the spark of magic I felt so effortlessly with Tyler. Yet, despite their warmth, I always came up empty—no caress, no kiss could ever ignite the fire that burned so brightly, not just in this moment but in a hundred other tiny, perfect moments woven through our time together.

But now, faced with the reality of his impending vows to Linda, I opened my eyes, realizing that my feelings for Tyler had long been there. Even with our mate bond igniting three weeks ago, it was painfully clear he didn't feel what I did. Beyond the reckless passion we'd shared, he hadn't acknowledged the bond I had felt beating in my chest. As he prepared to say his vows to another, the crushing truth engulfed me. He likely never would.

Logan's friend Valerie snickered beside him. "She'll be banished soon. Linda will put things right. She won't have a traitor around when pups come."

Her cruel comment fueled thoughts of the future. With the right herbs and spells, one could glimpse what was to come. But Valerie's words, paired with the sight of Tyler and Linda standing together, conjured the future with painful clarity. It was true. Tyler's choice to join with another foretold that soon enough, he'd have a real family

of his own, severing any threads that connected us. I could already picture him in their shared house, laughter filling it as they sat close, their intimate moments a stark reminder of what I would never have. Over the last four years, my and Tyler's lives had become so intertwined that I felt torn apart, and the thought of seeing them together in a way I longed for was unbearable. Hopelessness resonated within me. There would be no place for me here. Aside from Tyler, no one in the pack truly accepted me, and now, even he no longer wanted me.

Desperation seeped into my bones as I turned away from the pack. I hugged my arms around myself and retreated further from the celebration of love and unity. With my breaking heart, I ventured down the mountain. The familiar woods thickly framed the path with the scent of pine and moss.

As I trudged through the lonely forest, I couldn't shake the imagination of Tyler kissing Linda, her face aglow with happiness. My heart ached, and I looked up at Igaluk's full face, imagining her light shining down on the couple. The pain was almost too much to bear. Gazing up at the Moon goddess, a sense of grim determination settled over me. It was fitting that she'd witness the destruction I was about to unleash. After all, she'd been the one who'd given me this bond in the first place.

I trekked deeper into the woods through the whispering evergreens. The thick crisp snow met my open shoes and soon soaked my long dress. But as a shifter, I didn't feel the cold much. Instead, the cold grounded me against the turmoil threatening to pull me under. I listened to the satisfying crunch. For a moment, the feeling of being exposed and vulnerable eased, and the quiet of the forest enveloped me tightly. Its cold was a balm for the hot shame lingering on my cheeks.

But with each step, the weight of my decision pressed upon me. I reached a clearing and kneeled in the snow-kissed earth. The cold grounded me as I rummaged through my clutch bag. Thankfully, I made it a habit to carry crystals wherever I went and had

the reserves of extra energy I'd need for this ritual. I extracted the crystals—each stone vibrating with the magic of the Silver Moon lands around us. As I placed the crystals around me in a circle, I felt their potency amplified by Igaluk's waxing moon above. Her moonbeams caressed their depths, and each glimmered with possibility and power.

Closing my eyes, I called to mind the sacred markings of the Moon goddess I'd need. I picked up my ulu —my ceremonial knife. I used it to inscribe each rune into the fresh snow, tracing the ancient marks that my mother had taught me.

The rune for amaruq —the wolf—came first, its essence igniting a growl from my wolf within me. Next was ilak —mate. I felt my wolf's ears draw back, a whine escaping from her as if she suspected my intent, but I gritted my teeth, forcing myself on. I marked the rune for qiviut —thread. I swiftly followed it with the sharp, final one of pilak —cutting through. Each stroke reverberated with purpose, a manifestation of my intentions in the circle I now stood in the center of.

The runes began to glow softly in the moonlight, fueled by the power in the crystals. Closing my eyes, I envisioned the invisible thread that tied me to Tyler, its ever-present warmth a reminder of the bond we forged. I trembled, nuzzling into the fleece-lined shrug I wore, but the shivers racking my body had nothing to do with the frigid air or wet ground beneath me.

The Moon goddess's ancient language filled my mind like a melody.

“Amaruq pilak qiviut ilak,” I chanted, allowing the resonance of my words to cascade through me. A harsher chill swept through the air and goosebumps prickled over my skin as I wondered whether it was a warning or a reassurance from the goddess.

“Amaruq pilak qiviut ilak,” I chanted harder, forging ahead.

A lump rose in my throat, my wolf going berserk, snarling and leaping within me, begging to be let out as if I were in danger. Yet, I ignored her, breathing strength and intention into my words as the wind tore at me, lifting the snow into swirling eddies.

Determination solidified within me. I had thought Tyler saw me for who I truly was beyond the sins of my parents. It was painfully clear he didn't. The hollowness of that realization devastated me, tearing apart the fragile hope I had clung to. I would no longer remain tethered to someone who couldn't see the person I had fought so hard to become. I envisioned a future where Tyler faded into the depths of my past, reduced to a mere echo of what could have been.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I chanted fervently. A tremor rippled through the earth. A flash of color cleaved through the darkness, even behind my tightly closed eyes. I felt the bond break with an almighty crack—like a glacier falling apart and plunging into the ocean.

Pain burned through my chest as if fire and ice raged within me, and I cried out, dropping to the ground and clutching my heart. My wolf writhed in agony, curled up and scared within the corners of my mind. Yet, bit by bit, I breathed through the torment, a flicker of relief moving through me as I felt the new space in my chest.

Tentatively, I reached out for the mate bond. It was gone.

I staggered to my feet, my heart racing with relief.

The Moon cast her glow on the circle of runes and crystals, and I saw they were now dull and lifeless, all the power drained from them. I instinctively knew that tools used to sever such a bond would never again be able to channel magic.

Casting off my shoes and clothes, I felt a surge of determination. I was eager to leave this place behind. It was a world where nobody wanted me and where I no longer

belonged. I shifted, the transformation igniting a rush of freedom through me. My wolf's muscles rippled with relief as I let her plunge down the cold mountainside, her silvery fur flashing beneath the Moon as she ran. My anguish evaporated into the night as I dashed into the woods, my heart a wild thing racing toward a new beginning. I was unsure where I would go, but I was filled with resolve. It was time to leave the past behind.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

The pack gathered beneath the vast, starry expanse of night. The shimmering constellations seemed to wink and nod in approval. This was a moment I had long envisioned—the forging of a future with a luna at my side.

Linda looked enchanting in her flowing gown, intricately woven with threads of giak, one of the Silver Moon Pack's most precious ores. Ancient folktales whispered that these crystals had belonged to Igaluk's handmaidens, cast off as they'd visited our earthly realm. Linda's honey-blond hair cascaded down her back in perfect curls, framing her heart-shaped face, looking as if she could be part of that celestial court. She smiled at me with pure admiration, yet something lodged like a stone in my stomach.

I brushed aside the feeling, casting my attention out to the pack. The whole pack was gathered except for the two wolves on guard duty. After the Black Moon Pack's invasion four years ago, only twenty hardened warriors remained. We were always on the alert, guarding our home against potential threats. Linda and I had only announced our mate ceremony this morning, a strategic choice to prevent external packs from taking advantage of our lowered guard.

I took in the familiar faces of our warriors and other packmates. I scanned the crowd, searching faces but only truly seeing one—Seffy, standing at the edge in her midnight blue dress shimmering like the night sky. My heart skipped. My mind whispered that I needed to focus on the ceremony. But I knew that she was hurt by what I was about to do, and I was conflicted with how I'd always strove to protect her.

Ever since Seffy's nineteenth birthday three weeks ago, my heart had been behaving treacherously. More than anything, I wished I could take that night back. Until then, I had felt a deep sense of familial love for her—an affection that came from knowing her like the back of my hand. But that birthday awakened a connection that thrummed like a live wire, igniting a passion I had never felt before and which had resulted in the best night of sex I'd ever had.

Remorse and shame prickled over me. That never should have happened. I thought of the moment reason had returned to me and how Seffy had thought our intimacy meant that we were meant to be together. But I'd been unable to honor that bond, and I'd had to tell Seffy we could never be. Her parents' betrayal meant that she could never hold our pack's trust. I'd told Seffy this morning that I would always hold her as my family, and I promised her she would always have a place in my home. In time, Seffy would understand the path I had chosen. Regardless of the wounding truth, I knew the affection we shared was unbreakable, no matter what.

My eyes found Linda across from me, her poised figure the embodiment of all I needed my mate to be. She was someone the pack respected and followed.

I fortified the walls around my heart, telling myself that that night should never have happened. It was just a chemical reaction fueled by pheromones and shared memories.

Our packmates erupted into cheers, showering us with Igaluk's blessings. Their joyous shouts struck a chord with me, a reminder of the joy our pack had lost and needed to reclaim. I shared a look with Linda again, seeing the woman across from me as a bridge to a stronger future. I had a duty to strengthen our pack's leadership. Too many young and brilliant Silver Moons had fallen during the invasion, their names forever etched on my heart. They had given their lives defending our home, and now it was my duty to strengthen our pack.

Linda squeezed my arm, her eyes sparkling with understanding. As a skilled healer and warrior and the daughter of Elder Darius, she was an excellent choice for my luna. She was a respected member of our pack, and her presence by my side would bring stability and balance to our community.

In truth, I should have forged this bond years ago. The pack needed strong leadership in the aftermath of the invasion. But I'd held back, believing Seffy needed stability after her parents' deaths. Little Seffy was a lively child, filled with spirit. Liam, my beta and best friend, was her father. Betrayed by him, I'd believed I'd never trust anyone again.

Yet, the bright girl I had taken under my wing had needed me more than ever. Some packmates had thought me mad for taking her in, given her parents' betrayal. But as alpha of my pack, I couldn't turn my back on an innocent packmate. She'd still been a teenager back then and needed a guardian. Without hesitation, I'd been her protector. Undoubtedly, Seffy had needed my support, but I'd needed hers, too. In many ways, we had healed each other through the pain of betrayal and loss.

A familiar ache coursed through me at the thought of the tragedy she'd endured. Seffy had faced more at such a young age than anyone should. I had shielded her as best I could from the judgment of our pack, but I knew their resentful whispers had weighed down her adolescence. I replayed the nights when I sat with her, whispering words of comfort, reminding her that love existed even amidst the darkest of times—assuring her that her parents had loved her despite their destructive choices.

Through the shadows, I had watched her bloom from a kind-hearted child into an even more remarkable woman. A mix of pride and protectiveness surged within me. Seffy was now a university student, a young adult, making my decision to proceed with Linda feel right. It was time for me to cement our leadership and ensure the future of our pack.

“Tyler?” Elder Darius’s voice jolted me from the haze of reflection.

“What?” I started, meeting the elder’s frown.

A gentle ripple of laughter stirred from nearby packmates, cutting the tension that hung in the night air.

“Your vows, Alpha Tyler. You must repeat them if you are to join with my daughter.” Darius’s authoritative words jolted me back into the present, making my heart race and pulse quicken, adrenaline spiking through my veins.

I nodded, shifting my gaze to Linda, whose smile wobbled, a quizzical look knitting her brow.

“Of course,” I said, my voice lower than I intended, laced with sudden gravity. I forced a reassuring smile for Linda and then focused on the elder’s dark brown eyes. Dressed in a black tunic and trousers, he’d have been lost to the night if it weren’t for the giak thread glimmering in intricate patterns—runes bearing the blessings of the Moon goddess.

“I, Alpha Tyler Tremblay, take you, Linda Martin.”

“I, Alpha Tyler Tremblay, take you, Linda Martin.” The words left my mouth steadily, and I looked out over the pack, telling myself that I wanted to look at the whole pack as I made this commitment, even as my gaze stole to the rear of the pack.

Familiar faces gazed up at me. Valerie and Logan were the farthest packmates. My heart thumped. Where was Seffy? Protectiveness stole through me. Logan had always picked on Seffy as a young teen. I frowned, wondering if he’d said something that had caused her to move.

“I vow to honor and protect you,” Darius urged.

I repeated the words, my gaze reluctantly returning to Linda, where it was meant to be, even as the guardian in me worried about Seraphina. I assured myself that I’d find her after the ceremony and check that she was okay.

“I promise to—” Darius began.

But pain flared in my chest. My wolf roared within. I struggled to focus on the solid wood beneath my feet. I gasped, a deep flare of pain echoing through me. My breath caught in my lungs, the bite there feeling like winter’s deepest chill, pulling me down to my knees.

As I hit the dais hard, my knees smarted, but the freezing pain in my chest was far more excruciating. Agony shot through me: Was this dark magic? Had the Black Moon Pack chosen this very night to invade despite all our precautions? Then, instinct struck. The coldness emanated through the mate bond in my chest, just below my heart.

In my attempts to shield myself from the bond, I’d failed to recognize that something was wrong with it. Now, its powerful thrum was dissipating like smoke in the wind. No... it had gone . Panic fired through me. The tether that had blossomed into existence three weeks ago had vanished completely.

“Tyler?” Elder Darius’s voice pierced through the turmoil, his concern tightening the knot in my gut. Linda’s hands gripped my arms, but all I could see was the gathering assembly. Their faces were twisted in confusion as the laughter and joy evaporated, leaving only a heavy silence.

Darkness surged upon me. The ceremony that was supposed to forge our future crumbled beneath the knowing silence that enveloped my heart. Again and again, I

reached out for the bond that had ignited so recently, but like a mine cleared of its ores, it was barren.

My wolf roared within, panicked at the sense of losing our connection with our mate. What had happened to our bond? Suddenly, the knowledge that Seffy and I were destined for each other flooded through me. Ironically, without the mate bond tethering my heart, I had never been more keenly aware of it. Its absence was everything. I'd never expected to find myself bound to Seffy as a fated mate. And yet, there it was—an undeniable connection that transcended a guardian's duty, a bond that nestled deep within my very soul. She wasn't just under my care. She was an integral part of me.

My mind spiraled back to Seraphina. Memories of us together whirled through my thoughts like leaves caught in a restless wind. I considered the countless days spent side by side, the laughter, the tears, the quiet understanding we shared. But among all those moments, one memory shimmered into focus—the one-year anniversary of her parents' death.

The sun hung low on the horizon as Seffy and I ascended Pivak Pass on the mountain, the air thick with unspoken words and our shared heartache enveloping us like the heavy blanket of snow beneath our feet.

A year had passed since Liam and Cordelia, Seffy's parents, had committed suicide. Now, Seffy kneeled in the snow, gently laying down bright yellow pomenta flowers. "They were her favorite," she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "Whenever Dad brought her flowers, it was always pomenta—something to brighten her day."

The grief in her voice struck deep, magnifying the ache in my chest until I felt as weighty as the mountain itself.

But then, something flickered in her eyes, and she took a steadying breath. "You

know, Dad always said Pivak Point was where he made you eat dust.” Her tone carried a rush of fondness, though I could see the way her bottom lip trembled.

A chuckle bubbled up inside me, surprising me with its suddenness. “Your dad was a good runner,” I replied, envisioning Liam’s strong face, his mouth curving into a grin just before he’d tease me mercilessly, as only my best friend and beta could. However, that smile faded almost instantly, crushed by the cold shadow of betrayal that still lingered, even one year later.

Seffy stood up, her gaze steady but her hands quivering against her thighs. “I... I can’t help... loving them, even after... what they did,” she admitted, her voice stronger than I knew she felt. The questioning look in her eyes spoke volumes, the pain lurking just beneath the surface.

Seffy had voiced exactly what I was struggling with. Despite the betrayal of my best friend and his wife, a part of me would always love them. As I recalled the warmth of our friendship, small moments poured over me like a warm tide, easing the weight of sorrow but leaving echoes of love. I realized I hadn’t truly allowed myself to remember the good times either.

I turned to her, feeling a swell of gratitude amidst our grief. “They’re part of you,” I said, my voice thickening. “You’ll always love them. We’ll always love them.”

Seffy’s eyes glistened as she came to me, and I wrapped an arm around her. For a quiet moment, we stood together, looking down at the bright pomenta flowers against the snow.

“Now we need to do something special for Dad,” she said, her tone lightening. “It’s time to make you eat my dust.”

With that, Seffy flung off her coat. A smile broke free on my lips, a laugh escaping

me as I turned my back to her, following suit, shedding my own coat and shirt, ready to shift. My chest felt too full, swelling with everything I felt for my friends and for their amazing daughter, who was not just their child but my family now, too.

As I shifted into my wolf, chasing after Seffy's lithe, silvery wolf, who would have given her father a run for his money, love washed over me.

As I took a deep breath, wrestling with new emotions, I realized that my feelings for Seffy had grown into something soul-deep. It wasn't a matter of right or wrong. Just as Seffy loved her parents despite their betrayal, my love for her existed in its own right. It wasn't judged by circumstances. It simply was. I loved her utterly and completely, just as she was—an indelible part of my life and heart.

I could hear the world around me fading back into my awareness—a distant hum. The anticipation hung thick in the air as the pack waited, faces expectant and concerned.

“Tyler?” Linda called to me, finally succeeding at wrenching me back into the present. Turmoil roiled beneath my skin, and Linda's presence beside me felt like an accusation, making bile rise in my throat. The knot in my gut tightened. What was meant to be a ceremony to fortify our pack now seemed utterly farcical. The terrible ache gnawing at my heart whispered that having a partner who I didn't love beside me would be utterly hollow.

Determination surged within me, igniting a fire. Suddenly, I swept forward, speaking more with my heart than my head, the words erupting with force. “The ceremony is off!”

The declaration rang out, clear and resolute, the strength of my conviction silencing the crowd into disbelief. Every eye settled on me, confusion and shock flickering across their faces.

“Go home,” I ordered, every word laden with the finality of the rupture ringing through my chest. Guilt bit at me as the murmurs swelled into a cacophony of confusion, but I ignored it all, the clarity that surged within fueling me forward.

I had been a fool to think I could continue on this path. Bound by duty, I had all but imprisoned myself, neglecting the undeniable truth brewing in my heart. The realization of what I truly desired blazed within me. I needed to find Seraphina. She was my fated mate, like a wildflower blooming amid the snow—her thrumming magic and powerful wolf called to me like no other ever could.

“Tyler. What’s going on?” Linda implored sharp and crystalline. Disbelief twisted her features, but I couldn’t linger any longer. I’d neglected Seraphina too long.

“I’m sorry,” I said, the weight of my conviction unwavering as determination filled me. Swiftly, I dashed toward the edge of the gathering, pushing through the throng of packmates. Confusion rippled through the pack, their inquiries and surprised exclamations fading behind me as I tore past.

“Tyler!” Linda’s voice rose again, a desperate plea, but I wouldn’t stop. Nothing could deter me from finding Seraphina and reclaiming what was rightfully mine. She needed to know, needed to feel that I recognized the power of our bond—that it wasn’t too late for us. It couldn’t be.

My focus sharpened as I allowed my wolf to break free, shedding my expensive suit and shoes like debris. My beast ran as if his life depended on it, his giant strides eating up the path as we descended the mountain. With each pounding step, images of Seraphina filled my mind—her laughter ringing like music, her radiant smile lighting up the darkest moments of the past. Just as we’d baked together, measuring our ingredients, laughter and flour spilling forth, all of those shared moments had been an alchemy of our sorrow transforming into something sweeter: love.

The ache in my chest burned intensely. I finally understood. I had shielded myself from her, convinced that our relationship had to stay the same as it had always been. Yet, my denial might have caused me to lose her forever.

The branches of evergreens to my right swayed gently in the breeze, the faint scent of honey filling my nose: Seraphina .

Hunger and need coursed through my veins as I followed the scent. My heart hammered with relief as I took in footprints, too. But panic clawed at me as, instead of getting stronger, her scent grew weaker.

My wolf's howl pierced the night, echoing in the stillness as desperation clawed at my throat. I needed to tell her that I'd made a mistake. I had to make her understand the depth of my feelings. In that moment, the weight of my indecision mocked me as I skidded out into a clearing.

Shock washed over me as my wolfish eyes took in a chilling sight: a magic circle. Crystals lay scattered amidst runes. A growl rumbled in my throat, my fur bristling as my wolf recognized the sense of loss ringing through the crystals. They had been leached of their magic and seemed to rest in the snow like a picked-over carcass—a hollowness that mirrored the barrenness in my chest. Then I noticed Seraphina's clothes, shoes, and purse abandoned beside the circle.

In a flash of insight, the realization crashed over me that Seraphina had done away with our mate bond. She was as remarkable a witch as her mother, Cordelia, and I knew she possessed the magic required to bring our connection to an end, especially after witnessing me on the cusp of committing to another woman. Agony shot through me, my wolf's howl piercing the air with rage and grief. She'd rejected me.

But even with the knowledge that Seraphina had severed our bond, we charged downward, following the faint tracks left by our mate. Every fiber of our being pulsed

with an unyielding resolve—we would find her.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

Howls pierced the stillness, shattering the fragile peace of our land.

“Mom?” I called, dread coiling in my throat.

My mother stood in the open front door, her face illuminated by the faint glow of magic.

“Stay back, Seraphina!” she commanded. Urgency pierced her voice.

My father’s silhouette loomed against the dark sky, barking orders. “Stay with your mother!”

Panic surged within me as the Black Moon wolves emerged, sleek and ominous. They had breached our defenses. The first wolf lunged, fangs glinting menacingly in the dim light. My mother’s magic snapped toward it, but another wolf barreled toward her.

“Watch out!” I screamed, fear cracking my voice. I joined her in the doorway, power igniting in my hands.

“Feel the energy, Seffy! Channel it!” she directed. I unleashed my magic, sending the black wolf sprawling to the ground.

A flicker of pride crossed my mother’s face, but more wolves surrounded us, their feral howls mixing with screams echoing through the night. My heart raced as

another wolf lunged at me. I fought back, but terror gripped me when I realized my mother was gone—my father, too.

“Mom! Dad!” I cried, but my voice was lost in chaos. My magic flickered, weak from overuse.

Then, warmth gripped my hand. Tyler stood by my side, embodying calm and strength. “It’s okay, Seffy,” he reassured me, his bright blue eyes firm. “I won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

I held his hand tightly. Moments later, he transformed into his wolf form, a powerful presence that renewed my resolve. Together, we faced the Black Moon wolves as they came at us.

But suddenly, the air grew thick with silence. The invaders had retreated, but victory felt empty. The ground was stained with blood. The mournful cries of packmates filled the air. I searched for my parents, dread tightening around me.

“Cordelia’s wards failed,” a voice accused. “Liam was on duty—why didn’t he sound the alarm?” another whispered.

I dashed toward our home, desperation driving me, but Tyler was there first, blocking my path. “I’m sorry, Seffy. They saw no other way out.”

Shock seized my heart as I pushed past him, catching sight of my parents’ lifeless bodies. The cruel reality of their deaths crashed over me.

Tears flooded my eyes, pooling in the emptiness within me. The pack surrounded me, their accusations sharp and piercing. “You’re the daughter of traitors!” they yelled, fear and shame drowning me.

Then, a woman emerged from the crowd, her golden hair flowing, her dress like starlight—it was Linda. I felt Tyler let go of my hand, his expression suddenly cold and unyielding beside Linda. The pack surged forward, and I was pushed back—falling into darkness.

“Tyler!” I screamed, the sound echoing around me as I plummeted into the abyss.

Just as panic clawed at my chest, I jerked upright, the familiar contours of my bed suddenly cradling me. Gasping for breath, remnants of horror clung to me like cobwebs. My heart hammered against my ribcage, mirroring the terror that haunted me. Familiar stone walls enveloped me, yet I had to shake the haunting memory of the abyss from the nightmare away.

I was in the Shadow Moon Castle, I reassured myself. The soft fabric of the sheets clung to my clammy skin, but I focused on the scent of stone and lavender filling the air—a reminder of safety that contrasted sharply with the nightmarish vision I had just escaped. Blinking against the light filtering through the heavy velvet curtains, I realized it must almost be dawn.

It had been two years since I’d left the Silver Moon Pack. In the time I’d spent away, I had immersed myself in learning the intricacies of magic from my witch friend, Lyvia, whose mastery was unparalleled, and delving into the healing properties of herbs at Selina’s enchanting boutique. Although I hadn’t returned to Silver Moon University to continue my studies, these two years felt like an internship of sorts, a rigorous training ground alongside my two talented friends. Yet still, the past seemed intent on creeping back in. The tension in the air was palpable, as if the castle walls were holding their breath. Though the Shadow Moon fortress had offered me sanctuary, tonight it felt stifling, memories clinging like fog.

I wrapped my arms around myself, wondering why Tyler’s shadow was being dredged up. I had thought I was moving on, yet his presence burned brightly in my

heart. I edged back against my pillows, trying to ignore the emptiness that ached where his hand had held mine.

A soft knock interrupted my thoughts.

“Seraphina, are you awake?” The voice belonged to Selina, my friend and the luna of the Shadow Moon Pack. Beautiful, with long golden hair and vibrant green eyes, she moved with a grace that belied her fierce strength.

She had been my steadfast friend these last two years, a lifeline when I’d had nowhere to turn after leaving the Silver Moon Pack. I couldn’t return to Silver Moon University, not while the thought of Tyler possibly searching for me clawed at my mind. Part of me wondered if he would seek me out or if he would feel relieved that I had gone, freeing him to live with his luna. Initially, Selina and I had both stayed with Lyvia, a witch I knew from university. After Selina returned to the Shadow Moon Pack, she had invited me to join her.

“I’m awake,” I said, my voice hoarse from the restless night. Embarrassment squirmed through me. I wondered if I’d woken her with my nightmare, recalling how I’d screamed Tyler’s name. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

Guilt pressed heavily on my shoulders, especially since Selina had a young daughter, Mia. I feared I’d be overstaying my welcome if I didn’t get these nightmares under control soon.

Selina stepped into the room, padding over to my bedside. I noticed that she was already dressed, wearing the dark leathers favored by the Shadow Moon Pack for scouting. Curiosity prickled through me. “Why are you dressed for scouting?”

Instead of answering, she asked with concern, “Did you have another nightmare?”

I nodded. This was the third night in a row that these nightmares had plagued me. In our two years of friendship, I had confided my troubled history to her. She knew the heavy baggage I carried.

“I dreamed of Tyler again,” I confessed.

“Did you dream of your parents again, too?” Selina asked softly.

I nodded, the ache tightening in my chest. “It was the same dream—the invasion. Their suicide. Then, Tyler letting me fall.”

“I think these dreams are a sign, Seraphina,” she said with a certainty that made my heart quicken.

Selina was a shifter and skilled in herbalism. Yet, this readiness to speak of signs felt unusual. Portents were mine and Lyvia’s sphere.

“Has Lyvia been in touch?” I asked, wondering if our friend might have seen something that shed light on the reason for my nightmares. She was a skilled witch and well-versed in the art of foresight. Currently, she was away, staying with friends in the Blood Moon and Moonlight Pack.

Selina shook her head. “No, but Alexis and I have uncovered information from another source.” A sense of urgency rang through her voice.

Once again, I took in her scouting clothes, and my heart drummed with anticipation.

Selina’s eyes met mine, heavy with the weight of our shared past. The Shadow Moons had also suffered an invasion from the Black Moon Pack. Theirs had happened only a few months ago, a battle I’d fought alongside my friend and her mate’s pack. I’d thought, perhaps, it was the recent memories of fighting the Black

Moons that were responsible for dredging up the past.

“You know Alexis was pursuing the remnants of the Black Moon Pack. Well, he caught one.”

My breath caught in my throat as I thought of Selina’s husband, the pack’s alpha. These last few weeks, he’d had his scouts searching the vast forests of Shadow Moon territory for the Black Moons who had scattered after their defeat in the battle.

“Last night,” Selina continued, “Alexis began interrogating the prisoner, and he has information about your parents.”

Shivers ran down my spine, goosebumps prickling my arms. “My parents?” I repeated, disbelief coursing through my veins.

Despite the apprehension swirling around us, Selina continued unwaveringly. “We stopped the interrogation as soon as he spoke about your parents. I thought you’d want to hear.”

My heart thumped loudly. My parents. This prisoner had information about my parents. Urgency engulfed me. “Yes.”

I bolted out of bed, grappling for my robe and stuffing my feet into my fluffy boots. Tightening the belt of my robe, I followed Selina out the door.

As we descended through the castle, the comfort of the upper quarters gave way to raw, unadorned stone. A chill danced along my spine. The corridors felt deeper and darker, shadows lengthening the further we ventured into the castle’s depths.

Upon reaching the dungeon, Alexis’s imposing figure immediately caught my attention. He cast a long shadow beneath the flickering lanterns. He was tall, with

short black hair and a stern expression that seemed permanently etched on his face. But I had seen moments of lightness, usually when Selina or his daughter were near.

I turned my gaze past the Alpha toward the prisoner bound to a chair. His hands were tied behind him, and bruises marred his chin and cheek. I wondered how far Alexis had gone to extract information from him. The shifter's hardened gaze met mine, curiosity flickering briefly.

"Now that we're all gathered," Alexis began, his voice heavy with authority. "Tell us again, Black Moon, about your pack's dealings with the Silver Moons."

The bound shifter met my gaze, a glint of defiance still lingering in his eyes, but the tremor in his voice betrayed his pain as he spoke. "To grow our power, the Black Moon Pack likes to exploit power struggles within other packs. We play the field for our own benefit."

This was hardly new information. The Black Moon Pack had become infamous for their treachery—but I remained glued to the spot, tension flowing through every muscle as I waited to hear what truths he held.

"Years ago," the shifter said, his resolve cracking under the weight of his torture, "we invaded the Silver Moon Pack. The wolves we worked with from within framed the beta and his wife."

My breath hitched in my throat. "Framed?" I repeated, astonishment flooding my senses.

"Liam and Cordelia... were framed?" The revelation battered my chest, knocking the air from my lungs. "How were they framed?" I demanded.

The Black Moon prisoner's eyes glinted wickedly. "We had a Silver Moon on the

inside—someone who got blood from both the beta and his wife. The dark witch working with our pack was able to use it to weaken the wards and prevent them from sounding the alarm long enough for us to invade.”

Shock ricocheted through me like a physical blow, spinning memories of my nightmare back into focus—my parents being unjustly accused and Tyler’s tormented face delivering the dreadful news that would forever alter my life.

Selina’s hand clasped mine, squeezing my cold skin and reminding me of the warmth that had spread through me as Tyler took my hand in the dream. She understood the weight of this revelation—the intertwining liberation and devastation in my soul. I had confided in her about my parents, sharing the story of their betrayal and how ostracized I’d been afterward. I’d told her of how everyone but Tyler had turned against me.

But my focus remained on the Black Moon prisoner. “Who’s the real traitor in the Silver Moon Pack?” I pressed, desperation tightening my chest.

“I don’t know,” the prisoner ground out, frustration flaring in his tone as he glared at Alexis as if waiting for a blow to fall to incentivize him to talk. “Only the Black Moon leader and the dark witch know the truth.”

My gaze darted to Alexis, whose frustration boiled over. Unfortunately, his story about that remains unchanged. I noticed the bruised knuckles on his hand and understood that the Alpha had done everything he could to get the truth out of the prisoner. “Our scouts are still hunting for more of the Black Moons,” he continued, “but they’ve skulked off like the cowards they are.”

A growl rumbled from the prisoner as he cut his eyes at Alexis, but my heartbeat raced, thrumming with the newly unearthed truth: my parents—who I had loved with all my heart—had been innocent. The shadows that had haunted me for so long began

to shift, morphing from despair into something almost hopeful. I could feel an ember of rebellion stirring within me.

My mind leaped ahead, making plans for the future. I met Selina's eyes. "This changes everything," I said. "I think I can do what I never hoped to—I can clear my parents' names."

Her gaze shimmered with tears, and my heart swelled with thankfulness for the sanctuary she'd given me these last two years. But with this fiery feeling growing in my chest, I believed Selina was right: my nightmares had been a sign.

My part in the war against the Black Moons was far from over. A traitor lurked at the heart of the Silver Moon Pack—one who had framed my parents and robbed me of my family. I realized dazedly that I would have to break my vow to leave the past behind because I was going to uncover the truth and bring my parents the justice they had long been denied.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

The forest hummed with life, the sounds of chirping birds and buzzing insects filling my wolfish ears. I had already bid farewell to my friend's family back at the castle, but Selina insisted on accompanying me to the forest's fringes.

She tightened the strap of the small saddlebag on my back. I would be traveling in wolf form, covering the vast distance to the Silver Moon Pack over the next few days. My saddlebag, clipped across my furry chest and back, held only the essentials—clothes, crystals, and, of primary importance, the letter from Alexis detailing everything the Black Moon prisoner had said during the interrogation. I knew well that the word of the child of traitors wouldn't be trusted alone.

"Does that feel secure?" Selina asked, her bright green eyes as vibrant as the green of the forest around us.

I nodded, feeling the weight of both the saddlebag and the task ahead.

With tenderness, Selina kneeled and wrapped her arms around my furry neck. "You've always got a home here if you ever want it," she murmured.

She had already said as much back at the castle, and when I'd glanced at her normally austere husband, Alexis, he had actually smiled. It meant the world to have such friends, and my heart swelled with gratitude for their support as I prepared to leave.

With a heavy heart, I cast one last glance back from beneath the forest canopy, seeing Selina standing amidst the lushness of her territory. Summer here—so close to the

sea—had melted the snowfields entirely, and I felt a pang of reluctance to leave both the warm temperatures and the nurturing friendships I had formed. Blinking back emotions, I turned to continue my journey, thoughts shifting to the lands awaiting me—where even summer air chilled to the bone and the snowfields persisted.

Determination surged within me as I ventured onward. For two days, the dense forests of the Shadow Moons provided ample burrows and dens for resting at night. On the second day, when hunger gnawed at me, I caught the fresh scent of a deer and stalked it through a clearing. With precision, I brought it down, savoring the rich, gamey meat that filled my belly.

As dawn broke over the horizon on the third day of my travels, soft rays of gold washed over a blanket of snow. I stood atop a small hill and marveled at the breathtaking sight—the boundary of the Silver Moon lands lay before me once again.

My heart thumped with nervous energy, and I quickly shifted into my human form, pulling on the warm clothes and sturdy boots from my bag. The shadowy leathers of the Shadow Moon Pack were durable but stark against the brightness of the snowy plains. But I reminded myself that I wasn't trying to go unnoticed. I had every right to return to the Silver Moon Pack. As apprehension thrummed through me, the familiar sensation of magic tingled at my fingertips. Each step deepened my reconnection to the territory that had once been my home, yet anxiety twisted tighter with every footfall. The air buzzed with electricity, whispering that company would find me soon—I was sure it wouldn't be long before I was challenged by the Silver Moons guarding the borders.

Less than half an hour into my journey, shadows flickered from the treeline. Silvery wolves glimmered between the trunks. As I continued my approach, a small force of six emerged onto the snowy plains.

My heart quickened at the sight of their leader, wondering if it was Tyler. But as my

gaze traced the outline of the wide head and sharp muzzle, I knew it wasn't him.

In a blur of motion, Logan shed his silver pelt, his human form materializing into existence. I remembered how strong he had been when I left, and now he stood even broader—a testament to the passage of time.

But his cold, dark eyes bore into mine, contempt radiating off his wide face. My heart thundered, and memories of torment bubbled to the surface, raw and stinging.

“Seraphina.” His voice cut through the morning air, dripping with disdain. “How predictable—like a rat drawn to rot.”

Confusion sparked within me. “Rat” was a new term, but I supposed it wasn't so different from “traitor.” I understood the jagged edges of his hatred; after all, one of the many scars left by the invasion had been the loss of his parents, and I realized those scars ran deep.

But as I stood beneath his disdain, I thought of the letter tucked safely in my bag, signed by Alexis. It was my proof—an ember of hope that could cut through the thick fog of ignorance and hatred surrounding my family.

“I have a message from Alexis, the Shadow Moon Alpha. I need to see Alpha Tyler,” I declared, striving for steadiness despite the tension tightening around us.

Logan sneered, stepping closer, his breath warm against my face. “You're going to feign innocence, then? The pack's been struck by a mysterious illness. We've already suffered many deaths.”

My heart plummeted at his words: “deaths.”

“This illness is tied to dark witchcraft,” he plowed on. “And now we find you lurking

here. I always say the simplest answer is usually the right one.”

A wave of disbelief washed over me. Dark witchcraft? He thought I’d caused this and that I had slain packmates. Indignation ignited within me, fueled by the knowledge that his hatred was unfounded. My parents had been framed and were innocent of the sins attributed to them. My body hummed with righteous anger, ancient energy swirling just beneath the surface, drawing from the life pulsing through the snow and ice of our lands.

But beneath that fury lingered a tug of worry. A mysterious illness? How many were ill? My heart clenched with concern for Tyler despite the rift that had grown between us.

“Maybe I can help,” I began, forcing the words out. But Logan moved even closer, and his grip tightened painfully around my arm.

“Oh, you think I’m going to take you near people you’ve already harmed?” His growl held a menacing edge, each word laden with a fury that simmered just beneath the surface.

Defiance surged within me. “I haven’t got anything to do with this,” I denied fervently.

But Logan only gritted his teeth, maintaining his resolved scorn. Dread coiled in my gut. He wasn’t going to take me to Tyler, not willingly. My body thrummed with untapped energy, an instinctual pulse urging me forward. Channeling my magic, I felt a luminous energy envelop me, crackling at my fingertips. In a rush, I thrust Logan away, propelled by the shockwaves of power that rippled through the snow-laden landscape.

Seizing the moment, I turned and ran. My breath came in sharp gasps as I sprinted

into the forest, dodging low-hanging branches and leaping over roots that thrust up like grasping fingers. The world around me shuddered, and adrenaline surged through my veins, sharpening my instincts as I heard Logan bellow behind me.

“Don’t let her get away!”

The warriors of the Silver Moon Pack roared in response—the rhythm of their paws crunched through the melting snow, forming a sinister percussion echoing behind me.

Every footfall reverberated with urgency, the remaining minutes of grace slipping away. They wouldn’t grant me a fair hearing, blinded as they were by their thirst for vengeance. Just as my parents had experienced, the pack would enforce its own brand of ruthless justice—with no mercy for the innocent.

Panic clawed at my throat as I sensed them tracking me. I longed to shift into my wolf form, to reclaim the speed and agility that had carried me most of the way here, but my magic was my best chance against six wolves. I fought the instinct to yield to my wolf’s urges, remaining firmly in human form. I couldn’t risk letting go despite the uncertainty clawing at me.

As I zigzagged through the trees, I concentrated on my center, harnessing the aura of my magic. But the panic within me churned, and my wolf growled as it begged me to shift and defend myself. Her instincts whispered dangerously that one misstep could mean my tender flesh would be torn apart. The odds were insurmountable. One against six Silver Moon wolves was not a battle my wolf could win.

Logan and his guards encircled me, their movements balletic and predatory. I pivoted to face them, backing against a wide tree, shielding myself. The magic pooled behind my eyes like a brewing storm, crackling at my fingertips.

The first warrior lunged, a flash of silver against the vibrant white of the melting

snow. Grounded by fear yet rallied by instinct, I raised my hands, channeling magic into a shimmering barrier. The surge collided with the warrior, knocking him backward and leaving him breathless as he crumpled into the icy ground.

Barely allowing myself a moment of relief, the second wolf charged, jaws snapping, ready to take me down. Dread coiled within me, and I summoned another rush of power, unleashing a torrent of blinding light that shot forth like a sunbeam. It struck him square in the chest, sending him tumbling to the ground with a pained yelp.

A third wolf lunged toward me. As I grasped for strength, I felt the first signs of overexertion. My magic hummed with fatigue, warning me that I needed to draw on a source of energy. I cursed myself for not having retrieved the crystals from my bag; their power lay trapped within the depths of fabric too thick to access.

But the ancient energy from the land called to me. I sensed the shards lying beneath the ice, dormant but pulsating with vitality—a gift from the Moon goddess flowing like blood through the veins of Silver Moon territory. Focusing on their essence, I called forth the vibrations from beneath, amplifying my magic as their power harmonized with mine.

I threw my arms wide, and roots erupted from the ground, reaching out from beneath the snow like skeletal fingers, ensnaring the warrior before me. Like ink splattered on a white canvas, the roots snarled and twisted around him, pinning him to the cold earth.

Yet each spell drained my energy further, and a creeping exhaustion wrapped around my chest. My senses began to blur. The icy forest felt more like a predator now, as if it were ready to consume the last breath left in me.

The first wolf was already rising, shaking off the daze. I aimed only to stun them—I couldn't endure the thought of my magic inflicting real harm upon them, even as they

threatened me.

Logan and the fifth wolf still hadn't attacked, and I turned to them as the air thickened with anticipation. My heart raced, and I could feel the magic coiling in response, warning me that I had depleted my reserves.

Leaning deeper into the haze, fatigue tugged at me—every spell siphoning energy I could not replenish. The crunch of snow underfoot faded beneath the roar of my heartbeat.

Suddenly, just as Logan and another warrior lunged toward me, a low, commanding voice shattered the forest. "Stop!"

Electricity surged in the air as Logan and the other warrior jerked mid-pounce, skidding to a halt as they turned to gaze upon a figure that had forced them into submission. Alpha Tyler emerged from the trees—imposing and regal, he was the embodiment of the Silver Moon Pack's strength.

His presence, once a comfort, now radiated a fierce intensity. His eyes gleamed with protective fury, drawing my attention. Relief and hope swirled within me at the sight of him, grounding me amidst the tension.

Even in this critical moment, I found myself admiring his tall, muscular figure. He was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, hinting that he had raced from somewhere. His disheveled hair only added to that impression. A flash of memory struck me—how sweet it had felt to run my fingers through that hair, hearing a groan of contentment escape him. But now, knowing he was mated, that warmth twisted into a bitter ache in my chest. I swallowed hard, pushing the memory down, fighting against the butterflies swirling in my stomach, a painful reminder of what could never be.

"Leave Seraphina alone!" Tyler commanded, his powerful voice rippling through the

air, settling against the fraying edges of my nerves like a caress.

Shock rippled through the warriors. Their pointed ears folded back against their heads as brittle silence coated the forest, freezing the tension in place.

My heart fluttered, caught between relief and disbelief at the effect Tyler's arrival had wrought.

In a heartbeat, Logan stood again in human form, his voice sharp like splintering wood. "Seraphina's a skilled witch. You really think her showing up here is a mere coincidence?" He moved forward, angling his robust body between us as if he intended to impede my approach to Tyler.

"No." Tyler's response was direct, a fierce determination etching every line of his face. Shock overwhelmed me again at that single word, fear mingling in my chest. Surely, Tyler didn't think I meant any harm. Surely, he didn't doubt my intentions.

Then, Tyler moved past Logan, his vivid blue eyes meeting mine, searching. "I don't believe Seraphina's return is a coincidence. The Moon goddess has brought her back to us in our time of need." His gaze softened as it searched me, uncertainty flashing for just a moment. "Please tell me you'll come to the pack and see if you can help?"

I looked between Logan and Tyler, a tumultuous swell of emotions crashing within me. Tyler stood as an unwavering shield while Logan's taut fists and clenched jaw contorted with unresolved anger. In that charged moment, the forest held its breath—awaiting our next actions, the tension palpable.

"It's not why I came," I said, finally breaking the silence. "But I will help if I can."

Tyler's face lit up, and my heart warmed at the affection evident in his expression despite our troubled past. I quickly turned my gaze back to Logan, whose barely

contained anger anchored me to the present.

“Lead the way,” Tyler said, gesturing to Logan and the rest of the patrol. “I’ll escort Seraphina from here.”

Logan looked as if he meant to argue again, but Tyler was the pack’s alpha. After a tense moment, Logan bowed his head in acknowledgment of Tyler’s command. Turning, he shifted into his wolf and led his warriors ahead, leaving me and Tyler to walk alone together.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

I could hardly breathe. Seraphina was here, walking beside me, as real and radiant as the sun flooding our land. It felt surreal, as though I had stumbled into one of the countless dreams that had haunted me over the last two years—dreams in which I'd reach for her only to have her slip through my fingers. Yet here she was, flesh and blood, returning home as if the Moon goddess had finally twisted the strands of fate back in my favor.

I had been out gathering more of the kuppik herb for the packmates in the infirmary. I had thought the unsettled feeling in my chest was due to my worry about the illness afflicting our pack. But then I'd caught her scent—sweet and mesmerizing like honey drizzled over warm bread—something primal ignited within me. I had known this unsettled feeling in my chest was a forewarning that everything was about to change.

Now, so near to her, my mate's scent washed over me in intoxicating waves, soothing the broken pieces of my heart while simultaneously sending a jolt of electricity coursing through my veins. My wolf still stirred restlessly, but I'd chosen to remain in human form. I knew the instinct to claim Seraphina was too strong in my beast's form, so I kept him under wraps.

As we walked, I surreptitiously stole glances at her. I couldn't believe how stunning she looked, even with her obvious tiredness. A soft breeze tousled her hair, catching the sunlight and making her raven locks glint like obsidian. Beneath her fatigue lay a strength that had always captivated me—a warrior's spirit that refused to be eroded despite the inevitable trials she faced.

I longed to reach out to her, but I had to content myself with walking beside her. Logan and the rest of the patrol ahead of us, in their wolf forms, gave us a semblance of privacy. Yet, I knew their hearing was even better in their beast forms, so I reluctantly tamped down the many questions teeming in my head. Every question that I wanted to broach might unlock a topic that was better faced in privacy.

Still, questions crowded my head as we trudged on through the snow. Where had she been? I noticed that she wore black leathers I'd never seen before. A brown leather saddle bag was on her back that looked like it was designed to be worn by her wolf.

In the first few months of Seraphina's disappearance, I'd tried to trace her through her university contacts. She didn't have any friends in the pack, so I was the only one who tried to find her. Despite getting in touch with all of her university friends that the dean forwarded to me, none of them had heard from her. As the second year of her absence slipped by, I'd begun to despair that I would ever see my girl again.

Yet here we were. Soon, our town of Nahachoh embraced us—the stone houses and the mountains standing guard over our lives. Seraphina walked gracefully alongside me, her presence stirring both hope and anticipation. Her words from earlier, the only ones she'd uttered so far in my presence, tortured me: "It's not why I came back, but I will help if I can." I longed to ask her why she'd returned. Had she missed me as much as I'd missed her? Could there still be hope for Seraphina and me?

While I tortured myself with this line of thought, covertly feasting on the sight of her, I continued to flank her, aware of how hostile Logan and the other packmates in the patrol were. Anger roiled through me at how close they'd come to harming Seraphina.

But I steeled myself, knowing that we were about to meet with yet more mistrust from the rest of the pack. We followed the patrol to the Council Chambers, which stood like a stronghold beneath the towering peaks of the Nuvuja Mountains. The

walls were constructed of coarse, sun-bleached stone, the same as most of the pack's homes, exuding an air of rugged strength. Even in the summer, the mountainous region of our far north clung to its snow-covered peaks, creating an otherworldly backdrop against the biting cold.

As we stepped into the council room, the sunlight filtered in through the tall, narrow windows, casting a pale glow on the intricate carvings that decorated the stone walls—depictions of our ancestors and their great battles and triumphs over darkness. Jewels and fixtures of polished silvery giak adorned the chambers, bearing witness to the rich resources our homeland offered. Ashen-blue tagiu, velvety kayunil, and deep crimson ivis shone, too—each gem capturing a different aspect of our long, proud history, lighting up the air with whispers of ages gone.

Too soon, the relative peace was interrupted. Elder Darius strode in, his presence immediate and imposing. With dark brown eyes and stern features framed by silver-gray hair, he was dressed in a silvery-gray tunic and trousers favored for official meetings. There was nothing formally scheduled today, but Darius never hesitated to present himself with the utmost formality, as though the world around us was a ticking clock waiting for him to issue some edict.

A tide of packmates swarmed in behind him. As predicted, word had spread among the pack. Logan and his patrol unit had shifted back into their human forms and had furnished themselves with clothes from the closet in the corridor. Logan was nearest, still seeming intent on lingering too close to Seraphina, his dark eyes prickling over her with an alertness that drove my wolf wild.

Everyone's eyes prickled over me, too, their curiosity understandable. The whole pack knew that after canceling the mate ceremony with Linda, I had searched frantically for Seraphina. She was the reason I had remained single these two years. Yet, I knew that was hardly going to help turn the tide of animosity the pack harbored toward her. If anything, it heightened their distrust of her.

Seraphina spoke, her quiet voice instantly stealing my attention from the crowd. “Will you show me one of the infected?”

I opened my mouth to say that I reckoned she needed to rest first. She looked drained from her journey and the fight with Logan and the other Silver Moon warriors. But before I could speak, a chorus of angry protests erupted, echoing off the stone walls.

“Tom will be carried off next, mark my words,” Jackie declared, her voice laced with desperation as she cast a wary glance toward the door. Her husband, Elder Tom, was among the afflicted, and I knew she was picturing him lying unconscious in the infirmary with so many of our other packmates.

At the thought of those suffering, I remembered why I’d been out in the wilds this morning.

“Justin,” I called the attention of one of our packmates nearby. “Can you take these to Linda in the infirmary?”

Justin nodded, accepting the leather pouch I handed over to him.

Then, I confronted Jackie’s accusation head-on. “Seraphina is not the one responsible for what has befallen our pack. The herbal treatments we’re administering will only do so much. It is paramount that we procure magic to help heal them.”

But still, Jackie’s expression was hardened by mistrust; her bitterness toward Seraphina came from deep-rooted wounds—from the loss of her son in the invasion Seraphina’s parents had enabled. It was a shared grief and bitterness that clung to most of the pack.

“I promise you,” Seraphina vowed, her steady beside me. “I am not responsible for this illness, and I will do everything I can to help.”

Elder Darius interjected, “So you just happened to be in the neighborhood?” Skepticism dripped from his every word. His dark eyes glinted with suspicion.

Everywhere I looked, I could see doubt in the pack members’ expressions, especially among the elders. The tension in the room thickened, and my heart began to race. Would Seraphina tell everyone why she was back, or was it something best left spoken about in private?

Just then, Linda, Darius’s daughter, entered the Council Chamber. Her eyes were wide with disbelief as she took in Seraphina standing beside me. She must have rushed here from the infirmary upon hearing the news of Seraphina’s arrival. I noticed she held the leather pouch of herbs I’d sent to her via Justin.

With a tight expression, Linda drew toward her father. Many of the pack looked to her. The crowd parted for her, and she came to stand next to her father at the front of the crowd.

Linda was dressed in scrubs, and I could see from the tired rings around her eyes that she’d been working round the clock, with this illness inflicting so many packmates. A mix of gratitude and guilt washed through me as it often did when I saw her. I hadn’t ever meant to hurt her by calling off our mate ceremony, but I knew I had. As always, Linda didn’t beat around the bush. “So, it’s true. Another threat’s surfaced in our pack.”

I felt Seraphina tense beside me, but she met Linda’s accusatory stare with her head held high.

A foreboding feeling prickled through me. Our healer’s voice carried a lot of weight, and a chorus of unhappy voices erupted in its wake. But as entrenched as the pack’s mistrust was, I knew Linda’s vehemence toward Seraphina had its roots in the hurt I had inflicted on the night I’d called off our mate ceremony.

On that goddess-awful night, I'd returned from my fruitless hunt in the woods and broken the truth to Linda. I apologized to her and explained that I couldn't bind myself to anyone else, not when I now knew I was in love with Seraphina. Linda knew, just like the other packmates, that I'd hunted for Seraphina these past two years. That was the real reason for Linda's stony expression and hurtful tone.

Despite the accusations hurled at Seraphina, she held her ground. "I just wanted to return to my pack," she said steadily, making my heart beat with hope. After her parent's death, there had been little here for her—except for me, a small hopeful voice whispered.

"I'm willing to take a blood oath to prove my innocence," Seraphina declared.

A wave of angry murmurs traveled through the room. "Blood magic can deceive," Valerie, a female in her mid-twenties, called out, her suspicion mingling with lots of other voices.

But I wouldn't let this continue. I raised my voice, cutting through the chaos, determined to restore order. "We urgently need a capable witch to address this illness. As alpha, I am responsible for resolving this crisis. Above all else, the pack is most important to me. I swear, I would never allow harm to come to it. Therefore, I will be shadowing Seraphina at every step, but she will be giving treatment."

My declaration hung in the air, reverberating off of the stone walls. Though many remained cautious, my words seemed to silence the pack members, convincing them to set aside their mistrust—if only temporarily.

Just as people began to turn to the door, Seraphina suddenly stepped forward, asking, "Is there anyone willing to let me stay with them while I treat the sick?"

Shock beat through me. I'd assumed Seraphina would stay with me. A heavy silence

fell over the room, the weight of the past echoing through the space. Each gaze flickered away. I could see the hurt beneath the hardness in her eyes. My heart ached for her.

Yet, as the pack members turned away, the tension that had been throbbing within me since I had found Logan and the other warriors attacking her began to ease. Part of me wished that her request had unfolded differently, but the absence of offers granted me a twisted relief—I was now able to keep her close.

“Okay, looks like you’re coming with me,” I said, biting back the smile tugging at my lips as I gestured for her to follow.

As we stepped out of the Council Chamber and into the biting cold of the evening, Seraphina trailed behind me as if she didn’t want to be too close. The towering peaks of the Nuvuja Mountains loomed ominously against an overcast sky. But the weight of our unspoken emotions hung heavier than the cloud that had collected.

I led her around to the back door of our former house—our sanctuary once. I unlocked the door to the kitchen, and as we stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted. So many shared moments congregated in this space—laughter, warmth, and a sense of belonging rang from every surface. The scent of baked goods seemed to linger in the air, a reminder of weekends spent together, mixing flour and sugar.

Yet, in stark contrast, the silence between us felt cold and heavy, laden with everything that had transpired over the past years. The walls of our home felt as though they were bearing witness to the turmoil within us while my longing to bridge the chasm between us grew all the more intense.

Behind me, Seraphina hesitated at the threshold. My heart clenched as I saw that she’d gone rigid.

She shook her head. “I can’t do this.”

My throat tightened. Did she detest me that much for what I’d done by almost attaching myself to Linda? Her gaze was glued to the floor. I wondered if she was feeling as overwhelmed by the memories of this space as I was. She’d been away for years. If this moment was overwhelming for me, it must be even more so for her. My chest squeezed for the tension vibrating off her, but I stopped myself from reaching out.

Thankfully, Seraphina clarified the reason for her hesitation. “I can’t stay with you—you’re a mated wolf. It would be wrong.”

Surprise beat through me. I’d assumed that Linda’s hardened expression would’ve told her all she needed to know, but I swiftly explained, “I’m not mated.”

She looked up, shock sweeping over her beautiful face. But still, she didn’t move a muscle.

My lips twitched, but I said, “Will you please come in? You’re letting out all the heat.”

She frowned but reluctantly came in, closing the door behind her.

“Have a seat. Would you like a cup of tea?” I asked, trying to make her feel more comfortable.

She shook her head. She looked tense as if she were about to bolt out the door again, which only made my wolf prowl restlessly.

Finally, she said, “Just some water, please.” She took the bag off her back, taking a seat at the long oak table. With disorientating suddenness, I saw a younger Seffy at

the table, studying. I shook my head, realizing that that intense look on her face reminded me of the seriousness in those early dark days when she'd first come to live with me.

I used the moment it took me to get a glass of water from the faucet to shake the past away. I took the seat opposite her, and she drained the glass in a single gulp. I suspected it wasn't just the fight with Logan and the Silver Moon warriors that had made her so tired.

"How many days have you been traveling?" I asked.

Her gaze returned to me. She didn't speak. She only looked at me with those captivating jade eyes. Fighting to control myself, I felt the unmistakable thrumming in my chest—a call from the mate bond that longed to be reignited. If I closed the distance, it whispered, I could be whole again.

"You were telling me about what happened when I left," she prompted, steering us back to the past.

I nodded, suddenly fighting against the tide of memories—the moments I had tried to bury to stay strong in her absence. But the agony of that moment when she'd severed our mate bond resurfaced.

I fixed her with my gaze. "When you severed our bond, I called off the ceremony with Linda and went after you."

Every word hung in the air with a monumental gravity. That night replayed in my mind with excruciating clarity. The haunting memory of coming upon the magic circle with those runes and crystals devoid of magic.

But, as the seconds ticked by and she didn't say a word, I forced myself to tell her

what I hadn't had the chance to back then. "That night, I realized I loved you." My heart battered my chest now that I'd taken the leap to tell her the truth.

Seraphina blinked but remained excruciatingly silent. Her fingers fidgeted with the empty glass in front of her. The question that I'd longed to ask since catching her scent in the woods today forced its way out my mouth. "Why have you come back?"

"I came back to clear my parents' names," she replied.

I felt the breath rush out of my lungs. That was not...what I'd been expecting. She reached for her bag, taking something out. "This is a letter from the Shadow Moon Alpha, Alexis," she explained. "I was introduced to Selina, the Shadow Moon Luna, through a friend. I've been staying with her the last two years."

Astonishment enveloped me. The Shadow Moon Pack? That's where she'd been all this time. My thoughts skipped over what I'd heard over the last few months about our neighboring packs. Word was that there'd been a battle between the Shadow Moon and the Black Moons a few months ago. Had Seraphina been there at the time? My wolf bristled at the thought of her in harm's way.

"Selina and Alexis captured a Black Moon prisoner," Seraphina continued, "who said that my parents were framed. He said the dark witch helping the Black Moons to invade our pack managed to obtain their blood through the real traitor in our pack. They used blood magic to make it look like my parents' wards and patrol duty had failed."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I thought of Liam, my best friend, Seraphina's father, whose life had been cut short along with Cordelia, her loving mother—unjustly. After the invasion and their suicides, I had ferociously searched for evidence of something—anything—that didn't lead back to my best friend betraying me and our pack. Neither Liam nor Cordelia had behaved any differently in

the days leading up to that fateful night. I'd racked my brain for memories, haunted by the hope of discovering a glimmer that would exonerate them from the monstrous accusations that had been laid on their souls, but I came up empty.

The very fact that they'd chosen to take their own lives forced me to confront the painful truth: they must have been guilty. Or so I'd thought until now.

Shock ricocheted through me. There was still a traitor in our pack—one who had circumvented justice and allowed my best friend and his wife to pay the price. Anger and grief waged war within me as this news rearranged the past in one fell swoop. I pushed back my chair, needing to move. I paced. "Goddess, forgive me, Liam, Cordelia—I failed you." Pain and anger bled into my voice as I tracked up and down in front of the aga, its constant heat doing nothing to chase away the chill that had burrowed into my chest.

Seraphina stood up. For one glorious moment, I thought she was approaching me to comfort me, but she only lifted her hand, presenting the letter she'd spoken of. "Alexis's letter contains everything I've told you." A hardness came to her mouth. "After all, the word of the child of traitors can't be trusted." She'd come to a standstill, only a meter from me, offering me the letter.

I gritted my jaw, hating that I recognized her words as ones I'd spoken: "a child of traitors." Another memory came to me now. Seraphina and I were in bed together, and we had just made love. I told her I couldn't be with her because she was the child of traitors. My misguided belief that I had to have a luna beside me who the pack could trust had led me to utter those words to her. They were words that, as fate would have it, were completely untrue.

I held her gaze. "I vow to you that I will find the traitor in our pack. I will not rest until your parents—my dearest friends—have the justice they deserve," I said with fervor.

She blinked, giving me a look I couldn't place. She almost looked surprised as if she didn't expect me to want justice for her parents as much as she did. Frustration wound through me. Was her opinion of me really that low?

But I couldn't leave the rest of her reproach unfronted either. "Also, I have always trusted you," I said lowly. "I will always trust you. In fact," I continued, my heart quickening as each beat demanded I tell her everything I felt. "I know that if I'd only trusted you to guide me, my heart would still be whole." My gaze trailed over her face. I noticed her hand holding the letter was shaking as she lowered it.

A frown formed between her fine black brows. "Tyler, don't—"

At the sound of my name on her lips, memories of our glorious night together ensnared me. I needed to tell her that every ounce of my being had yearned for her during these years apart.

"Please, Seraphina, come back to me," I uttered. "Be with me again. I've never stopped looking for you or hoping you'd return." I reached for her empty hand, my heart beating with hope as she let me hold it. "I know how forgiving your heart is, and I promise to love and protect you as I should have if you'll only give me another chance."

"I can't," she said sharply. She drew away, her hand leaving mine. "I'm sorry, Tyler... I... don't love you anymore."

The words slammed into me, an irrevocable sentence that left me breathless. She backed away, leaving the letter on the table before retreating to the inner door with her bag.

"I need some rest before treating the packmates," she said flatly. "I'll see you once I've slept." Her footsteps sounded down the hall and then on the stairs.

As her bedroom door clicked shut, I felt the distance between us resonating through the hollow in my chest. The finality of her words made it painfully clear. Even if she harbored feelings for me, she was intent on shutting me out. An invisible barrier had risen between us that was as vast as the mountains guarding our town.

But determination ignited deep within me. Seraphina was back in our home where she belonged. This time, I wouldn't let her slip through my fingers. I would fight to prove her place was by my side. Tonight, the knowledge that my girl was back filled my heart with embers of promise. Our bond could be reforged, and I would reclaim my mate.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

After shutting my bedroom door, I leaned against it, allowing a shaky breath to escape my lips. My heart thundered in my chest, a frantic echo of the words still drumming in my head: “I don’t love you anymore.” I wanted my body to reflect that declaration, but instead, it felt like a fragile shell on the verge of shattering. Beneath the surface, a mix of terror and excitement simmered, an unsettling contradiction that left me breathless.

Before returning to Nahachoh, I had convinced myself that the years apart had extinguished my feelings for Tyler. I’d believed that without the mate bond tethering me, my emotions for him would fade. But now, standing alone in my old room, everything felt muddled. Disorientation spun through me, settling into my bones. His presence clung to me, a whisper of magic that called to me just like his cedar scent wrapped around me, an intoxicating reminder of all I’d tried to leave behind.

I rebuked myself for getting too close to him earlier. Tyler had looked at me with such directness, something raw and vulnerable in his bright blue eyes. In the past, that stare had often been filled with lightness or protectiveness, but now, there was a new openness—one that both thrilled and terrified me.

Physically, he hadn’t changed much. Perhaps there were a few more lines etched around his eyes and mouth, but they only enhanced the rugged handsomeness I remembered. And every time his lips hinted at a smile, echoes of our laughter in this space came tumbling back, a delicious ache that stirred deep in my stomach.

“I need to cleanse this stagnant energy,” I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper.

I turned away from the door, my gaze landing on the small altar before the window. My eyes settled on the incense holder nestled among my crystals. Yes, it was a good idea to clear my mind before sleep.

With determined movements, I tipped the contents of my bag onto the bed, rummaging until I drew out a stick of white sage. I slotted it into the holder, feeling the smooth surface of the sikin crystal on the altar humming gently with the sun's energy.

“Kaumma,” I murmured, channeling the energy from within the crystal to ignite the stick. It flared to life, releasing an earthy perfume that spiraled through the air. Inhaling deeply, I focused on the aroma, letting it carry me to a place of calm while I meditated on the smoke.

Yet my thoughts refused to dissipate, swirling around like one of those spirals. Memories of Tyler filled my mind. He had lit up when I appeared, not questioning me like the patrol. His fierce defense of me in the Council chamber stirred something within me. A warmth ignited as I recalled his unwavering faith in me, even before hearing about my parents' innocence.

I'd insisted on Alexis detailing everything the Black Moon prisoner had said, convincing myself that Tyler would need that information as much as anyone. But now, Tyler's words about trust—how he had always trusted me and always would—wrapped around me, especially after enduring the day filled with cold, mistrustful gazes and accusations.

The memory of his warm hand enveloping mine filled me with longing, but I forced the sensation away, inhaling the cleansing scent of sage, convincing myself it washed away the past. He may have canceled the mate ceremony with Linda, but the image of them together that night scarred my heart, a jagged reminder of what had been lost.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back to the task at hand. I was here for my parents, not for Tyler. The need to clear their names fueled my purpose, but pain twisted in my chest as I pictured Tyler pacing in anguish, burdened with the guilt of failing them. Reflexively, I had risen to comfort him, instinctively wanting to soothe his pain before reminding myself of my own scars.

As I stood at my altar, something caught my eye—my ulu, the ceremonial knife. It hadn't been there when I'd left; I'd last seen it abandoned in the snow, a tool in the magic circle I had cast to sever the mate bond. My heart fluttered, and for the first time, I let myself imagine Tyler's desperate chase after me that night. Those words he had uttered echoed in my mind: "I promise to love and protect you..." How my younger self would have cherished such a vow. But now? It felt too late. What did those promises really mean when he'd almost dedicated himself to another woman? Despite the fire in his eyes, despite the way his hands enveloped mine, I couldn't shake the betrayal that coursed through me. When I had needed him to choose me, he had faltered.

The words were sweet, but they felt like flimsy bandages applied to a wound that ran too deep. Forgiveness required trust and the kind of commitment that he had overlooked while I fought through my pain alone. I may have severed the mate bond, creating a chasm between us, but Tyler had crafted the distance when he'd rejected the love I'd given so freely.

The thought of letting him back in sent a wave of fear crashing over me. Trust, once broken, was a fragile thing to rebuild. I couldn't afford to let him back in when I had worked so hard to banish the pain he'd created.

My ulu steadied me, its sharp edge reminding me of my resolve. I had chosen to sever the bond, and it was done.

As I surveyed my old room, an unsettling realization swept over me. Everything was

exactly as I had left it. My robe was hanging on the door, and the floral sheets were on the bed. I approached my old wardrobe. My clothes remained untouched. Unease prickled over me. The room had become a shrine to a life I had outgrown. Tyler still needed to confront his past, just as I had.

But it was a roof over my head. After all, my parents' house had been burned down after the invasion by the Black Moons, the pack choosing to wipe out even their memory. Here, this room was all I had.

At least I was able to pull out a pair of pajamas from the drawer, and the familiar scent of fabric softener was comforting. Drawing back the sheets, I climbed into the bed, feeling the freshness envelop me. Soon, I succumbed to exhaustion, falling into a dreamless sleep—a much-needed respite from the day's turmoil.

The next morning, after a refreshing shower, I made my way downstairs, ready to visit the infirmary.

Tyler sat at the kitchen table, a bowl of cereal before him. With one look, I saw that it was the usual granola in front of him.

“Morning,” he greeted, his tone somewhat formal before quickly asking, “What can I get you—toast or—”

“I can get it,” I interrupted, already planning to fuel up for the energy I’d expend treating packmates.

“Did you sleep all right?” he asked as I joined him at the table with my toast and coffee. “Did you have everything you needed?”

“Of course,” I replied, casting an amused look at him. “Like—all my stuff.”

He blinked, a quizzical look crossing his face.

“Not that I’m not grateful to be reunited with my favorite sweater-and-jeans combo,” I continued, gesturing to my outfit, “but it’s probably time you turned my old room into a gym or study like most parents do when their kids leave home.”

Tyler choked on a mouthful of cereal, torn between discomfort and irritation, as evidenced by the scowl clouding his brow.

But I’d made my decision after last night. I was forging ahead, determined to eliminate any romantic ideas between us. While I needed to be here for my parents, I’d lean into the friendship we’d once shared. After all, Tyler had raised me after my parents’ death. Reminding him of that was the best way to ensure he saw me as nothing more than family.

“So, I suppose we shouldn’t tell anyone the true reason I’ve come back,” I said. “Not until we’ve rooted out the real traitor.”

“I agree,” Tyler replied, relief washing over his features as if the change of subject were a lifeline. “We’ll just tell everyone you missed your clothes, shall we?” His tone was teasing, yet a glimmer of challenge danced in his eyes.

I snorted in amusement, choosing to respond to his tone rather than look.

Once we finished breakfast, we made our way to the infirmary. As we entered, Linda strode toward us, animosity rolling off her in waves. “You’re not welcome here,” she snapped, her tone cutting through the air, sharp and clear.

Momentarily stunned, I gestured toward my supplies. “I’m here to help,” I said, my voice teetering between a plea and frustration. But my words fell on deaf ears. Linda stood firm, blocking the doorway.

Tyler stepped in, his voice steady. “I thought I was clear yesterday, Linda. Seraphina is going to look at the patients.” His stance exuded authority. A flicker of gratitude moved through me for his support.

She glanced at him warily, the fight dissipating as she realized she couldn’t deny his order. Her lips pressed into a thin line, but grudgingly, she stepped aside, letting out a heavy sigh. “Fine, but my supplies are off-limits.”

Like the rest of the pack, Linda hadn’t been particularly friendly to me since my parents’ betrayal. But I suspected that more of her anger originated from Tyler’s canceling their mate ceremony because of his feelings for me. She stalked away from us in the opposite direction, clearly not wanting to have any more interactions than necessary.

Tyler handed me a face mask after putting one on himself.

“So, the illness is an airborne one?” I asked as I secured my mask.

“Yes, but it can be transmitted through blood, too,” Tyler said. “We think Harry picked it up when training with David in the ring.”

We moved deeper into the infirmary, the muted lighting illuminating rows of makeshift beds filled with pack members suffering from the illness. Most lay in fevered slumber, while those awake appeared clammy and weary—an air of suspicion thickened as I passed their beds, making my heart race with trepidation.

“Luckily,” I told Tyler, scanning my supplies, “I’ve brought quite an inventory, but it won’t be enough for this many patients.”

Gratitude surged as I recalled raiding Selina’s stock cupboard before leaving. When I first met her, she had run her own herbal boutique. Now, her business thrived,

expanding to include a whole network of boutiques. The main bulk of her stock remained at Shadow Moon Castle. So, I felt confident I wouldn't need Linda's herbs for a while.

"They're running a fever, and Linda has been treating it with kuppik," Tyler explained, guiding us through the infirmary, where a few visitors tended to the infected.

I recognized two younger female shifters dressed in scrubs, Kelly and Laura, both of whom had studied herbalism at Silver Moon University. "Do Kelly and Laura work here now?" I asked Tyler.

"In the summer months," he replied. "Linda's been training them to be aides over the past few summer breaks. Good thing, too. We've needed all the help we can get these last few days."

"Hi," I greeted as I approached them. They were administering poultices to some of the worst affected patients.

"Hi, Seraphina," they both replied cheerfully, their acceptance a warm balm in the chilly atmosphere. They were more open-minded than most of the pack, having not lost any immediate family during the invasion my parents were supposedly responsible for. It also didn't hurt that they'd actually ventured from the confines of the pack to study at Silver Moon University.

I examined the male shifter Kelly was tending to—David, a Silver Moon warrior in his mid-twenties. He shivered beneath multiple layers of blankets, clearly suffering from the same fever as the others.

"We're trying a course of lemonwood to bolster their immune systems," Kelly explained, the citrus scent a welcome reprieve from the underlying sweat and waste

in the room. Yet a knot of concern twisted in my stomach—I knew deep down that the herbs wouldn't suffice. This illness wasn't merely a virus. A sickening whisper wrapped around David's skin, tugging at my magic—this was definitely dark magic.

Memories of Selina's sister, Marissa, flooded my mind. I recalled how the malignant shadowy tendrils had contaminated Selina's products. I had helped her and Lyvia heal the affected customers. Armed with that knowledge, I was confident I could make a difference here, too.

"I've seen something like this before," I whispered to Tyler after examining a few of the worst-afflicted packmates. Their symptoms were strikingly consistent, and I felt a growing determination swell within me. "I'm pretty sure I could whip up a remedy."

His blue gaze met mine, and I sensed that he wanted me to tell him more. I wanted to share more about Selina's sister and how dark magic had tainted the herbal products. But as I considered the possibility of the traitor lurking among us, I hesitated. The truth would need to wait for solitude.

"It'll take both herbs and magic," I explained to Tyler as I set out my supplies on a table in the center of the infirmary.

Just then, I noticed Logan had joined the small gathering of visitors. The hour was early, but the atmosphere felt charged, and Logan hovered beside David's bed, watching me like a hawk. As soon as I met his hostile gaze, he sneered, "Do you seriously think anyone will let you lay a finger on them?"

Heat flushed along my skin, but I refused to let Logan's spite hinder me.

Ignoring him, I announced to the infirmary, "Hi everyone! If you'll listen for a moment, I think you'll be pleased to know I have seen this type of illness before. A dear friend of mine, Selina, Luna of the Shadow Moon Pack, had a similar infection

that had passed through one of her herbal products. It had been tampered with in her boutique.”

Many in the pack respected title. If my friendship with a luna could help me convince them of my ability to help, I would lean into it.

“With both magic and herbal treatments, we were able to reverse the illness,” I explained. “I’m confident I can do the same here. Who wants to go first?”

My heart raced, and shaky breaths clawed at my throat. As a resounding silence permeated the infirmary, I felt cornered. Frustration made me want to shout that I wasn’t the enemy. I was here to help. But it seemed abysmally clear that Logan was right—this pack, the one I needed to remain in to find the true traitor and clear my parents’ name, was determined to hate me.

As Linda flitted around the infirmary, distributing poultices with heavy steps—each one seeming to beat with purpose and mock my own inaction—I felt defeated, the weight of the situation pressing down on me. Time stretched agonizingly slowly. I pressed my fingertips to my temples, fighting the start of a headache as I racked my brain for a way to convince the packmates around me.

In that moment, I felt Logan’s spiteful presence more than anything else. Images flickered in my mind: us as teenagers gathered around the bonfire, the crackling flames casting elongated shadows across our faces. I could hear his cruel laughter mingling with the others as they hurled insults my way, their words sharp and unrelenting. I had skulked away, head down, veins burning with shame, retreating to the safety of Tyler’s, locking myself in my bedroom. My studies became my refuge, the pages of my books the only companions who didn’t remind me of the betrayal that shattered my family.

Those memories hung heavy, a bitter reminder of how I had been cast out, an outsider

within my own pack. But things were different now. I had returned with the certainty that my parents were innocent. Everything I'd endured as a teenager—the bullying, the isolation—had been unjust.

So, despite the resounding silence around me, I held my head high, refusing to be forced away as I once had been. I wasn't the helpless girl they'd once dismissed. I would reclaim my strength and my place, no matter how long it took. This time, I wasn't backing down.

Tension and silence enveloped the infirmary like a dense fog. Pale morning light sifted through the eastern windows, illuminating the weary faces of packmates, their expressions a mix of doubt and fear. Justin stood at his brother Harry's bedside, worry creasing his brow as he watched the still form. A few beds away, Susan hunched over her daughter, her fingers worrying the blanket. Craig, a brooding figure with strong shoulders, gripped his wife's hand. Yet despite my offer to help, an impenetrable wall of uncertainty hung over the room, keeping all the packmates frozen.

Golden light crept across the cold stone floor, coaxing dust motes to dance like tiny spirits caught between worlds. As the sun's warmth slowly spread, I felt a weight settle heavily on my chest—a gnawing urgency that time was slipping away. How could I earn the pack's trust? How could I convince them that I meant them no harm?

Finally, muffled voices stirred, low and cautious. My heart quickened, hope flaring. Susan and Craig were whispering, looking at me. No... they looked past me. I turned. My breath caught in my throat. Tyler stood beside David, the unconscious Silver Moon warrior. Blood dripped from Tyler and David's hands. That's when I noticed my ulu blade gleaming in his other hand.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

My breath caught in my throat as I watched Tyler slice the blade across David's palm.

"Tyler—what are you doing?" My voice erupted, laced with disbelief and panic constricting my throat. Horror washed over me as the terrible realization sank in: he was infecting himself.

I lunged forward, urgency propelling me as I wrapped a towel around his bleeding hand. "What have you done?" I exclaimed, fear clawing at my insides.

"Will you please heal me?" he asked, his voice echoing through the air, a strange calmness amidst the doubt around me. A smile tugged at his lips, attempting to thaw the harsh atmosphere around us. My heart raced as I caught the glimmer in his cerulean eyes—the weight of overwhelming trust resting there.

Amidst the whirlwind of suspicion encircling me, I found strength in Tyler's unwavering faith. He had risked his health to prove that my skills could be trusted—a light in this cloying uncertainty.

With that in mind, I leaped into action. Ushering him into the empty bed beside David, I instructed him. "Lay down. We don't know how quickly the infection will hit you."

He followed my instructions.

“Kelly?” I called one of the infirmiry aides over. My voice took on a resolute tone. “Disinfect the blade at once. I need my cutting board and the potion bottle cleaned, too. And bring plenty of boiling water over here.”

I felt the prickling sensation of being watched, my instincts flaring as Linda’s assessing gaze bore down on me. Her eyes held a fierce intensity, and I was worried she was going to interrupt me. But she didn’t hinder me, perhaps recognizing the gravity of the situation at hand. After all, Tyler’s life hung in the balance.

When Kelly returned with the tools, vibrant energy surged through me. I turned to the herbal supplies I’d set up on the table in the center of the infirmiry. I drew the first array of the herbs I’d brought from the Shadow Moon Pack from their wrappings. The two herbalism students, curious sparks in the otherwise dim room, began asking questions about my method.

“That’s kulvich, right?” Kelly asked, her voice rising with interest.

“Yes,” I affirmed as I chopped, the knife’s edge biting into the fragrant herb, releasing its peppery aroma into the air. “It has anti-inflammatory properties like the kuppik you’re using. But in a tea form, it’ll have a more immediate effect on lowering the fever.”

“What’s that one?” Laura inquired as she passed by, enthusiasm painting her features.

“Palliks,” I explained, my fingers deftly handling the cottony leaves.

Laura frowned slightly. “Isn’t that for sleep?”

“It is,” I nodded, focusing on the task. “But in potion-making, it connects the spellcaster to the otherworldly. The tiny bit of palliks in this concoction will help me form a bridge to the Moon goddess’s power.” As I spoke, I stole a glance at Tyler. It

had only been about fifteen minutes since his self-inflicted wound, and the clamminess of his skin sent a fresh wave of urgency coursing through me, a reminder of the stakes involved. I saw that the other packmates in the infirmary were watching his condition deteriorate, too.

Carefully, I pulled the last herb from its wrappings—spray-lilies, pristine and delicate. I plucked the flowers, keeping them whole, their sweetness a stark contrast to the bitter taste of the rest of my mixture. Pouring hot water into the potion bottle, I watched the colors swirl together, a mix of hope and power.

Setting my crystals in a circle around the brewing concoction, I focused my energy. The familiar ebb and flow ran through me as I infused the mixture with magic. With anticipation, I whispered the ancient incantations, “ Saya uki kaumma tapiktuk .” With each syllable, a pulse of energy surged around me, lighting the blend until it shimmered with vitality.

“Is it true the Shadow Moons harvest the herbs under the dark moon?” Kelly asked, her eyes sparkling with intrigue.

“Yes, they are far more potent that way,” I said with a smile, memories of nights spent in the woods flitting through my mind. Selina, Lyvia, and I had gathered herbs by moonlight together. Those nights seemed instilled with friendship. “Sometimes, the Shadow Moons celebrate under the dark moon,” I told Kelly, “making a night of it, with dancing and wine—”

My words were cut short as the air shifted. Linda had approached quietly, her presence breaking up our rapport. “Aren’t there packmates you should be attending to, Kelly?” she interrupted.

I shot an apologetic glance at her, but she shrugged nonchalantly. My focus returned to the deepening hues of my potion, a rich green emerging as I strained the mixture

into a cup. Adrenaline spiked as I advanced toward Tyler's bedside.

His eyes fluttered open, dimmer than usual but still alight with determination. "Just resting my eyes," he murmured, the weight of fatigue thickening his voice. For a moment, the sleep-heavy tone made me think of nights when he'd dozed off beside me on the couch when we watched movies. Except then, I'd stolen as many glances as I could, feasting on the intimate sight of Tyler sleeping.

I forced the past from my mind. "I want you to drink all of this," I urged, offering the cup. His hands closed around it.

But as I guided the cup to his lips, I saw Logan rising from his chair, his face a mask of distrust. I sighed, frustration coursing through me. There was no respite from his incessant hostility.

"One moment," I said, taking the cup back. I took a gulp from the cup before swallowing it down. "Happy?" I shot a glare in Logan's direction.

He relented, slumping into his chair with a scowl, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"It's entirely safe for you, Alpha Tyler," I emphasized, shifting my attention back to him.

"I never had any doubt," he replied, holding my gaze with an intensity that ignited a flutter in my stomach. The world around us faded as he took a sip, followed by another. Moments later, I felt a surge of energy as the fever that had begun to envelop him retreated, leaving behind only a light sheen of sweat.

Ten minutes later, Kelly came over and confirmed what my magic already sensed. "Your vitals are stable," she exclaimed, measuring Tyler's pulse and heart rate.

“Your cure worked, Seraphina.”

A wave of relief washed through the room, lifting the weight of uncertainty from my shoulders. Whispers of awe blossomed among the gathered pack members as they approached, marveling at the transformation Tyler had undergone. Their eyes softened, hope replacing the trepidation that had clouded their hearts moments before.

As time slipped by, I lost myself in the rhythm of healing—the chopping of herbs and steeping them. With each batch, I infused the elixirs with magic and intent. Tyler, an enthusiastic advocate for my work, navigated Linda and returned with supplies from the closet.

Meanwhile, Linda, Kelly, and Laura administered the tea to those who were conscious.

By late afternoon, those with only mild cases were sitting up, their fever dissipating. The more serious cases who were unconscious, like David, would require the tea to be fed to them intravenously. Though I held out hope that my remedy would mend them as well, I had to leave it to Linda and the aides to set up the medical equipment for their treatment.

As the afternoon shadows began to fall in the infirmary, I felt a creeping exhaustion settle over me.

At that moment, Tyler approached me. “Can you come with me a moment?”

“What is it?” I asked, frowning, already thinking about the next batch I needed to start to prepare.

But he only gestured for me to follow. I trailed him to the sink. “Wash your hands,” he instructed as we went to the sink in the corner. I followed his instructions after

he'd washed up, too.

He exited the infirmary and put on his coat. I followed suit. We wandered out into the afternoon, its biting chill making me snuggle deeper into my coat.

I realized Tyler likely wanted the rundown on what had really caused the packmate's illness. I glanced around, wondering if this was the place to discuss it. Currently, there wasn't anyone around.

But Tyler surprised me. "You need to eat something," he ordered, pulling out a chocolate bar from his pocket.

My stomach growled as if my wolf were suddenly out in the open.

Chocolate had always been my weakness—a sweet indulgence I simply couldn't resist.

I moistened my lips, my fingers eagerly unwrapping the bar. I snapped off a chunk, enjoying the sweet, sugary goodness as it melted in my mouth. "Mmmm," I sighed with satisfaction. "Thanks," I added, glancing at him.

I licked my lips. Tyler's eyes darkened with a hungry look that I was sure had little to do with chocolate and everything to do with me. That thought had my heartbeat thumping into overdrive.

"So," I said, suddenly needing to look anywhere but Tyler. I fixated on the landscape as if trying to melt the snow with the intensity of my stare. "It's going better in there than I thought it would."

As I ate another piece of chocolate, I couldn't help but reminisce about how much the taste made me think of Tyler. It was during those early months of staying with him,

after my parents had died that he had coaxed me back into the world, in part, with chocolate.

He had known it was my favorite—and the baking sessions he'd instigated had almost always been something chocolaty. This simple act of giving me chocolate now felt heavier, charged with memories of the comfort he'd gifted me in the past.

He cleared his throat. I chanced a glance at him, relieved to see he was now staring out at the snowy rooftops and trees, too. "It is—thanks to you, Seraphina."

My stomach fluttered at the way he said my full name. There was a softness and sensuality in it that made my cheeks flush. I pretended to be cold, burrowing my face into the neckline of my fluffy coat.

But it wasn't only thanks to me. Tyler had risked his own health so that others would trust me. He'd convinced the packmates that I was worthy of their trust.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself to speak the words that had been weighing on my heart. "Thank you for risking your health to sway the pack. They wouldn't have trusted me without you." I took another nibble, battling the swell of emotions threatening to engulf me whole.

Thankfully, there were packmates coming toward the infirmary. Ollie, a middle-aged packmate with a scruffy beard, surprised me as he greeted both of us, "Tyler, Seraphina. Is it true?" he hurried on. "That you've found a cure for the illness?"

I quickly fielded his question, not wanting him to get his hopes up prematurely. "It's early days yet," I cautioned, "But those with mild cases of the illness are responding well. We're tentatively hopeful that after a few days of treatment, we might see the same thing in the more serious cases." Ollie's mate, Neave, was one of those serious cases being fed through intravenous drip, so I didn't want to make promises I

couldn't keep.

But Ollie smiled and held out his hand, grasping mine. "Thank you, Seraphina. Thank you so much." The tears misting his gaze had my heart squeezing. Something about the big-barreled man showing his emotion so easily made my own throat constrict.

Ollie went on inside, no doubt eager to see his mate.

With that thought, I finished my chocolate bar and said to Tyler. "I'm going to get back to it."

"Of course," he said and then added. "Though I'll be enforcing mandatory chocolate breaks throughout the afternoon."

An incorrigible smile lifted my lips as I went back inside.

I didn't get to ride the sugar rush and the feeling of being more welcome for long, though. As I started on my next batch of potion brewing, Logan joined me at my table. Goosebumps prickled over my skin, and the hair at the nape of my neck stood on end.

Logan towered over me. I knew his physique was one developed through relentless training in the ring rather than out in our beautiful lands, doing something more meaningful—like hunting for gems or herbs. His wide face bore an angular jawline and deep-set eyes that were perpetually narrowed in scrutiny, giving him the look of someone always on the hunt.

His voice was low as he uttered, "Your little good Samaritan act may have fooled lots of them, but I don't trust you."

His voice dripped with scorn, and I continued to chop the herbs evenly, forcing down

the impatience bubbling up. I wouldn't let him rattle me. It would be too much to expect my biggest bully to suddenly extend an olive branch.

I shrugged, trying to wear indifference as a shield, but I couldn't help commenting, "I notice your suspicion hasn't stopped you from refusing treatment for your cousin." His scowl only deepened.

"I'm going to expose your plot," he warned before skulking back to David's bedside.

A grim kind of satisfaction tugged at my lips. He was such a hypocrite. I reminded myself that once my parents were exonerated, Logan would feel the weight of guilt for the ill-treatment he had shown me, as would so many in the pack.

Yet, as I watched Kelly begin to set up a feeding tube for David to administer the tea, a chill crept down my spine, inked with an ominous sense of foreboding. I felt the weight of Logan's words settle over me, thick and claustrophobic.

The true origin of this illness prickled against my skin. I could almost taste the dark magic emanating from the sick. It was a greasy, unsettling presence that twisted my gut, and it was a power I recognized all too well. Flashbacks of the Black Moons invading the Shadow Moon Pack surged through my mind, vivid memories of Marissa and that sinister witch wielding dark sorcery—memories that felt all too familiar and dangerously close.

A deep unease bloomed within me. Who among us had betrayed the pack? The traitor could be lurking in plain sight, hidden among us, sowing the seeds of illness right now. My gaze swept across the infirmary, lingering on the faces of the pack members who had come to visit their ailing friends. I looked over at Laura and Linda, who were administering a tube to Neave. Each heartbeat echoed in my ears, a pulse of rising anxiety, as the realization dawned. It could be anyone.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

The infirmary hummed with subdued energy, low lamplight casting warm pools of light over the occupied beds as deepening shadows settled into the corners of the room. The air was thick with the earthy scents of medicinal herbs—the bitter notes of kulvitch mingling with the more whimsical undertones of palliks.

I had spent countless hours with Seraphina, standing by her side as she prepared batch after batch of healing tea. Her focus remained unwavering, even as fatigue tugged at her spirit. The only reprieve came when I managed to coax her out of the infirmary for brief breaks and the occasional snack of chocolate.

At last, she sighed. “I think I better go back to the house for some rest.”

Relief washed over me, flooding my chest with warmth. I had been acutely aware of the immense energy she poured into each potion, her magic intertwining with the herbs’ vitality. Thankfully, she recognized her limits before I had to drag her away from her work.

In a moment, Kelly took note of Seraphina’s orders, conferring quietly about which patients needed treatment throughout the night. Both Linda and Laura had retired earlier to rest before returning for the night shift. While I felt gratitude toward my packmates, my predominant emotion was protectiveness for Seraphina. My wolf prowled restlessly, eager to whisk her home and care for her.

Outside the infirmary, I extended Seraphina’s coat toward her, and she allowed me to help her into it. The simple acceptance warmed me, igniting a flicker of hope.

Perhaps, just perhaps, things were slowly shifting between us.

In under five minutes, we arrived home, the familiar kitchen awash in cozy warmth. The moment the door clicked shut behind us, she made a beeline for the refrigerator, and an unexpected wave of nostalgia flooded me. Memories danced through my mind of her returning from the mountains, cheeks flushed from the fresh air, gathering herbs and crystals with childlike glee. Back then, she would storm in, ready to raid the cupboards, filling up on chips and popcorn before I could coax her into something more nutritious.

“Do you have any chips?” she asked, an eager glint in her eyes.

I shook my head, regretting not stocking up on snacks during my last trip to town. Instead, I retrieved a couple of microwave meals from the fridge. “How does lasagne sound?”

“Like heaven,” she replied, shrugging off her coat and hanging it up by the door. She sank into a chair, her exhaustion apparent. She rolled her neck back and forth, cracking with each attempt to ease the tension built from hours of chopping and mixing. An impulse surged through me, my hands longing to knead the knots from her shoulders and soothe the tightness etched along her spine.

Forcing myself to focus, I unwrapped the lasagne, puncturing holes in the foil before placing it on a plate. The hum of the microwave reverberated around us, a comforting background noise that contrasted with my racing thoughts. Turning around, I caught her removing her boots, her small, tired movements igniting a rush of warmth in me and a desire to relieve her weariness.

“Want a glass of wine?” I asked, leaning back against the counter to divert my attention.

“Yes, please,” she replied, gratitude tinged with exhaustion lighting her features.

I poured two glasses and set them on the table just as the microwave dinged, snapping me from my reverie. I plated up our meals, feeling a deep satisfaction wash over me as I watched her finally eat something substantial. Even if it was just a microwave meal, it was a meal I had prepared for her. The wolf inside me rumbled contentedly. I had ensured she received nourishment.

After a few mouthfuls, Seraphina set down her fork, her brow furrowing with an intensity that pulled my attention. “I couldn’t tell you earlier, but this illness—it’s definitely the work of dark witchcraft.”

Her voice was steady yet laced with a tension that pulled me further into the gravity of the moment. I leaned forward, eager for clarity. “Tell me everything.”

With a deep breath, she continued, “It’s true what I told the packmates about seeing something like this at Selina’s boutique when her products were infected. That was Marissa, Selina’s sister. She infected Selina’s products with dark magic.”

A chill sliced through the warmth of the kitchen, leeching away our comforting atmosphere.

“But it’s more than that,” she pressed, her determination cutting through the tension. “I sensed this blend of dark magic a couple of months ago when the Black Moons invaded the Shadow Moon Pack. Marissa worked with a Black Moon witch. Their magic felt precisely like this.”

“Are you saying you can identify this dark magic as belonging to the Black Moon Pack?” I asked, urgency coloring my tone.

Her expression deepened. “Think of it like tasting wine—distinguishing the grape by

its aroma, its flavor, the way it clings to the glass.” She swirled her deep red wine thoughtfully. “Each type of magic carries unique identifiers. This one feels like an oil slick against my skin. This particular blend is identical to the aura of the Black Moon witch. I’m convinced that the traitor responsible for this illness is someone colluding with them—a traitor who has been here all along.”

Anger washed over me, tightening my chest, and I could hardly breathe. “I need you to stay focused on treating the illness,” I insisted, trying to shake off the weight of her revelation. “I’ll investigate the connections between the illness and the traitor.”

The gravity of her words anchored me in a brooding silence as I contemplated the task ahead—rooting out this threat. Seraphina wolfed down her food and finished her wine long before I did. Her exhaustion became more pronounced, and I urged, “You need to rest.”

“I should wash up,” she said, though her voice was sluggish.

“Go to bed,” I ordered, forcing myself not to imagine her lying down, her midnight-black hair spilling out across the pillow. She shot me a grateful look before heading upstairs.

The following day, Seraphina returned to the infirmary, pouring her energy into treating the packmates once more. Her efforts began to bear fruit. As we hoped, her treatments proved effective, even for those most gravely afflicted.

With each day that passed, I silently thanked the goddess for Seraphina’s return. Without her, our pack’s situation could have spiraled further into chaos. Only a few of our Silver Moon warriors—David, Harry, and Neave—had fallen ill. But with only twenty strong warriors to guard our borders against the likes of the Black Moon Pack, I couldn’t afford to entertain thoughts of more warriors being bedridden—a weakening that I suspected the traitor desired.

I had begun investigating the origins of the sickness. The first two sufferers of the illness had unfortunately passed away two days before Seraphina returned. The conversation with their surviving loved ones was difficult and yielded no leads. Harry, one of the Silver Moon warriors had been next to exhibit symptoms. I met with his brother in an attempt to try to piece together some common denominator between the three cases, but I came up infuriatingly empty.

Each day only deepened the sickening feeling that someone within our midst wished our pack harm. I could almost feel the dark magic as Seraphina had described it—an oily residue that clung to my skin and never quite vanished.

That, combined with my protective instincts, compelled me to check in on Seraphina at the infirmary far more often than necessary. With no solid leads to pursue regarding my investigation, my visits became my favorite part of each day.

It was uplifting to see the improvements among the packmates—those who had suffered mild cases had returned home with full health within four days. Meanwhile, the most seriously afflicted gradually regained consciousness, receiving teas that continued to stave off the sickness.

After a week of treatment, however, it became apparent that the remaining patients—Harry, David, and Neave—would need to remain in the infirmary. Seraphina determined their symptoms worsened whenever she reduced their doses. I couldn't help but admire her as I watched her toil, amazed by her growth. She had become not only stronger but also kinder and more resilient through the trials.

I had sought to win Seraphina's favor, hoping to mend our relationship. Yet she continued to distance herself from me, even going so far as to call me “Anatch—Uncle.”

Instantly, I was taken back to those weeks after her nineteenth birthday, when I'd

tried to deny our mate bond. In my foolishness, I had suggested that she address me as Anatch to try to distance myself from her and what I'd decided were inappropriate feelings. Now, each time she uttered that name, it felt like a cold blade piercing my heart, a sickening reminder of my past choices. I longed to hear her call me by my name and feel the intimacy wrapped around each syllable. Desire thrummed through me at the thought of how she would moan my name, a possessive heat spiraling within me.

Every day seemed to bring fresh reminders of my role as her protector—her “caring Anatch .” I couldn't shake the jealousy that brewed within me as young males gravitated toward her. David, now recovered enough to take short walks around the infirmary, inevitably found his way to Seraphina's herb station. I watched as he bent over her work, helping her pick the delicate flowers she needed for her teas, his large hands awkwardly gentle against the fragile buds.

Since when had the Silver Moon warriors developed an interest in herbs and crystals? Their attention should have been on their recovery, not lingering around my Seraphina.

“Tagiu,” Harry remarked, admiring an ashen-blue crystal that caught the light. I knew the young warrior had little interest in ores; he was more inclined toward fighting and woodworking. Yet here he was, faking fascination as he leaned closer to her, asking, “And what's this one?”

“That one is ivis. The crimson color is believed to help quicken the connection the curative has with one's blood,” she explained, her voice smooth and informative.

“Remarkable,” he said, but I could see the admiration in his gaze wasn't for the gem but for her.

Determined to shield her from their lingering presence, I strode in, letting my alpha

authority radiate from me like a shield. My wolf rumbled jealously. I couldn't bear watching these males hover around Seraphina.

David paled as I approached, muttering, "I think I'm going to go lie down." He made a hasty retreat to his bed, his gait confirming Seraphina's constant teas were helping his health. Harry followed suit, ducking back to bed without a word, leaving Seraphina and me alone in the relatively quiet room.

She crossed her arms, glaring at me with those brilliant green eyes. "Might I ask why you're here again?"

"Is it a crime for an alpha to check in on how his packmates are healing?" I shot back, frustration rising in my chest.

"It feels counterproductive for an alpha to scare them off like you just did."

"I only encouraged them to get the bed rest they need," I countered, my anger roiling within me, fueled by the scents of the young men still lingering in the air around her.

"Part of their improvement means being active and engaged in their recovery," she argued, her voice steady yet sparking with annoyance. "You're hindering my treatment with your interference."

Not knowing how to refute her perfectly reasonable logic, I growled, "Look, the packmates haven't always been your biggest supporters. I don't trust them around you. Is it a crime for me to check in on you?"

Even before I finished speaking, I could tell I had crossed a line. Fury ignited in Seraphina's eyes, bright and fierce. With swift decisiveness, she grabbed my arm and marched me out of the infirmary, her grip firm and unyielding.

“Let’s talk about this somewhere private,” she insisted, pulling me into the supply closet, the double doors shutting behind us with a soft click.

Inside the dimly lit space, the scents engulfed us: the peppery bite of kulvitch mingled with the sweet, honeyed aroma of Seraphina’s skin and the soft notes of palliks. The air was thick with herbal fragrances, a testament to her hard work, but it was her presence that was truly intoxicating.

Turning to face me, she declared, “I can handle anyone harassing me. I don’t need you to protect me, Anatch !”

A wave of her magic erupted around her, forming a barrier that pushed me back. The intensity in her eyes burned like fire, capturing me. I was mesmerized by the strength radiating from her—pride mixed with my growing anger. Yet beneath it all, the sharp pang of rejection cut deeper. She confined me to the role of guardian, ignoring the truth of what we really were. Frustration churned in my gut. I wasn’t her uncle. I was her mate .

As her magical barrier dissipated, a rush of conflicting emotions coursed through me. I took a cautious step closer, captivated by the fierceness and strength in the lines of her face.

“You’ve always been able to handle yourself,” I observed, my voice low, wanting to express how much that strength meant to me. I held back the deeper truth that her resilience was one of the many things I loved about her. Instead, I added, “Your strength is one of the many things I admire about you.”

She bit her lip, uncertainty flickering momentarily in her expressive green eyes. “Tyler, this isn’t right—”

“Why not?” I took a step closer, compelled to erase the distance that felt like an

aching void. I searched for the right words while inhaling the sweet scent of her. “Because that’s exactly what it feels like to me—right.”

I lifted a hand, tentatively brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. My fingers lingered against her skin, and a shiver ran through her. “Seraphina,” I murmured, my voice low, “Every time I’m near you, I feel like I’m right where I should be.”

She tilted her head, searching my gaze in a way that left me breathless. “Tyler, stop—”

But her plea faltered, the weight of the moment pressing down on us, leaving her momentarily speechless. The emotions pulsing between us thickened the air, making it impossible to think straight. I could see the conflict swirling in her eyes, her desire battling against her fears. “Just tell me,” I urged, my voice a whisper. “Tell me you don’t feel this, too.”

For a moment, I feared she would, but her gaze dropped to my lips. The delicate silence hummed with tension, and the world outside became a distant whisper. The barrier between us slipped away, leaving only the raw truth of desire behind.

Seraphina’s eyelids drifted half-shut as she leaned in, evoking memories of how she’d looked at me in her bedroom years ago. I inhaled deeply, the sweet temptation of her presence drawing me closer. Goddess, help me. I couldn’t resist this anymore. The restraint I had clung to snapped, and I surged forward, claiming Seraphina’s mouth.

Her lips were soft and warm against mine, igniting a furnace in my chest. My wolf roared to life, demanding more contact with her. I felt her shiver beneath my touch, and despite her restraint, a spark of energy surged between us. My fingers cupped her cheek, pouring every unspoken feeling into this moment.

Though hesitant at first, Seraphina's kiss transformed from a gentle pressure into something more. Her hands crept up my back, fingers burrowing into my shirt, finally surrendering to the undeniable pull between us. I relished the feel of her hands on me, daring to deepen our kiss. My tongue sought hers, and she met my passion, opening to me fully.

The warmth of her body pressed against mine stirred an overpowering ache. I was intoxicated by our connection. It felt as if the heat of our kiss had reforged the mate bond that tied us together, a bond crackling with renewed strength. But a persistent voice in my mind urged me to look into her eyes again. I pulled back slightly, needing to see her expression, to find my want mirrored in her eyes.

As our lips parted, I murmured, "This is so right, Ilak ." The word mate was suffused with reverence and the newly burning hope in my chest.

But before I could savor this newfound connection, her expression shifted. Defiance shadowed her features, and a flicker of something deeper danced behind her eyes—fear and regret. "We are not mates."

The words fell from her lips as if they were forged in stone, resonating painfully in the enclosed space and fraying the invisible thread that had just been restored.

I searched her eyes for any hint of the desire we had just shared, but all I found was a resolute determination that sent chills down my spine. The wonder of what we could have been crumbled, leaving only echoes of desire swirling around me as she stepped back.

I wanted to reach out, to pull her back into my arms, but the weight of her rejection held me in place. She strode past and through the doors, leaving me empty and aching for the warmth of her presence. I dragged her lingering scent deep into my lungs—a bittersweet reminder of all I'd lost, of a bond that had flared with life only to be

extinguished again.

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Seraphina

When Tyler kissed me, everything shifted. It was as if a dam had burst, unleashing a tidal wave of emotions. In that fleeting moment, the world around us melted away. Warmth ignited every nerve ending in my body. That heady contradiction of feeling both at home and on the cusp of an extraordinary adventure caught me up. My heart raced as I fought to understand the strange emotions coursing through my veins. The place in my chest thrummed with a haunting familiarity—a soul-deep connection that whispered we were destined for one another.

Yet, my heart raced with panic. I had severed our mate bond. This shouldn't be happening. How could I still feel this intense attraction toward him? And why did the fire in my veins burn hotter with each lingering memory of that kiss?

After that moment, I retreated by throwing myself into my healing work with desperation. Every day, with dawn's light creeping through my window, I dashed out. Breakfast became a granola bar so as to escape encountering Tyler at breakfast. For both lunch and dinner, I stayed at the infirmary, sharing staff meals with Kelly and Laura.

Yet still, there were snippets of the day when Tyler's presence still found me—when his broad shoulders filled the doorway of the infirmary and when his deep, thoughtful gaze was focused on one of the recovering packmates. Each encounter sent shards of longing through me, cracking the hardened resolve I desperately clung to. My wolf stirred restlessly beneath my skin, howling for the connection we once shared. I clenched my fists to suppress the urge to reach out, to close the yawning chasm between us. Despite the physical distance I continued to build, every stolen

glance ignited a spark within me, the commanding yet gentle of Tyler's bright blue eyes threatening to defeat all of my resolve. I balled my hands into fists, willing myself to ignore my wolf's demands and the yearning swirling within.

The temptation for news about how the hunt for the traitor was going was great, too. Yet, even in that, I forced myself back. Tyler had told me to focus my energy on treating the sick. He was the one searching for the one who had betrayed us. Prodding him for information would only lead us down the rabbit hole of entanglement again—something I was terrified of happening. My stomach flip-flopped at the memory of our kiss and how close I'd been to giving into my feelings until he'd uttered that word, *ilak* —mate.

Night was the worst time of the day, when thoughts of Tyler so close and yet so far from me, tormented me. I tried to harden my resolve, reassuring myself that where I was was temporary. Once I'd cleared my parents' names, I'd leave here for good. Every night, I cleared my mind through meditation and smudged white sage, desperate for peace. But no matter how I prepared, restorative dreams evaded me.

Instead, one night after a prolonged meditation, I found myself staring into a deep pool. The surface shimmered with the essence of the Moon, and as the image clarified, I realized my appearance had changed—my skin emanated a luminescence, a milky-white glow that mirrored the moonlight flooding down.

It wasn't my reflection I was seeing, I realized, but Igaluk, the Moon goddess's. Her luminous green eyes sparkled with the hope of early spring buds, yet beneath that beauty surged powerful, otherworldly energy.

“Restore the bond, Seraphina. Restore what is meant to be,” the goddess urged, her words rippling with intensity.

My pulse quickened, dread stealing through me. “I can't,” I gasped, shaking my head.

I had always drawn strength from Igaluk's presence, but this? I couldn't accept it. So much had happened between Tyler and me—pain and betrayal. Besides, I hadn't returned to the Silver Moon Pack for Tyler. I'd only come back here for my parents. Tyler belonged to a past that I desperately wanted to close.

"I respect your decision," Igaluk said, her tone rich with understanding yet laden with gravity. "But listen well."

My heart thudded painfully as trepidation hung between us. "Every wolf shifter should have a fated mate," she continued, her voice resonating, each word an ominous stone sinking into the lake's depths. "Fate has already arranged everything for you. Do not worry. You will eventually see your true heart."

At dawn's first blush, consciousness returned. As I awakened, anticipation and anxiety twisted within. I felt the mate bond that I had desperately fought against threatening to dissipate. Like a flame flickering in the breeze, it quivered, then was... gone. I'd once severed the bond before, but this time it felt different. I recognized that the bond had disappeared completely. For a moment, I searched for it again in my chest, feeling the tide of my panic rising as if a piece of my very essence had slipped into the ether. My heart felt hollow in a way I had never experienced before. I felt the lack like a piece of land that once held life, but it had been uprooted, the space now barren and scarred.

In that agonizing moment of clarity, awareness struck me like thunder. If I felt the loss of our bond so acutely, then Tyler would, too. The thought sent another wave of panic crashing through me. I couldn't face him. I dashed to the bathroom.

A heartbeat later, Tyler's soft knock echoed through the door. "Seraphina?" His voice held a thread of concern that tugged painfully at me.

"Yes?" I replied, forcing my voice into a semblance of steadiness though my insides

quaked.

“Are you all right?” The weight of his concern settled heavily on my chest, the sincerity of it making tears spring to my eyes.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, but the words felt hollow against the backdrop of my fraying emotions.

“I thought I felt...” he trailed off, an unspoken question hanging between us. Did he know? Did he feel the same depth of loss that I did?

I moved away from the door, grateful for the barrier between us. Could he read the guilt radiating from me? I couldn’t face his piercing gaze. It would unravel me completely.

“Look, Tyler, I need to shower and get to the infirmary, okay?” I attempted to sound neutral, to project indifference as if nothing had changed between us.

Silence stretched out, thick and suffocating, the ragged beat of my heart pounding in my ears.

“Okay.” His voice was low. “Just know I’m here if you want to talk.”

A single tear slipped past my defenses, trailing down my cheek—a stark reminder of the ache lodged deep within me. I felt his presence, steady and unwavering, yet I turned away, retreating further from him.

I undressed and stepped into the spray of hot water, closing my eyes and willing the water to wash away my guilt and longing for Tyler, something that still echoed through me despite the bond being gone.

Thankfully, I ducked out of the house without seeing him. I rushed through my morning, feeling strangely robotic as if on autopilot—a pattern that continued daily. Each dawn, I leaped into my work, brewing teas to fend off the illness that was still holding the Silver Moon warriors in its grip, losing myself in the world of herbs and healing.

Despite doing everything I could to help the ill Silver Moon packmates, the pack's resentment remained as entrenched as ever. One morning, as I hurried through the crisp morning air on my way to the infirmary, I spotted a pair of Silver Moon warriors—Justin and Hudson—changing shifts for their patrol. Their hackles rose in unison as they passed, casting me icy glares that sent a shiver racing down my spine. Such reminders that I was still an outsider, shunned by most, were constant.

Yet, as I came into the infirmary, a chipper voice reminded me that not everyone was the same. “Morning, Seraphina!”

“Hey, Tara,” I replied with a smile. The young warrior of just eighteen sat at Neave's bedside, one of the patients still afflicted by the illness. My heart lightened as she beamed at me.

She'd been dropping in to visit the Silver Moon warriors regularly. She was part of the patrol, one of only two females along with Neave, whose strength and training had been honed to the point where she was a valued member of the warrior wolves.

Tara had told me that Neave's encouragement had led her to aspire to the patrol. I knew Tara had moved in with Neave and Ollie when she'd been orphaned at a very young age. Tara was like family to them, I supposed, in a similar way I was to Tyler. I knew she empathized with me in a way that hardly anyone else could, having experienced losing both parents, too.

“Would you let me practice a new hairstyle on you?” Tara asked, her eyes filled with

friendliness.

The request caught me off guard, but warmth blossomed in my chest. Over the last couple of years, I had cherished the moments spent with Selina, who would brush and braid my hair, a common pastime for females of any pack, mimicking the grooming rituals of our wolves. And before Selina, it hadn't been since my mom brushed my hair that I'd experienced that kind of bond.

"Sure, I'd love that," I managed, a smile breaking through the fog of my lingering sadness.

Late that afternoon, another friendly face dropped into the infirmary to see me.

Elder Carl entered with a smile for me. "That new texts we requested from Silver Moon University have arrived, Seraphina."

In addition to my work in the infirmary, I'd been spending most evenings in the library, hoping to find a long-term herbal remedy that might cure the pack of this illness. Elder Carl had been helping me request books. I was still affiliated with Silver Moon University, but it was only elders and alphas who could request the more ancient texts that I suspected were where a cure might be found.

A thrill shot through me. "Amazing. Thank you, Carl."

Carl waved my thanks aside with a hand. "You're the one who should be thanked, my dear," he said, a twinkle lighting his aged blue eyes, his wrinkled and weather-mottled face, making me think of the old books and their worn parchment I couldn't wait to see.

Elder Carl joined me, and we swiftly navigated our way to the library. The scent of aged paper greeted me like an old friend, igniting memories of my teenage years

spent pouring over the books housed in our pack's modest library. The glow from the soft green library lamps illuminated the pages cursive script as we poured over the books together.

Hours passed in a blur of study, my gaze drinking in the lines of ancient herbal wisdom. Finally, I came across an account detailing a herb that had cured an illness spread with dark magic in a shifter community in the nineteenth century. Hope pounded through me. I looked at the picture of the herb more carefully and felt a prickle of recognition, remembering a trek that Mom and I had taken up the Nuvuja Mountains in my childhood. This rare plant, known as jedra, grew on the forested slopes of our mountain.

"I found something!" I exclaimed, elation ringing in my voice.

But my celebration was short-lived as I looked up to catch sight of Logan—his hulking form lurching out of the stacks at my exclamation. He glowered at me, his scrutiny stark against this newfound hopefulness in my chest.

I could see from Logan's alert body language that, as usual, he suspected I was up to no good. No doubt, he'd want to follow me. With that thought in mind, I excused myself from Carl loudly. "I better go tell Tyler about this."

As I hurried back through the snow, thoughts of going off and handling this by myself took root. I could pick up some supplies and slip off to the mountains before anyone missed me. The night was only just falling, and I knew I could pick up my harvesting stuff, pack it away in the bag Selina gifted me, and take off in wolf form up the mountain. I was returning earlier than usual, and with any luck, Tyler would still be out on pack duties, too.

But, opening the door, Tyler was seated at the kitchen table, a steaming mug warming his hands while he scribbled in a notebook. His bright blue eyes widened in surprise,

and he shot to his feet.

“Are you all right?” he blurted out, worry quickly blanketing his handsome face.

He’d gotten so used to me returning late that he assumed only trouble would bring me back early. A mixture of frustration and guilt washed through me.

“Everything’s fine,” I assured him.

He looked at me quizzically, his gaze brushing over me, and I knew there was no way I was going to be able to slip out with my bag of supplies without an explanation.

I forced myself to explain, “I’ve had a good breakthrough in the library. Elder Carl requested some texts to research herbs that might contain more long-term curatives for the Silver Moon warriors. We think we’ve found a potential herb.” I swallowed hard, my pulse quickening under his watchful gaze. “Jedra—it grows on the mountains. It’s rare, but I’ve found it in the forested peaks with my mom years ago.”

Tyler’s expression transformed, determination igniting in his cerulean eyes. “That’s great news! If we set out soon, we should make base camp before midnight,” he declared, his steps and movements already purposeful as he carried his mug to the sink.

Alarm bells rang in my mind. I didn’t want him to come with me. “I’d like to search for the herb alone. I only came back to grab my harvesting supplies,” I insisted, striving to hold onto my resolve.

Tyler’s expression went rigid as he turned around to face me. “Absolutely not.” His voice was firm and unwavering. “I’m going with you, Seraphina.”

“No,” I said, my heart pounding, refusing to step down despite the waves of authority

that roiled off Tyler's tense figure. The last thing I wanted was to be alone with him.

"I won't allow you to wander into the wilds alone when a traitor is lurking in the shadows," he pressed, a hard edge creeping into his voice.

I bristled, irritation battling against reason. "If I leave immediately, I'll be back without anyone noticing—"

"I'm coming with you. That's final," he interrupted, his tone making it clear that there was no room for debate.

I inhaled sharply, torn between anger and an inexplicable longing. Tyler's protective instincts—albeit annoying—were sensible. But that only deepened my frustration.

Just then, the memory of Logan shadowing me in the infirmary, his ever-watchful gaze full of suspicion, filled my mind.

"Okay," I finally relented, a reluctant accord settling between us. "But let's take Logan, too."

Tyler's brow knitted. "Logan?"

"You and I leaving town will hardly go unnoticed," I countered. "It'll be easier to keep watch if we have someone else with us, especially if we run into trouble."

With someone else present, I hoped to retain control over my emotions. My heart raced as I faced the prospect of an adventure into the mountains. Logan's instinct to shadow me could at least provide protection from the real danger—my own feelings. I knew the mate bond had disappeared, but my attraction to Tyler was still very real, and I understood that my affection for him was more than just the remnants of that connection.

As the shadows of the night fell, I packed for the unexpected journey ahead. All the while, the pull of the Moon goddess gnawed at the edges of my resolve. She had spoken of fate. Would this be the turning point? Would I find guidance, or would the shadow of my past dictate my future?

Seraphina

Sunlight filtered through the dense canopy, casting dappled patterns of warmth on the cool forest floor. Each beam glinted off dew-kissed leaves like liquid gold, igniting the forest in a vibrant palette of greens and browns. Tyler, Logan, and I moved quietly through the ancient trees, our human forms navigating the underbrush with purpose. Anticipation coursed through my veins, and every one of my senses felt heightened by my hunt for the rare pink buds of the jedra herb.

Both Tyler and Logan lugged hefty packs, bulging with camping supplies. I carried a lightweight rucksack with my magic supplies and a box to carry the herb should we be successful on our hunt. We'd broken up camp that morning, leaving the remnants of our fire smoldering against the backdrop of the Nuvuja Mountains. Now, our ascent along the lower slopes became steeper with every passing hour.

The air was filled with the earthy scent of moss and fallen pine needles. We didn't speak as we scanned the forest floor. Only our footfalls interrupted the forest's relative peace. Logan had been pretty much silent at camp, too. Both he and Tyler had taken the first watch last night. When I'd awoken to take over, Logan had claimed not to be tired, so only Tyler had rested.

Logan still didn't trust me. Out here in the wild, Logan had kept the same careful eye on me that he'd seemed to think necessary back in Nahachoh. I glanced over at him, noticing the shadows beneath his eyes from his lack of sleep. As we'd shared the warmth of the campfire in silence last night, I'd imagined telling him that it was I who had decided to bring him, amusing myself by imagining the look of surprise that would blanket his face.

But I'd contented myself with the thought that Logan was doing exactly what I'd hoped, acting as a buffer. With his presence, Tyler and I hadn't had a single moment alone.

As we continued our way, the rugged slope of the mountain ascended more steeply. As my gaze flew up, I felt a sudden draw. My heart raced, intuition deepening in the pit of my stomach as I scanned the gray crags of the mountain. I spotted a delicate tuft of pink flowers nestled in a narrow crevice, glimmering jewel-like against the gray stone.

"That's it," I breathed. It must be a good thirty feet above us, but the herb was so rare. I wasn't going to let that stop me. "Those crevices are so narrow only a female wolf will fit," I blurted out, my heart racing. With the herb being incredibly difficult to find, I knew I had to collect every specimen we saw, even if it meant taking a risk.

Tyler took off his pack, his serious gaze taking in the height and steepness of the cliff. From the solemn expression on his face, I knew he was about to argue.

Quickly, I shed my clothes, only briefly self-conscious as I unclasped my bra. But in a moment, I'd shifted, the familiar pulse of my wolf bursting forth, her strength coursing through me, thrilling me.

"Seraphina!" Tyler's shout barely reached me over my pounding heart as I raced up the cliff. Instinct guided me, and the need to retrieve the herb consumed my thoughts. Each foothold felt precarious as I scampered upward, the rocks scraping against my paws, but I heaved myself up the slope, edging along the mountain's crevice.

Tyler's voice faded away. Even the wind's call and its touch through my fur fell away as I hauled myself up the jagged rockface. It was just me and the mountain. My wolf reveled in the challenge, each movement taking all of her agility and determination as she ground her claws into the stone, heaving her sleek-muscled body up the slope.

I panted with the strain it took me to shift my lupine form along the rocks, but every few minutes, I made progress up the mountain. Finally, I reached the ledge on which the herb bloomed. Triumph shot through me. The herb beckoned beneath a blanket of moss and roots entwined in the shallow soil. With careful precision, I dug my claws into the earth, uprooting the jedra. I couldn't give it the reverence it deserved but cradled it in my mouth as gently as possible.

Descending, my muscles strained with even more effort as I dug my claws into the treacherous slope, inching down on my forelegs as I eased myself down the peak. My belly scraped the jagged slope, but I forced myself not to ground my teeth, the precious herb in my mouth obliging me to keep my jaw soft.

Back on the forest floor, I carefully dropped the herb, morphing into my human form.

"I told you to wait," Tyler censured.

"And I told you, I'm more capable than you think," I argued, tilting my chin up, a mixture of determination and defiance catching me up. Tyler's nostrils flared with anger, but the glint in his blue eyes had my heart thrumming with something other than anger.

Suddenly, I was very aware of my nakedness. I caught up my clothes, slipping my knickers on, which finally prompted Tyler to turn his back on me. I didn't miss the way his Adam's apple bobbed or the flush of heat on his cheeks. My stomach flip-flopped, but I quashed the sensation.

My cheeks heated as I considered again that it was a good thing Logan was here with me and Tyler; when one couldn't even shift without getting all hot and bothered, there was a definite need for a buffer. With surprise, I noticed that Logan had turned away from me, too. I'd expected him to make me feel as uncomfortable as possible, but he'd been decent and given me privacy to dress.

“I’m decent,” I announced to them both as I squatted down to pack away the precious herb in my hand in its box.

When Logan turned around, his entire demeanor had altered, and respect shone in his eyes. “This past week, I’ve been watching you,” he said, his expression intense.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I deadpanned.

I thought I detected the minutest smile, but it was gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

I picked up the box with the jedra, carefully putting it away in my bag.

“You’ve dedicated yourself to treating the sick,” Logan continued, “even those who have treated you poorly. Now, you’ve risked your life to get that herb. I respect that.”

I looked up at him with surprise. A strange prickling sensation washed over me from the crown of my head right down to my spine. Logan’s brown eyes, ordinarily so hostile, were centered on me with complete earnestness. For a moment, I felt more bare than I had when I’d been naked. Even Tyler’s expression, etched with frustration from my dangerous climb, seemed to fade into the background as Logan seemed to be extending this wholly unexpected olive branch.

But clearly, I’d read too much into his words as he added, “Don’t for a second think I trust you fully. I’ll be keeping a close eye on you when we get back.”

My lips twitched. Logan was back to being himself.

Before I could respond, a guttural growl sliced through the air, freezing my blood. Black wolves emerged from the shadows of the trees, their onyx fur glinting ominously in the muted light. Eyes burning with malevolence, they stalked toward us,

primal rage etched into their features.

My heart hammered. All six Alaskan packs had different colored fur, and the wolves with the ebony coats belonged to the Black Moon Pack.

“Fire the flare, Logan!” Tyler ordered before shifting into his majestic silver wolf, his glinting coat like that of all of us Silver Moons.

From the side of his pack, Logan drew out a flare gun. Without hesitation, he pointed the gun skyward. The rocket spiraled up in a blazing arc, illuminating our surroundings as it exploded like a fiery star.

Yet, the black wolves advanced, their growls rumbling through the forest as they circled us, slowly surrounding us. I held my breath, anticipation crackling around us like static. My magic pooled in my veins, a hidden power awakening.

The black wolves lunged, snarls echoing and their teeth gleaming in the low light.

I raised my hands, and a protective barrier sprang to life, shimmering like liquid light, encasing Tyler, Logan, and myself.

In a moment, Logan had shifted into his silver wolf, too. My shield allowed both him and Tyler exit and entry, a fluid curtain of protective energy, but it was as impenetrable as the mountain rock to the enemy wolves.

Both silver wolves locked onto the invading wolves. When the first black wolf lunged, Tyler launched himself through the barrier, a silver streak colliding with the ebony shadow, the two spinning in a whirl of claws and teeth.

But then, the weight of dark magic pressed against my shield, a force that took all of my focus. Shock ricocheted through me. Where had that come from?

Logan launched himself through the barrier, his movements fierce and swift as he brought down two black wolves before returning to the safety of our circle. Both he and Tyler fought with calculated coordination, their attacks brutal and efficient. The clash of black wolves as they threw themselves against my shield crackled with energy, but they couldn't penetrate it.

But then something shifted; a figure emerged from the trees—someone in human form. He boasted rippling muscles, and his arms were adorned with tattoos that coiled around them like shadows. But it wasn't his figure alone that was intimidating. It was what he held—an artifact, some sort of medallion studded with different ores.

Dread stole through me as I sensed the power pulsing around this relic. The hint of dark magic that had assaulted my shield earlier came from this man and relic. The familiar oily residue I felt from the Black Moons' dark magic thickened against my skin. My heart raced as I realized this was no ordinary group of wolves. This man, wielding this relic, reeked of powerful dark magic. The object he wielded was one steeped in the darkest kind of magic, and those crystals were instilled with cursed magic.

In a moment, the Black wolves fell back toward him, and Tyler and Logan moved back into my protective circle. Tyler shifted once more into his human form, his muscled, powerful body taut with tension as he fixed his attention on the newcomer.

The tattooed man had longish dark hair and a silvery scar across his cheek, giving him a roguish look. He pinned his dark stare on Tyler.

The man's gaze settled on Tyler, his eyes gleaming with a malevolent intensity. "Alpha Tyler, what a fine thing to happen upon you." His words were laced with sarcasm.

Tyler's face remained impassive, but a hint of anger simmered beneath the surface.

“Alpha Marcus, I presume?” His voice dripped with disdain.

Marcus chuckled, his grin twisting into a snarl. “My reputation precedes me,” he sneered, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Tyler’s gaze fell to the dark relic in Alpha Marcus’s hands. “You know using dark magic to spread illness is a coward’s way of fighting?”

A flash of anger crossed Marcus’s face, and he took a deliberate step closer, his voice lowering to a cold whisper. “Let’s see if you dare call me coward when you and your witch are on your knees.”

The dark relic he clutched gleamed ominously. The wolves at his side growled in response, their eyes glowing like embers.

Tyler straightened, defiance igniting in his chest. “You can’t intimidate me. A true leader doesn’t hide behind curses and shadows.”

The tension crackled between them as Tyler shifted once more into his mighty silver wolf.

“ Unnuak atuutluk tuku! ” Alpha Marcus’s voice boomed with power. The ancient language of the goddess was sharp and guttural as his curses flew at me like arrows.

I’d never felt anything as powerful or grotesque. That last word of the incantation pulled at me: “ tuku — kill .” I felt the certainty in that word and in the oily residue that pulsed from the artifact and Marcus’s will.

Sweat broke across my brow, rivulets winding down my back. With every ounce of determination, I reinforced my barrier. I clenched my fists and teeth, willing all of my strength into the force field around us. The rhythmic thud of my heartbeat drowned

out the growls around me, filling my senses with urgency. But the artifact glowed ominously, and a pulse of malevolent energy rushed at me—a darkness that seemed almost alive as it barreled toward me.

“No!” I screamed. I reached out with my magic, pouring my essence into the barrier, but it shimmered and faltered dangerously. Shards of light shattered like glass around me, splintering, leaving myself and the two silver wolves exposed. I felt the oppressive surge of the Black Moon’s power crushing my own as time seemed to slow and stretch around me.

“ Unnuak atuutluk tuku! ” The Black Moon leader chanted again. His voice was all-consuming. The bloodlust in it centered on me as he sent another wave of darkness from the relic toward me. Without my barrier, I knew this was it. I didn’t have the energy to conjure anything else. I didn’t even have the energy left to shift into my wolf’s form, who might have been able to outmaneuver this dark magic. The whisper of my wolf beneath my skin was too weak to even rise to the surface after I’d drained my magic.

But then, Tyler’s wolf threw himself in front of me. A low growl resonated from Logan, too, as he joined him, the two of them forming a wall of silver fur. Protectiveness radiated from them both as they positioned themselves between me and the encroaching tide of dark magic. Like a crashing wave, the darkness hit the two wolves. The air crackled with tension as their bodies collided with the oncoming threat.

Terror and shock pounded through me. The world around me was a cacophony of growls and the breaking wave of darkness. Then, both my protectors, who had taken the full force of that hit, slumped to the forest floor.

Were they all right? But before I could check on them, two massive black wolves stole toward me. My heart raced as I braced myself to fight, not just for my sake, but

for Tyler and Logan's. The air hummed with tension, the distance closing all too quickly as the wolves charged.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

With each thud of the black wolves' paws against the forest floor, my heart raced violently, drumming a frantic beat in my chest. Dizziness swirled through me, and I gasped for breath, desperately trying to steady myself. Tyler and Logan lay incapacitated, and I felt the weight of exhaustion creeping in, threatening to steal me away at any moment.

The fragile wisps of magic within me felt painfully inadequate against the murky shadows pressing in from all sides. Panic churned as a primal instinct clawed at me. My wolf roared for freedom, especially with the two menacing wolves charging at me. But I clamped down the urge to shift; fangs and claws would do little against the tide of dark magic enveloping us.

"No!" I screamed, my voice piercing the damp air, trembling with desperation and determination. "I won't let you have them!"

I pressed my palms to the earth, feeling the vibrant energy of the Nuvuja Mountains swirl beneath me like a living entity. I reached deep into the ground, calling upon the hidden roots, ores, and crystals that lay buried far below. The ancient energy sang through my blood, reverberating with the pulse of the mountain yet trembling under the malignant influence of the dark artifact.

The forest itself whispered encouragement, urging me to tap into the raw wildness coursing through its roots, an instinctive reminder of our land's potent power. The mountain's magic surged through me, igniting a renewed strength within my body and fueling my spirit.

I leaped forward, positioning myself protectively over my fallen companions.

As the black wolves lunged, they collided with an invisible barrier of pure energy. One wolf snarled, jaws snapping fiercely, but recoiled as if struck by lightning, its eyes wide with shock. The second wolf crashed into the first, jerking back with a yelp of pain, confusion flickering across its sleek, dark face. Power coursed through me, amplifying my magic and lending resilience to the shield enveloping me, Tyler, and Logan.

Then, howls I knew deep in my marrow suffused the air: Silver Moons. They'd seen the flare. They'd come. I barely had time to process the wonderful energy of my pack joining me before the Silver Moon warriors swarmed. Silver fur flashed like lightning through the dusky backdrop of the forest, driving the Black Moons back.

As the Black Moon leader retreated with his medallion, a renewed fire ignited within me, and I felt the current of my energy roaring through my veins.

As the last of the black wolves slipped into the shadows, a heavy silence fell over the clearing, broken by the panting Silver Moons catching their breath.

But my heart sank as I turned to where Tyler and Logan lay, their bodies crumpled on the forest floor, the nightmare of the darkness we'd just faced evident in their stillness.

I ran to them, my mind racing. Transforming into my human form, my hands ran over them. "No," I breathed. The dark magic still pulsed through them, clinging to them like an oily residue.

But...the sound of two steady heartbeats were apparent beneath my palms and flooded my heightened shifter senses as I was finally able to focus on them both. Relief washed over me.

Tara joined me, kneeling beside them, worry etched on her delicate face. Her short, tousled hair framed her worried hazel eyes. “What happened?” she asked.

“They protected me,” I managed, warmth stinging behind my eyes as tears threatened to spill. “They shielded me from a curse.”

“I’m pleased you’re okay, Seraphina,” Tara said gently, her eyes soft with understanding that cut through my spiraling thoughts.

She reached out, squeezing my shoulder, the simple touch grounding me in a way words couldn’t.

“Can you heal them?” she asked, seriousness threading through her tone.

I nodded, already making an inventory of the herbs I’d need. From all my recent work in the infirmary, I knew the supply closet held everything I’d need.

“We found a herb to cure the other Silver Moons, too,” I told Tara. “It’s a very potent herb—I can use a tiny bit of it to help Tyler and Logan before we use the rest to cure the Silver Moon warriors. But we’ll need to get them back to Nahachoh first.”

A flush of joy colored Tara’s cheeks, and I was sure she was thinking of Neave and the other Silver Moon warriors still in the infirmary. But steely resolve soon stole over her face. “Let’s get going then.”

The warriors formed a perimeter, ensuring the safety of their Alpha, while Justin and Hudson took Tyler and Logan on their backs, carrying them back in fireman’s lifts, their huge wolves draped like pelts over their backs.

I remained close to them, trying to get my drumming heart under control by listening to the steady beat of theirs. But the journey back through the forest stole my attention

frequently, dread spilling through me that at any moment, the threat of the Black Moons might return.

Eventually, we reached the stone buildings of Nahachoh. With immense relief—and weariness—I stumbled inside the infirmary, watching the warriors carefully lay Tyler and Logan on a pair of beds. Their wolves’ flanks rose and fell steadily, but the grotesque reek of dark magic cloying around their auras told me I needed to treat them as soon as possible.

David, Neave, and Harry, the packmates still afflicted by the illness, looked on from their beds, their faces fraught with worry.

Healer Linda was at the sink in the corner, the pale blue of her scrubs highlighting her dewy complexion and neatly tied-back blonde hair. She turned off the water as soon as we crowded into the infirmary, her attention quickly shifting to Tyler and Logan. Elder Darius stood nearby, his formidable presence casting a shadow over the room.

Linda’s brows knit together with concern as she crouched beside Tyler, gently brushing her palm across his forehead. Meanwhile, Darius stepped forward, his gaze sharp as he surveyed the scene.

I had hoped to see Kelly or Laura, the infirmary aides, to assist me with the supplies and equipment I’d need. But I couldn’t afford to be picky; Linda would have to aid me.

Determined to set aside our differences, I quickly asked, “Linda, I need pomenta, kulvitch, and spray lilies. Tyler and Logan were hit by a curse.”

But before Linda could respond, Elder Darius interrupted, “Not so fast!” His voice was like steel, cutting through the heavy air.

The elder's face hardened as he scrutinized me, suspicion swirling in his dark brown eyes. "You don't seriously expect my daughter to just take your word for what happened out there, do you? For all we know, this curse is your work!" he spat, gesturing toward Tyler and Logan.

Fury roiled through me. "I protected them. I tried to save them!"

"Did you?" Darius surveyed me with judgment.

Mistrust sharpened Linda's features, too. She turned around. "You left with the Alpha and your biggest critic—only for you to return unharmed while they're cursed." Her lips were pressed into a grim line.

A potent mixture of astonishment and anger churned in me, making me tremble. My tiredness from the fight with the Black Moons left me feeling fragile, but now my blood spiked with adrenaline as I faced renewed scrutiny. I knew I shouldn't be surprised at this treatment; I'd faced enough doubts from them about my intentions. But part of me—after everything I'd done to help heal the packmates—still felt the sting of betrayal.

"They shielded me from a curse cast by Black Moons," I argued, my voice rising above the tension.

Tara, her hazel eyes shining with fierce determination, piped up, "We just witnessed how hard Seraphina fought to protect Tyler and Logan from the Black Moon wolves."

"And she brought back the herb that will treat the other warriors from this lingering illness," Tara added, her voice unwavering as she looked past Linda and Darius, fixing her shining eyes on Neave and the other afflicted warriors still in the infirmary, their faces shadowed with concern.

I hadn't noticed Elder Carl step forward from the crowd of Silver Moon warriors gathered by the entrance, but his presence was a comfort. His voice was steady and sure as he asserted, "Seraphina has been researching tirelessly for a cure the whole last week. You shouldn't be doubting her when she clearly has the pack's best interests at heart."

The elder's unwavering faith filled me with warmth, but it did nothing to lift Darius and Linda's skepticism.

Darius's expression was as unyielding as granite as he ordered, "That's enough. Seraphina can't be trusted." He pointed at me. "Arrest her now!"

Desperation flooded me, igniting my spirit until I felt a furnace roaring inside. I could feel my magic rising, ready to respond to this blatant injustice. I noticed that none of the Silver Moon warriors around the door came forward, but I wouldn't risk them interfering.

"Enough!" I shouted, my voice slicing through the air. The words spiraled with power, my magic pulsing stronger than ever before as I raised my hands; I was grateful I'd channeled so much energy from the roots of the mountain earlier.

With a snap of my fingers, my magic burst forth, weaving around Darius and Linda. A silencing force snatched the words right from their mouths. Their eyes widened, shock rippling through their features as they attempted to speak, but no sound escaped.

"You will listen to me!" I commanded, my voice resonating with authority. A ripple of energy washed over the room, and I directed my focus back to Tyler and Logan, desperate to treat them. I wouldn't let other people's misguided ideas about justice and retribution claim more innocent lives. Not like my parents' lives had been.

I decided I didn't need herbs for this. That would take too long. It gave Darius and Linda too much time to interfere. I'd call on more deep-rooted magic for this. Both Tyler and Logan had leaped in front of me to shield me from that curse. That kind of sacrifice brought a magic all of its own.

I stood between their beds. The distance between them was too great for my hands to reach both of them, so I asked Tara, "Would you push Logan's bed closer toward me?"

With urgency, she maneuvered Logan's bed nearer, positioning it so I could stand between him and Tyler, resting my hands upon them both.

My hands hovered over their fur, the fire of my witchcraft igniting once more. I took out the crystals from my bag that would help: the sikin and ivis, the warmth and energy of the sun in one, and the crystal that helped absorb magic into the blood.

"Kaumma ukigiruk kaumanik," I whispered.

I moved through the motions swiftly, channeling my light into their forms, willing the warmth I felt for what they'd done for me to combat the oily slick of dark magic enveloping them.

I closed my eyes now as I concentrated on the aura of light flowing from the crystals. I pressed my hands more firmly to their fur, feeling the steady beat of their wolves' hearts. I let the light and warmth gather around my hands and then pushed it into both of them. The oily slick of dark magic retreated like shadows retreating in the magnificent rise of the sun. I concentrated fiercely, unwilling to let the doubt of Darius and Linda dim my will.

Beneath my hands, the softness of fur vanished, and the smoothness of skin replaced it.

“Seraphina,” Tyler’s voice rumbled, rough yet comforting. His eyelids fluttered open. His bright blue eyes, like shards of sky, were half-open as he struggled to focus. The fierce lines of his handsome face softened, and a flicker of recognition replaced the momentary worry clouding his features. My heart fluttered at the sight, but I forced myself to concentrate.

“Tyler, you’re okay,” I breathed, relief flooding me as the last residue of dark magic clinging to him washed away. The awareness of his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and chest threatened to steal my attention, especially as the feel of his taut muscles beneath my palm sent a flutter of feeling through me.

But I turned my attention to Logan, who lay beside him. The younger warrior wasn’t quite as broad-chested as Tyler, but his muscular chest was just as taut beneath my palm. Logan groaned, his deep brown eyes blinking back the haze of unconsciousness, his expression mirroring Tyler’s struggle. “What happened?” he rasped, the sound carrying both fatigue and bewilderment.

A remnant of darkness clung to his aura, and I whispered, “Kaumanik.”

The last invocation banished the lingering darkness, and I exhaled with satisfaction. I only sensed the warmth of my healing magic around the two warriors now.

As the realization that they were both all right settled over me, I felt myself teetering on the edge of exhaustion. It was as though the weight of everything—the battle, the fear, the worry—suddenly bore down upon me like a mountain. I fought to stay grounded, but it was no use. My body succumbed to the toll it had taken from the overwhelming exertion of magic I’d just worked. I felt like a rag being rung out of water. All my energy deserted me in one squeeze. My legs buckled, and my vision tunneled.

“Seraphina!” Both Tyler’s and Logan’s voices echoed distantly, filled with urgency.

Their hands reached out to me, but darkness crept in, pulling me under, and I had no choice but to surrender to the void.

As consciousness faded, warmth enveloped me. Both Tyler's and Logan's strong arms caught me. Their presence cocooned me, their actions echoing with the same protective fervor they'd shown in shielding me from the killing curse. The familiar scent of cedar wrapped around me, but beneath it lingered a new, spicy aroma that set my senses ablaze. My heart raced, a bewildering rush of emotions flooding me. When Logan's hand glided across my back, his fingers brushed the bare skin at my waist. A jolt of electricity coursed through me, igniting every nerve with a startling awareness. It was as if his touch awakened something dormant within me.

In that fleeting moment, just before the darkness claimed me, the world shrank to him: the deep resonance of his voice calling my name, his warmth radiating from his touch, and his intoxicating spicy scent. Logan was more than my protector. He was my fated mate. The weight of that truth crashed over me like a wave, raw and overwhelming, as darkness finally dragged me down.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

Three agonizing days had passed since Seraphina collapsed, slipping into an unconscious state after pouring herself into the monumental task of lifting the curse from Logan and me. Each hour felt like an eternity against the relentless tick of the clock that echoed in the dim infirmary. Unease gnawed at my insides. What if there was more to her condition? What if she had absorbed too much darkness from that vile curse, leaving her trapped in a slumber forever?

The silence of the infirmary grew oppressive. I had paced its confines more times than I could count, each turn a reminder of my conflicting emotions—a mix of relief that we had survived and a biting fear that the person who was most precious to me had left me again. I couldn't lose her again.

As the sun set on the second day, a deep resolve gripped my heart: I could no longer remain at Seraphina's bedside. I assigned Logan to guard her. The thought of him by her side gave me some comfort as I knew she'd be safe. It was staggering to think that before our journey up the mountain, I wouldn't have trusted Logan with such a duty. He had long been one of my most trusted warriors, yet I knew his resentment toward Seraphina was longstanding and deeply entrenched. But I recognized the change in him. He had risked his life to save Seraphina when the Black Moon leader had cast that deadly curse. He had even admitted he respected her on the mountainside. I knew that not only would he protect her but that if she woke while I was gone, she would wake to a comforting presence.

So, on the morning of the third day, I stood in the Council Chamber before my pack. The atmosphere crackled with energy. Aside from the warriors on patrol and Logan at

Seraphina's side, I'd summoned the entire pack. They stood in a half-moon shape before me.

The chamber's walls, adorned with shimmering crystals, caught the light and cast vibrant colors across the room. The brilliance of the gems reminded me of Seraphina's healing magic, pulling me out of the darkness and enveloping me with a powerful warmth. Longing shot through me—to see that warmth in her open eyes again, in her smile, and, if the Moon goddess would help me, in the warmth of her arms around me.

Yet, today, I had pressing pack matters that I needed to address. Glancing around at the Silver Moons, I announced,

“Firstly, I'd like you all to welcome the Silver Moon warriors back into our midst. The jedra herb from the mountain has successfully restored them to full health. I am pleased to say that that means the last of the illness has been banished.”

A roar of applause erupted, voices calling out in joy. Well-wishers reached out to shake hands with David, Harry, and Neave, but the time for celebration was limited.

“Which brings me to the real reason I've gathered you today.” My tone shifted, a palpable weight settling over the room, silencing the exuberance. “Our pack's restoration of health wouldn't have happened without the bravery, compassion, and talents of one woman—Seraphina.”

As I spoke her name, confusion and skepticism flickered across some faces. The worst offenders, as I knew they'd be—were Elder Darius and his daughter, Linda.

I injected iron resolve into my voice. “Seraphina risked her life to get that herb from a steep and treacherous cliff on the mountain so as to heal our pack. She risked it again, healing Logan and me from the Black Moon's curse. It is time for all of you to

recognize that Seraphina is one of our pack's most loyal and devoted members."

My words hung ominously, and I watched the expressions shift among the pack. Some averted their gaze, shame blanketing their features, while others exchanged wary glances, caught in the tension between loyalty and mistrust. Confusion and fear gripped them, and I could see the internal struggle etched in every brow furrowed in consideration.

Frustration bristled through me. I longed to announce to everyone that Seraphina's parents were innocent. That all the blame and shame they'd heaped upon her over the years wasn't only unjust because she wasn't accountable for her parents' crime but that they were innocent, too.

I felt the injustice coursing through my veins, but the sobering fact that the real culprit was likely hidden among us now enforced my silence on the matter. The traitor who framed them still hid in the shadows. My heart raced with concern for Seraphina. The sudden emergence of the Black Wolves while we'd been on the mountain felt ominous. Our trip up the mountain must have been leaked by the traitor in our midst.

Some pack members began to nod, their expressions lightening as they contemplated my words. I felt a current of anxiety ripple from others who were still unable to cast past prejudices aside.

I challenged them further. "How many of you have even spoken words of gratitude to Seraphina?" It was a direct, piercing question meant to awaken their sense of honor. I caught sight of Susan flushing. Tom clenched his jaw, and Justin clenched his fists.

Elder Carl's commanding voice rose. "Even before she went up the mountain, Seraphina showed through countless hours of research in the library that she was dedicated to finding a cure for our pack. She has proven herself a loyal packmate who

deserves our respect and gratitude.”

“Thank you, Elder Carl,” I affirmed. I nodded. It filled me with warmth to know that there were packmates in our midst who spoke of the compassion, dedication, and strength for which she deserved to be recognized.

Turning my gaze to Elder Darius and Linda, I felt the concentration of tension in the air. I’d heard from Tara and Elder Carl how Darius and Linda had turned on Seraphina as soon as they’d arrived at the infirmary.

My gaze swept toward them both. I glared from the center of the floor. My steely look brooked no dissent.

“Mark my words. Seraphina is a cherished member of our pack,” I said with weighty finality. “Let me make myself clear: I will not allow anyone to treat her with disrespect or suspicion any longer.”

Elder Darius and Linda’s gaze was averted. They’d settled their expressions into neutral ones. But the account I’d heard of them turning against Seraphina as soon as she and the warriors had arrived at the infirmary made my blood boil still. To think that after the fight she’d endured on the mountain with the Black Moons, she’d been forced with no choice but to expend more of her magic so as to heal Logan and I made me want to lash out at the elder and his daughter.

My wolf wouldn’t settle for just their sign of subservience, and the fury bubbling in me made me demand, “Elder Darius and Healer Linda, I want your word that you understand my command?”

Both the elder and his daughter bobbed their heads, “Yes, Alpha,” they said.

It was my duty to ensure our pack stood unified, especially in the face of the threat of

the Black Moons that continued to hang over us and would until I rooted out the traitor in our midst.

The atmosphere shifted as understanding settled over the gathering. I could sense the tide turning, the building momentum of loyalty and gratitude. Yet, the nagging persistence of knowing our enemy was still among us didn't allow me to get too comfortable. The sudden attack by the Black Wolves pointed to the likelihood that the lurking traitor wanted to do away with Seraphina, who had clearly affected their plans by healing the pack of the magic caused by dark magic. My sense of urgency swelled. I needed to try to make some headway on who it could be.

With thoughts of the traitor festering, I took to my office in the Council Chambers. I reviewed the accounts of David, Harry, and Neave, calling them in again to question them about their actions in the lead up to their illness, which they might have forgotten while being more seriously ill. I compared notes anew, scrutinizing each detail, desperate to uncover a common thread that might reveal the origins of the sickness. Yet, I found myself coming up blank again. There was no pattern and no flash of insight to offer me any solace.

As twilight descended, the need to see Seraphina surged within me. I tidied up my desk, shrugged into my coat, and made my way toward the infirmary, my heart a mixture of dread and yearning. The howling wind tugged at me as I walked through the shallow snow, a chill threading through my veins. Yet, the thought of her and the warmth of her laughter and the reassurance of her smile ignited a soft heat that pushed back the cold.

I remembered the sight of her relief the last time she had gazed down at me, the gentle lilt of her voice wrapping around me like a protective embrace, "Tyler, you're okay."

I had to believe that this hollow ache in my chest that I'd awoken to recently could

still be replaced by the fullness of our bond.

I'd awoken one morning to this feeling of loss, which had instantly compelled me to go to Seraphina. When I'd knocked on the bathroom door to check on her, though, she'd denied feeling anything out of the ordinary. I didn't know if she'd deliberately severed our bond again or somehow insulated herself from it, but the ringing loss I'd felt had been familiar to when she'd broken our bond with magic two years ago.

Yet, I could see that Seraphina still cared about me. And I dared to imagine my girl waking to look at me, that spark of affection she'd held me with growing, unfettered into the mate bond it was always meant to be.

With determination in my step, I pressed through the door to the infirmary, my worries melting away as warmth flooded my senses. The dim, quiet space was interrupted only by the gentle sound of Seraphina's barely audible breath, a rhythmic lullaby that soothed my tattered nerves, reminding me that she was still here, still the steadfast strength by my side.

But, as I crossed the threshold further into the room, I froze, caught off guard by the sight before me. Logan sat beside Seraphina, crouched in the chair protectively over her. Yet it wasn't his being there that halted me; it was the expression carved into his features—a tenderness that bordered on reverence. The light in his deep brown eyes shimmered with a mixture of worry and something else, something that sent a jolt of shock spiraling through my veins.

My wolf bristled with agitation and a raw edge of jealousy.

“Logan,” I called with an uncharacteristic harshness creeping into my tone, my protective instincts flaring to life.

He rose to his feet, seriousness settling like armor over him. “Yes, Alpha?” His

posture was stiff, yet the warmth emanating from his gaze lingered on Seraphina as if she were the Moon, her power too potent and powerful to look away from.

My fists curled tightly at my sides as I struggled to rein in my anger. No, I wasn't about to let misinterpretations twist my thoughts. I was simply starved for the connection we shared. Logan had fought beside her; he owed her gratitude for lifting the curse. That was all this was.

"You may go, Logan," I said, needing more than anything else to get this young male away from my girl, as my wolf simmered and snarled dangerously close to the surface with protective instincts to defend our mate.

But Logan planted his feet, unflinching as he met my gaze. His brown eyes took on an intensity. "I can't leave, Alpha Tyler. Seraphina needs me." His voice was steady but thick with emotion, and he glanced down again at her slumbering form.

My wolf rumbled with rage, his dominance demanding to set down this male who refused my command.

Forcing my tense shoulders down, I dug down into the last of my restraint and said, "Seraphina will be fine with me here. You can leave. Now."

A tense silence stretched between us, thick with unspoken challenge, as I fought with every ounce of restraint.

A glimmer ignited in Logan's brown eyes, an unyielding spark of defiance that told me this wasn't merely about loyalty—it was a claim. "I will not leave my fated mate's side."

In that charged moment, it felt as if his wolf had ripped into me, tearing through my sanity. Incredulity spun through me, leaving me reeling. But my wolf, who snarled

within, fierce and primal, soon defeated my disbelief. If this usurper dared to lay claim to Seraphina, I would defend what was rightfully ours.

Just as my fury threatened to spiral out of control, the only thing that could have snapped me out of this rage did—Seraphina’s eyelids fluttered open, revealing the deep jade of her eyes. In an instant, the world faded, her gaze holding me captive as my heartbeat drummed a wild rhythm in my chest.

Seraphina

The world drifted back into focus. The darkness lifted, and colors bloomed like wildflowers. At first, disorientation clouded my mind, hazy shapes melding in and out of the fog, but as consciousness washed over me, I registered the pale walls of the infirmary. The scent of herbs lingered in the air—robust yet comforting. Yet, dread lingered as I tried to remember why I was lying in the infirmary.

As my surroundings came into focus, my gaze locked onto the two figures at the foot of my bed—Tyler and Logan. Seriousness was etched into both their faces. My heart sped, memories flooding back. The last remnants of darkness fell away—my mind skipping over fragments of what had happened: the Black Moons attacking us on the mountain, how Tyler and Logan threw themselves in front of me—protecting me from the impact of the curse, and how it had taken all of my magic to lift the curse from them.

But the presence of the two men at my side was full of even more confusion as a flush of warmth ignited through me at the sight of both of them.

“Seraphina,” Tyler said, his voice a deep timbre, punctuated with heart-breaking relief that made me wish I could hammer down all of these confusing emotions churning through me. “How are you feeling?”

I shifted slightly, the blankets rustling around me as I drew myself up against the headboard. How was I feeling? Unbelievably confused.

My attention landed on Logan, who stood a little closer than Tyler. Instantly, Logan’s

presence pulled at something deep within me. The revelation crashed over me—as vast as an ocean wave—Logan was my fated mate. The weight of that knowledge sunk into my chest, heavy and potent, pressing me to think of a future I’d never anticipated.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, feeling like the Moon goddess was playing a cosmic joke on me. Igaluk, with all her caprice, had tied me to another. I couldn’t escape the bond’s undeniable tug, but beneath the shimmering strand was a deep-rooted instinct—to recoil and resist it.

In a moment, I remembered the Moon goddess’s words from my dream, “Every wolf shifter should have a fated mate.” My heart punched my chest as I realized that even if I severed the bond, she’d pair me with someone else. If it weren’t Logan, it would be another. As I engaged in a silent battle, I ultimately abandoned the thought of severing this bond. So far, trying to shape my own fate hadn’t gone well.

“Is Logan your fated mate?” Tyler’s question cut through my reverie. His gaze searched me. His voice was mixed with concern and something rawer.

I hesitated, then nodded. “He is.”

The admission felt heavy on my tongue, a mix of resignation and caution. I didn’t say what else I felt—that while I felt the bond, tension churned within me. My wolf was restless, panting anxiously in the background, crying out for freedom and flattening herself down as if she were getting ready to bolt. She didn’t long for Logan, nor did she welcome the prospect of being tied to him. Instead, she actively resisted the bond, clawing at the very fibers that bound us.

But I wouldn’t reveal that—the heaviness in my chest was mine alone. For now, I needed to compartmentalize things. This new obstacle the Moon goddess had presented me with needed to be dealt with.

“Tyler,” I said, steeling myself for what had to come next. “Can you please give us some privacy?” The request fell from my lips, wrapped in unyielding determination, although my heart twisted as I watched the light fade from his bright eyes.

“Seraphina...” He opened his mouth to protest, but the resolute firmness spread like wildfire through my veins as I locked eyes with him, searching for the resolve to stand firm.

I shook my head, shooing away the brewing storm in his gaze. “Please, Tyler. I need to talk to Logan. Alone.”

He hesitated, glancing from me to Logan, confusion and concern lacing his features, before finally conceding. “All right.” He cast a last glance back at me. My wolf rose up, and I felt her frantic energy as if she were nipping and nudging me to stop him. She didn’t want to part with him. It was a feeling that only intensified with the anguished look Tyler gave me before exiting the infirmary. But he went, leaving Logan standing by my side.

As soon as Tyler’s footsteps faded into the distance, I turned my focus to Logan, who remained rooted in place. I tried to fool myself into thinking the intensity with which he looked at me was no different from the hawkish way he’d watched me these last few weeks. But an undercurrent of something more simmered just beneath my skin.

“Logan,” I began, my voice steady despite my racing heart. “We need to talk about this... bond.”

His expression shifted, the warmth radiating from him instantly at odds with the heaviness dragging me down.

“You don’t want to be with me,” I blurted out, needing him to hear my truth.

“What do you mean?” Surprise sparked in his brown eyes. “You’re my fated mate. Of course, I want to be with you!” He spoke with such earnestness as if this were a clear-cut situation. I frowned. This was anything but clear-cut.

I pressed on, ignoring the jagged pain twisting deeper in my chest—the rawness of his emotion, which I felt through this new bond already joining us.

“I mean, I’m not ready for a romantic relationship.” I took a breath, struggling at where to begin. The bond in my chest felt like a snarled, tangled mess. “I only came back to the pack to clear my parents’ names.”

His brow furrowed, confusion clouding his features. But even that look didn’t entirely conquer the unmistakable faith he’d already placed in our bond, which thrummed in my chest. It beat loudly through my body, its presence feeling suffocating.

He approached slowly, looking at me as if I were a skittish animal he was afraid would panic. “Can I sit down?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

He settled into the chair beside my bed. His next words surprised me. “What do you mean you came back to clear your parents’ names?”

I’d expected him to leap into talking about our bond. But the fact that he’d slowed down and listened to me put me a little at ease. I took a breath.

“Did you know the Shadow Moon Pack was invaded by the Black Moons a few months ago?” I asked.

Logan nodded. “I heard they defeated the Black Moons.”

I nodded in agreement. “I was staying with the Shadow Moon Pack at the time, with my friend Selina and Alpha Alexis. After the invasion, Alexis sent out scouts, hoping to capture remnants of the invaders. A few weeks ago, he succeeded. During his interrogation of this Black Moon prisoner, he discovered information about my parents.” I couldn’t help dropping my gaze as I shied away from seeing the animosity I was sure would flare in Logan’s gaze at the mention of my parents.

“The Black Moon prisoner told Alexis that my parents had been framed. He said that there was a traitor within our pack who had gotten my mother and father’s blood to the Black Moon witch. They used blood magic to ensure my parents’ wards and alarm failed.” Expecting his mistrust, I pre-emptively added, “Tyler has a letter detailing all this from Alpha Alexis.” I frowned, feeling the heat rising to my cheeks. “Given the new tie between us, I’m sure Tyler won’t mind that I’ve disclosed this information to you, and if you want proof of it, ask Tyler for the letter.”

“Seraphina,” he intoned. My gaze moved up to meet his. Logan’s forehead was wrinkled, but his brown stare watched me with earnestness. “Your word is all the proof I need.”

His comment, although refreshing, only reminded me of when I’d told Tyler this news and about Alexis’s letter. I heard Tyler’s low voice, “I have always trusted you. I will always trust you... if I’d only trusted you to guide me, my heart would still be whole.” My heart pounded in my chest, the memory and my wolf howling within, longing for Tyler.

Logan released a heavy sigh. “Now it’s my turn. Will you hear me out?”

I nodded, my chest filling with nerves.

“In light of this bond between us... and what you’ve just told me, I need to say how sorry I am. I’m sorry I made life here for you so hard.”

I worried the blankets between my fingers. I shrugged. “It’s in the past.” I didn’t want Logan to feel like he had to make up for how he’d mistreated me in the past, especially with the weight of this mate bond between us. I knew from the way he’d shielded me from that killing curse in the forest that he was a loyal, dutiful warrior. I could imagine how easily he could get it into his head that he had to make up for the way he’d treated me by being a steadfast mate to me now.

So, I pressed on, eager to assure him that his bullying hadn’t had as big an impact on my life as he thought. “I’ve moved on, Logan. I made friends at Silver Moon University and in the Shadow Moon Pack,” I said, honestly.

But instead of looking reassured by this, Logan’s face grew even more burdened. “You mean I drove you away? That I and the other packmates forced you to live elsewhere?”

I shook my head, hating the worry on his face.

With more honesty, I said, “Perhaps your bullying and that of some of the other packmates influenced me to go to Silver Moon University. But once I was there, I loved it. There, I’ve made lifelong friends, and these past two years have been some of the happiest of my life.” Once again, I ignored the tug of my wolf, who, at that moment, decided to raise her head and whimper at the fact that for the last two years, she’d been deprived of Tyler. Her restlessness said that she hadn’t been any happier than now.

Concern pooled like a potent potion in Logan’s gaze, and I felt how off-track I’d gotten. I forced myself to affirm what I really needed to.

“I know you and I don’t belong together, Logan. Not because of the past but because I don’t belong here. Because after I clear my parents’ names, I’m leaving again.”

“The bond in my chest says otherwise, Seraphina,” he said instantly, holding my stare. “We’re fated mates. We’re meant to be together.”

I shook my head, fighting against the tumult of emotions swirling in my chest.

“No. I need you to understand what I’m saying. This isn’t about you and me. I can’t—” I paused, searching for my next words, a strange tide of emotion strangling me as I thought of Tyler.

But I clung to my resolve again. I hadn’t come here for Tyler. And I hadn’t come here for Logan.

No matter what the Moon goddess thought, I didn’t want a fated mate. The bond between me and Logan thrummed with an intensity I was unprepared for, a relentless pull that stirred something deep inside me. Yet, the idea of surrendering to it felt like relinquishing my freedom—a freedom that had become precious after spending so long away from this place and battling everything that had happened here in the past.

“I can’t be in a relationship,” I said, my voice almost a whisper. “Once Tyler and I have found the truth about my parents, I’m leaving.”

The thought of leaving sent a tingling sense of hope coursing through me. My wolf growled softly, sensing the threat of being tethered to Logan. I couldn’t allow myself to become entangled in this bond, not when I was still trying to navigate my feelings for Tyler. The idea of being bound to someone—of losing the ability to choose my own path—chilled me. I’d tasted independence, and I wanted to savor it.

Logan leaned forward, a hopeful glow in his eyes. “But after we’ve proven that your parents were innocent, you can have friends here, too, Seraphina. You were born here. You grew up here,” he said with fervor. “Besides, the way you’ve fought to help the Silver Moons these last few weeks and on the mountain shows you’re one of

us.”

I frowned, not sure of what to say to the heartfelt look in his eye. I’d been fighting to cure the illness so that we could focus on who the traitor was in our midst. I’d helped because doing so would unearth the truth and allow me to leave Tyler and the pack behind once and for all.

Frustration and annoyance fired through me, something that must have been obvious in my expression as Logan raised his hands and said, “You look like you’re going to use your magic on me.” His lips twitched, the motion recalling the way he’d looked at me on the mountain. He had almost smiled at me when I’d joked about not noticing him watching me these last few weeks. Confusion whipped through me as the bond between us thrummed with warmth... but my wolf pulled away as she felt the tug, hating the feel of the tether.

I crossed my arms over my chest, huffing. “It’s tempting to shut you up,” I griped.

He smiled fully now. “Tara told me that you did something like that to Linda and Elder Darius—I wish I’d been awake to see that.”

My lips lifted, and I felt a little easier. At the time, I hadn’t had a chance to enjoy it. I admitted, “It was pretty brilliant, even if I do say so myself.”

Tentatively, he said, “In light of what you’ve shared about the danger in the pack, will you please let me protect you while you’re here?” The same intensity that had characterized him as he shadowed me about the pack came over him, but there was undeniable warmth in his voice and a glow in my chest as he waited for my answer.

“I can take care of myself. You don’t need to—”

“You’ve expended a lot of your magic to heal me and Tyler. Will you please let me

protect you, at least, until your magic's back to full capacity?" he said, refusing to give up.

I frowned. He wasn't wrong. I had expended all my magic on healing him and Tyler. It would take days of rest and then rebuilding my magic through training before I would be at full strength again. But I frowned. Why did he have to be so logical?

"Fine," I agreed, my brow knitted.

The warmth I felt blooming in my chest was all Logan's, and it only made me want to argue back again. "This doesn't change anything. Once I've achieved my goal, I'm still going to leave."

He lifted up his hands again. "Noted. Once your goal's achieved, you're going to choose to leave," he said, feigning a neutrality of tone that was at complete odds with the warmth thrumming down the bond. When he said leave, the bond told me he thought I'd stay. The look in his eyes and the glow beating through my chest zinged with hope. My stomach roiled with nausea, recognizing that hopeful glow in my heart as the one I'd once felt toward Tyler—when I'd thought that things would work out. I didn't want to inflict that kind of pain on Logan, but I'd been as clear as possible.

Needing some space from him, if only for a moment, I asked, "Do you think you could get me some peppermint tea?"

He leaned forward, attentiveness prickling over him. "Of course." He stood up, his tall figure already striding away, and called over his shoulder with the hint of a smile on his face, "I won't be long."

I sank back into my pillows, hoping that the infirmary kitchen would be out of peppermint, wishing that he'd give me as long as possible to myself. Frustration and bitterness roiled through me. No matter what the Moon goddess thought, I hadn't

returned to be saddled with another mate. After my parents' names were cleared, I was determined to be unfettered and free.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

My life at Nahachoh settled into a strange new rhythm. Logan was by my side, his presence a constant, warm thrum of protection that followed me—earnest and... persistent.

For the first few days, I was forced to remain in the infirmary as I rebuilt my strength after draining so much of my magic. Most of the time, Logan was there—often deflecting Linda’s blatant dislike of me. She had a habit of taking my blood pressure with unnecessary force, something she didn’t dare do when Logan was present. “Linda, you’re more careful with us warriors, and Seraphina’s much slighter,” he would point out.

He often made jokes about how I could start building my magic muscle up again by practicing on silencing Linda’s constant sighs. Each time a sigh slipped out, he’d raise a brow at me as if daring me to use my magic on her. I would bite back a smile, grateful for his protective care, but... I still had no feelings for him.

After our intense conversation about my parents’ innocence, his bullying in the past, and my intention to leave the pack once their names were cleared, we hadn’t talked in depth again. Yet, I became overly conscious of the warmth rising in my chest whenever he watched me. Since he’d heard the news about my parents’ innocence—and knowing how the Black Moon leader had aimed that killing curse at me—his protective instincts had kicked into overdrive. He barely left my side. Even when he was on patrol duty, he insisted warrior Tara stay with me. In truth, I much preferred her company. It was free of the weighty expectations and hidden agenda that I was sure Logan’s company held.

On the fourth morning of being in the infirmary, Linda finally looked at my bloodwork charts, took my vitals, and declared, “You’re back to normal. I’m discharging you.”

“Thanks, Linda,” I said, hoping that despite her lingering resentment, we might end on a civil note.

But she just nodded curtly before walking away.

“She’s really gonna miss you,” Tara joked under her breath.

I chuckled, watching as Linda got her handbag and left the infirmary. With all the Silver Moon warriors and other packmates fully healed, I was currently the only occupant. I supposed Linda was making the most of this quiet spell.

“Seriously, Tara, what are you doing back there?” I asked.

Tara had been messing with my hair for at least half an hour. “I just can’t seem to get it right,” she said.

I realized what was happening. “You’re deliberately keeping me here, aren’t you?” I accused.

“Logan made me swear I wouldn’t let you out of the infirmary without him,” she admitted.

Frustration whipped through me. I knew Logan’s protective instincts were overbearing, and I resented the restriction he placed on my freedom. I hadn’t confided in Tara about mine and Logan’s new bond, but I was also on edge at the idea of her and other packmates discovering it. With Logan’s overbearing behavior, it wouldn’t be long before they put two and two together. I wanted to keep it under

wraps so that it would be easier to leave after I'd exonerated my parents.

"That's it," I said, wrenching my hair from her grip, even though her gentle braiding had been comforting. "I thought you, of all people, would appreciate that I can look after myself," I challenged.

"I know you can, but Logan's the patrol leader," Tara complained. "It's hard to turn down an order from him."

"Excuse me for wanting to escape Linda giving me the stink eye."

"She's not even here!" Tara argued.

I shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. "I want to get back—have a bath and use my altar." See Tyler, I added silently to myself, my heart drumming with anticipation and nervousness.

"Of course you do," she said, understandingly. "I bet you can't wait to be back in your own space."

Finally, Tara relented but insisted on walking me back to Tyler's house. I hugged her goodbye before letting myself in through the unlocked kitchen door.

Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself for the first encounter I'd had with Tyler since he'd learned Logan and I were fated mates. He hadn't visited me during my four days in the infirmary, something that I admitted stung. Yet, I told myself this space was for the best. Tyler was finally putting the distance between us that I had tried to create before our ascent up the mountain.

But disappointment swept through my stomach as I saw the note on the table: "At the Council Chamber if you need anything, Tyler." Did he know I'd been discharged this

morning? Had he deliberately avoided me? He ordinarily worked at the kitchen table, a steaming cup of coffee beside him, notebook open, unless he was seeing packmates.

I tried to find solace in meditation and a bath. After dinner alone, I got an early night. Much later, I heard Tyler return. In the morning, I heard him quietly leaving at an early hour. I got up to look out at the dawn, realizing we'd reversed roles. He was employing the same techniques I had used to evade confrontation before our journey up the mountain.

Over the upcoming days, the most I saw of him was his back as he skillfully evaded me. Conscious that I should feel relieved by his distance, I focused on myself. With the packmates healed and enough jedra infused into bottles, I worked on exercising my magic. After drawing so much from it, rebuilding my capacity was crucial.

I roped Tara into sparring with me during the first few days, but when she had patrol duty, I thought I'd be forced to skip it. Logan insisted he could help, though. I hesitated to accept his offer, knowing that I should be fostering distance between us now that I was out of the infirmary. But as ever, he proved persistent, even promising me that sparring with him wouldn't be any different from sparring with Tara.

Unexpected duties had come up earlier for Logan, and by the time I stepped into the training ring, night had settled in, enveloping everything in a deep, velvety darkness. The air was crisp and biting, hinting at the onset of fall. A gentle snowfall swirled lazily in the low light.

Flaming torches flickered in the darkening sky, casting an amber glow across the snow-dusted ring. I peeled off my hoodie, the chill hitting my bare arms, and tucked my tank top neatly into my leggings.

Logan stood with his feet planted firmly, exuding a quiet confidence. But it was the intensity in his gaze that caught me off guard. It wasn't the determined look that Tara

often shared with me, but something primal—fiery and consuming. His dark brown eyes burned as they swept over me, igniting heat in my cheeks and making me uncomfortably aware of how different this felt to sparring with Tara.

Logan's tall, muscular figure exuded strength in his lightweight training gear, too. The form-fitting, long-sleeved top clung to his ripped physique while his combat pants showed off his defined legs.

He went to hand me a sparring pole, but I shook my head. "I don't need one. I'm working to build my magic, remember?"

"Sure, but what if you overexert yourself? You're still—"

"Healing, I know." I rolled my eyes. "But I have to push myself. If I want my capacity to grow again, I need to use it. With Tara, I just yelled 'Timeout' when I needed a break. We can do the same."

His brow furrowed as he considered it. "A safe word. All right," he acquiesced, a suggestive smile on his lips.

Uh, again, this was so not the vibe when training with Tara.

Awkwardness bristled along my skin. I began to suspect that he'd only been eager to train with me as he hoped that if we got hot and sweaty together, other feelings might spark. But I gritted my jaw, determined to feel nothing but the determination and exhilaration that rebuilding my magic brought.

I laid the pole aside on the snow-dusted earth of the training ring and straightened my stance. Centering myself, I felt my magic thrum beneath my skin, anticipating Logan's strike as he leveled his stare on me.

Logan ran toward me, his pole connecting with my shimmering magic shield as he struck. I countered by sending a pulse of energy radiating around me—a dome of energy that held me within its protective embrace. However, that power waned a moment after, fading like a candle snuffed out.

Restraint etched itself across Logan's features, and he didn't take advantage of the lull in my defenses.

"Come on—Tara was much fiercer," I ribbed, dodging sideways as he swung his pole toward me.

With a chuckle, he twisted, his movements fluid and precise. I stepped back to evade him, his strike barely grazing my shoulder.

He smiled, but it was tinged with the same protectiveness that had become all too familiar lately.

"My magic needs this!" I thrust my hands forward, unleashing a wave of force that collided with him, sending him staggering back.

At last, determination solidified on his wide face, his jaw tightening. "All right. But you asked for this."

With newfound energy, Logan sprang toward me, swinging his pole with force. Excitement surged through my veins as I met his strike head-on, a flare of magic bursting forth from my palms like flames igniting tinder. He had to duck and roll to evade it.

Logan tested me, pushing harder as I summoned my power, weaving patterns of energy to match his strikes. Each of his swings was met with shimmering spells erupting from my fingertips, bending the air around us.

I could feel energy building deep within, muscles of magic straining and strengthening pleasantly as my magic flowed forth.

For a brief moment, our eyes locked amidst the flurry of blows. He came at me again with an intense swing aimed to catch me off guard, and I countered, exerting a force that sent him stumbling back.

As he regained his balance, he dove toward me. Exhilaration flared through me as it felt freeing to unleash my magic. With every push of my will, Logan answered with skillful strikes and evasions. Then, in one mighty clash, I summoned all the magic I could muster, infusing it into my hands, redirecting it to form a light shield around me—energy coiling in response.

Admiration flickered across Logan's features. Then, there was something more—heat stoked in his brown eyes. I sensed his desire to breach the barrier between us, not to defeat me but... to get closer.

Awkwardness surged within me. I'd told him I didn't want a romantic relationship. Why was he looking at me like that? He'd insisted that fighting him would be no different than fighting Tara, but my heart raced at the intensity of his gaze.

I lowered the barrier, quickly uttering, "Timeout." I leaned over, putting my hands on my thighs as I took in deep breaths, trying to clear my head, the tide of feeling beating through my chest, stirring something.

The exhilaration and attraction pounding in my chest that I felt from Logan, far from making me feel anything toward him, reminded me of another time. I remembered dragging Tyler into the supply closet in the infirmary and how I'd used my magic to prove I could defend myself. "You've always been able to handle yourself," he'd said. The mixture of exhilaration and attraction I felt in my chest reminded me of what I'd felt for Tyler then. His bright blue gaze had held me with such reverence and

affection.

My wolf howled at the thought of him. She ached for Tyler. Despite glimpsing him slipping away in the early mornings, I still hadn't seen him since he'd learned of the bond between Logan and me.

Desperation beat through me, raw and aching. My breaths grew more ragged as frustration and longing quivered through me. Logan touched my back. "Are you all right?"

We'd both worked up a sweat, and his spicy scent was overpowering as he stood so close. Far from comforting me, I longed for a different aroma. My nerves felt frayed as my wolf yearned for the fragrance of cedar—Tyler's scent.

"You were right," I said, trying to quash the need in my voice. "That was a lot. Can you take me home?"

Suddenly looking worried, Logan took my arm, tucking it into his side. "Of course. You were amazing, Seraphina," he said, his tone imbued with that warmth that made my skin prickle uncomfortably.

"Thanks," I said, trying to avoid the shining look of admiration I felt sure was still suffusing his face. I grabbed my hoody and focused on the stillness of the snow-dusted landscape, catching my breath as we strolled back.

I had to fight to prevent Logan from following me in.

"I just need to lie down," I insisted. I promised I'd call if I needed him. He'd given me his mobile number while visiting me in the infirmary. Finally, as I closed the door, I was free to be by myself. But as the emptiness of the house lapped at me, it only deepened the yearning in my heart.

In a moment, my wolf dominated me. I let Tyler's scent wash over me, trailing to where it was most potent: his bedroom. As if our bond still existed, urgency rushed through me. I remembered the raw, intense look Tyler had given me in the infirmary when I'd asked him to give Logan and me space. That same feeling was consuming me now. I felt as if it would devour me entirely if Tyler stayed away any longer. I couldn't bear it anymore.

The startling realization hit me: I still loved him. My heart grappled with the powerful scent of him as I allowed myself to settle on his bed, breathing him deep into my lungs as if it were as essential to me as the air itself.

With a fierce determination igniting my veins, I raced back down the stairs. I threw open the door, stripped off my clothes, and shifted into my wolf. As if she were on the hunt, she raced out into the snow-dappled land. Following the faint echo of intuition—magic guiding our strides—we made our way toward Tyler.

My paws seemed like an echo of the hope pounding in my chest. It wasn't too late. Every fiber of my being seemed to resound with that thought.

I skipped around the back of the packmates' houses, keeping close to the treeline—eager to avoid being seen by anyone. I didn't want to get waylaid. I needed Tyler. My instincts guided me to the house beside Justin and Harry's. I peered through the large picture window of the neighboring house, my heart sensing Tyler's presence before my eyes did.

He was there.

But my heart sank as I caught sight of him on a cream sofa, remembering belatedly who this house belonged to as I saw Linda beside him. Despite the darkness, I stole down in the snow, every muscle in my body screaming in protest as I watched her lean closer to him, her arm running along his. Jealousy burned through me, a fierce

wildfire amidst the bitter cold.

A tide of memories engulfed me—of Tyler and Linda standing together during their mate ceremony, of their futures entwining as I was pushed farther away, eternally separated from the one I loved. Numbness crept through me, as cold as the snow beneath my paws.

Had Tyler decided to give up on me?

The sharp ache deepened, gnawing at my fragile heart. I forced myself to turn around—my ears and tail drooping as I slunk back along the treeline, feeling like the cruel hand of fate was toying with me yet again.

As I stalked back, questions whispered in the dark corners of my mind. Had I angered the Moon goddess by daring to rebuff her plans? Was it she who had cursed me to live a life forever shadowed by unfulfilled love? The weight of despair pressed down on me, and the hope thrumming in my heart felt like a cruel joke. Was there still a path forward, or had I lost Tyler forever?

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

As I hefted another sun-bleached block onto the wall surrounding the Council Chamber, I felt the satisfying strain in my muscles. It was a welcome distraction. Packmates moved around me, their spirits lifted as they repaired the damage done during a recent storm.

“Not many more now,” said Justin, a younger packmate, as he picked up another rock.

“Yeah, it’s looking good,” I replied, masking the turmoil that churned within. I’d been immersing myself in as many of the pack’s manual labor tasks as I could lately—throwing myself into training and physical tasks to keep my mind occupied. I aimed to feel stronger, to push through the bite in my chest that accompanied memories of Seraphina.

Ever since I learned she had a new fated mate, I had felt like a ghost in my own life. Memories of Logan intruded, his youthful sturdiness and protective brown eyes imprinted in my mind. After all, Seraphina was thirteen years my junior. Wasn’t the youthful twenty-something Logan much better suited for her?

Determined to ignore those thoughts, I hefted another block, muscles aching but my resolve unwavering. The pack buzzed around me, bright and full of life now that all the packmates had been healed. We were all catching up with various bits of maintenance that had fallen by the wayside during the illness that had afflicted us. With the patrols now back to full strength, there was spare time to get these jobs done. Yet, amid the pack’s light-hearted camaraderie, I felt emptier than ever.

“They’re almost done on the painting,” Justin said casually, interrupting my reverie. “The west ones will be done in a couple more weeks, ready for fall.”

The west houses of Nahachoh were where Logan’s house lay. What I’d been trying to suppress lately whirled through my mind—an image of Seraphina leaving my house and moving in with Logan. My heart sank at the thought of what the passage of time must bring, and fall’s approach had never seemed so bitter.

A sudden urge to rush home surged through me, to capture every moment with her while I still could. But the weight of her previous words echoed in my mind: “I need to talk to Logan. Alone.” She had chosen him now, and I felt the sting of that reality, a reminder of my own shortcomings that had led us to this moment.

It was my fault. I was the one who had stood beside Linda when Seraphina loved me. The memory of that night replayed endlessly, tormenting me. I remembered how I had kissed Seraphina in the infirmary’s supply closet more recently, and how it had felt right, so much so that I had thought the bond we’d once shared had been reignited. Yet now? That bond was gone.

Letting fate take its course was right, but watching Seraphina and Logan grow closer was something I couldn’t bear to witness. I knew from Justin’s reports that Logan was with Seraphina whenever he wasn’t on duty. I knew, too, that he’d insisted Tara was with her otherwise. I didn’t need to worry about Seraphina not being protected without me there, but still, I longed to be the one at her side. Swiping a hand down my face, I remembered with incredulity how I had ordered him to guard her. My chest squeezed. I couldn’t help feeling as if I’d been a helping hand in fate’s planning, placing Logan beside Seraphina as if I’d helped the Moon goddess in her matchmaking.

That was why it was more important than ever to stay away from her. Consequently, despite living under the same roof at the moment, I’d been slipping out with the dawn

and not returning until late.

So, I channeled my heartache into the investigation, knowing that helping clear her parents' names was my best contribution to her happiness. I worked tirelessly, and I recently uncovered a vital lead: the first infected had assisted in the infirmary briefly before the aides returned from summer. I believed the two female packmates who had died from the illness had caught it in the infirmary itself.

The thought unsettled me. Before Seraphina's arrival, Linda was solely responsible for administering treatment. My relationship with Linda had grown awkward from the fallout of our canceled mate ceremony. Guilt lingered since our breakup, and whenever I met her, I tried to keep it brief and business-like to avoid the undercurrents of our past. Besides, with the way Linda and her father had treated Seraphina recently, I wasn't looking forward to reaching out. Yet the evidence pointed to an urgent need to investigate further.

I left a note at her house, casually asking her to stop by the Council office. In anticipation of her arrival, I cleared away the sensitive notes I had collected and switched to some standard paperwork.

A knock sounded on my door.

"Come in," I called out, looking up from the documents I was signing.

"Hi, Tyler," Linda greeted me in a neutral tone. "I got your note."

"Yes, please come in."

She left the door open, and I added, "Would you shut the door, please?"

A flicker of surprise swept across her features, but she obeyed. Since we'd first

broken up after Seraphina's disappearance, there had been two awkward occasions when Linda had visited me here in my office at the Council Chamber, trying to rekindle something that had long since faded. I did my best to suppress the memories of those uncomfortable conversations where I had to rebuff her advances.

"Have a seat," I said, gesturing to the chair on the other side of my desk. As she settled into it, I asked. "How's it going? Must be nice to be getting some rest after the craziness of the last few weeks."

"It is," she agreed.

Linda, along with the three elders—Elder Darius, Carl, and Tom—were the only ones, aside from myself, with a set of keys to the supplies in our infirmary. To investigate without arousing suspicion, I needed a reason to take a more active role in the infirmary.

"I wanted to check in on how the restocking of supplies is going?" I asked. "We mustn't get complacent, given how seriously that illness affected us," I explained.

Her gray gaze took me in seriously. "It's going fine." She didn't hesitate and said smoothly, "Both Kelly and Lauren have been able to get on harvesting duty since the last of the warriors were discharged."

"Great," I replied, searching her face for any sign of guilt or nervousness. "I was considering putting more packmates on harvesting duty. Do you think there's enough storage for more supplies?"

I'd decided to gauge her reactions with talk about supplies. I was pretty certain that the two females must have picked up the illness from the herbs they'd handled in our stocks.

“Sure,” she said easily. “Just give me a head’s up when they’re dropping things off, and I can make sure I process the herbs and store them correctly.”

“Will do,” I said. With that settled, I had a reason for why I’d be dropping off supplies. I fully intended to gather said herbs myself and let myself into the infirmary closet for some private investigating. If she came across me doing so, though, I at least had a reason for being there.

She caught me off guard as she asked, “This is nice, Tyler, clearing the air between us. Maybe you can come over for a drink later?”

I must have given her a hesitant look as she quickly added, “Sorry, that was silly. Forget I said anything.” She was already shooting up from her seat, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

Guilt somersaulted in my stomach. Perhaps it was because of how devastated I was feeling about Seraphina moving on that I listened to that guilt. I hated the idea of the hurt I’d caused Linda. Even though I couldn’t give her what she wanted, maybe it was time to clear the air between us.

“Sure,” I said, “why not. I’ve got a little more to do here. How does nine p.m. sound?”

“Perfect.” The smile she flashed me had me already regretting my acquiescence. But surely being on civil terms with the healer would only help me investigate the infirmary that bit more easily. After all, she was on my list of suspects.

Linda’s house was a short ten-minute walk, and just before nine, I trudged along the snow-dusted path, taking in the few wolf prints in the snow and the bird prints on the lawn before her house. I couldn’t help but think back to the days when I visited Linda’s house years ago.

Linda opened the door before I had a chance to knock. Her expression was relaxed. Her long blonde hair framed her heart-shaped face, falling in waves against her shoulders. Her gray eyes were guarded, and another swirl of guilt went through me as I wondered how much hurt lingered beneath the surface.

Dressed in a cozy, oversized sweater and jeans, she looked comfortable and laid back. Something eased as I saw that she wasn't trying too hard. In the past, when she'd tried to make advances, she'd always dressed in tight-fitting, low-cut tops, but tonight, she seemed more relaxed.

"Hi," she greeted. "Come on in. G&T all right?" she asked, making her way to the open-plan kitchen opposite the living room. She'd already poured a splash into a couple of glasses. It was her drink of choice. When we'd dated, she'd tended to drink gin.

I'd always preferred a bourbon but acquiesced, "Sure, thanks."

The log burner was lit, and the warmth was welcome after the inefficient electrical heater in the office. The small living and kitchen area was snug, and I shrugged off my coat, setting it on one of the stools by the breakfast bar.

"Have a seat," she said, gesturing to the couch in the living area. The small living area was decorated in a minimalist style. It was a bit sparse for my liking, but the two-seater sofa sat before a huge picture window, and I settled myself down in the seat furthest from the fire.

I had always liked this view. The night had settled in. The bright white of the lawn at the back of Linda's property was unspoiled and peaceful before the faint shadows of evergreens behind.

Both fruity and spicy notes were strong as she handed me my glass. I took a sip. The

robust flavor caught me by surprise. I coughed. “That’s...spicier than I was expecting.”

Linda chuckled. “I’ve been experimenting with different cordials,” she said. “This one’s got chili and passionfruit in it.”

I nodded, thinking there was too much going on in it, but said politely, “It’s nice. Different.”

“Glad you like it,” she said with a smile, taking a sip of her own and gazing out at the night.

“The new wall at the Council Chamber looks good,” Linda said.

“Thanks,” I replied, relaxing a little at the neutral topic. “It’s been great to see everyone back on their feet and able to pitch in,” I agreed. I took another sip of my drink and glanced at Linda. For the briefest of moments, I thought I saw a spark of desire playing on her face, but she merely said, “It’s great to get a little R&R, too.”

I smiled. “It is, but I know that doesn’t come particularly naturally to you or me.”

She nodded, looking out the window, a smile lifting her lips. I admired Linda for her hardworking ethos. She often worked long hours in the infirmary—as frequently as alpha duties kept me busy. But those responsibilities never seemed too much.

“Did your father mention the new mine?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Tom’s found a deep vein of ivis in the glacier to the south.”

Elder Tom was a specialist in ores and oversaw our mines. Elder Carl was much more into research in both herbalism and ores, while Elder Darius specialized in running

our pack's ceremonies.

I took another sip of my drink, the lingering heat in my chest leaving a warmth that didn't feel quite right. It did feel like drinking bourbon: a very strong one.

"I don't think you're here to talk about council duties, though, are you?" Linda suddenly asked.

As the strange heat flooded my chest, Linda's hand traced lightly along my arm. "Do you remember the nights we spent here together?" she murmured, inching closer. Her words curled like incense around me, the lilt of her voice sounding suddenly more appealing, and my gaze wound to her heart-shaped face. Her skin looked soft and her lips full. The strange heat in my chest made me feel as if I wanted to reach out to touch her cheek.

Oh, goddess, this had been a mistake.

She reached out, her fingers brushing mine, sending adrenaline racing through my veins. I frowned, confused by my body's reaction to her mere touch.

I thought she was reaching for my hand, but she only took the glass from my hand. The glass, I realized, had been angled precariously as I gazed at Linda. The heat running through my body had made my surroundings recede. All I could think about was the fire in me and the spark of electricity that her touch produced,

I yanked my hand back from her, the world spinning. Startled, I realized there'd been something more than herbal cordial in that drink. It was something that made an alarm bell blare in my mind as this heat spread rapidly out of control, again making me far too aware of Linda's soft fingertips lingering on my arm.

"What are you doing, Linda?" I demanded.

Her lips twitched, an unsettling glint in her eye that sent a chill racing down my spine. “Just helping you relax. It’s been too long since you let go,” she insisted, her thigh touching mine as she leaned closer toward me. Heat roared through me at the feel of her.

“You’ve had so much strain lately. We both have. There’s nothing wrong with blowing off some steam,” she said.

My instincts roared. The lingering warmth of the drink ignited a clarity I couldn’t ignore.

“I have to go,” I said, pushing her away, resisting the heat in my chest that seemed to tell me I wanted her touch. Dread curled in the pit of my stomach as I knew that was the last thing I wanted.

“Don’t fight it,” she urged, following me. “I know you feel it, too. There’s still something between us, Tyler.”

In a moment of self-preservation, I hurried to the front door.

“Tyler, wait!” she called after me. But I was already yanking the door open and stomping out into the night. The cool air felt heavenly against the heat prickling against my skin.

I’d forgotten my coat, but I didn’t go back. I fought against the rush of adrenaline flooding my body as I strode away. I needed to get as far away as possible from Linda. Striding through the night, all my focus speared on the sole thought of getting back to my own space. There, I’d be safe and could wait for this noxious heat that Linda had poisoned me with to pass through my system.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

When I got back inside, I hastily threw on my clothes. I shut the night out and tried to stop thinking about what I'd seen. The wind's bitter chill had settled deep into my bones, and my leggings and tank top did little to shut out the cold.

I heated a cup of milk in the microwave, the rhythmic hum connecting me to the present, albeit momentarily. Stirring in some dark hot chocolate powder, I let the aroma conjure a myriad of memories—Tyler and I laughing and baking together in this very kitchen.

The heady scent, both rich and sweet, comforted me. I closed my eyes, inhaling it and letting it soothe me. Yet, too soon, the thought of Tyler being elsewhere clawed its way back into my mind. I could see him sitting on that couch, with Linda leaning in, her fingers grazing his arm. The bitter seed of jealousy took root in my stomach again, twisting tighter, suffocating the warmth of happier memories.

My heart thudded with agitation as I made my way up to my bedroom. I ran my brush through my tangled locks, the feeling evoking the familiar movement made by Tara and Selina when they combed my hair. Tyler was probably just at Linda's on pack business.

I tried to get my mind off it, settling down in front of my altar and lighting some white sage incense. But every moment that the house remained silent grated against me. He still hadn't returned, and it was getting late. Her touching his arm replayed in my head, each thought sending that familiar roil of jealousy churning anew.

Frustrated, I set the brush down and settled cross-legged in front of my altar, lighting white sage incense and watching the tendrils of fragrant smoke curl into the air. But the silence of the house taunted me, every moment stretching taut with longing.

I couldn't bear the thought of Tyler and Linda together. It was like poison coursing through my veins. The idea of him being intimate with her made me break out in a cold sweat, and as I tried my hot chocolate again, even its rich taste seemed bitter.

As I fixated on Tyler, I felt as if I were conjuring him from the depths of my longing. He was so vivid in my thoughts: his tall, muscular figure clad in jeans and a plaid shirt, his short brown hair framing his bright blue stare. I could almost hear his laughter and the fierce yet gentle energy radiating from him that both settled and thrilled me.

Determined, I sprang to my feet, a newfound resolve coursing through me. I needed to find him. I needed to tell him what I had left unsaid. Tyler had heard from my lips that Logan was my fated mate, but he remained unaware that I had no feelings for him. My heart beat only for Tyler.

Charging downstairs, I stepped into the kitchen, a rush of hope swirling in my chest. I'd only gotten halfway across the room when the back door burst open.

My breath caught in my throat. Tyler filled the space, his form silhouetted against the night. He only wore a thin sweater, jeans, and boots. The cold had gotten to his cheeks, a line of color on his cheekbones. His body was tense, hunched against the winter wind at his back. His head bowed down—he hadn't noticed me yet.

He kicked the door shut. The movement was more forceful than he'd clearly intended as the bang resounded in the silence. His gaze shot upward as if he were worried he'd disturbed me. That's when his bright blue eyes found me.

I stood frozen, my heart thumping, a swelling wave of need crashing over me again. The deep yearning that I'd felt during these long, torturous days apart consumed me. I had been starved of his presence, and now he was here, breathing the same air I was—his chest rising and falling rapidly as if matching the frantic tempo of my heart.

“Seraphina,” he breathed, saying my name like an incantation. His low voice was enough to spark tremors through me.

As my breath quickened, his name was on my tongue in a heartbeat. “Tyler.”

He strode forward, the space between us closing in an instant. When he pulled me into him, I gasped, taken aback by the heat radiating from him. I had expected him to feel cold, a remnant of the bitter wind, but instead, his skin burned against mine. That's when I noticed the dilated pupils and the blaze in his eyes. Had he returned here thinking of me, too? Could it be that the longing that had been eating me alive was echoed in him? Could this moment mean he felt just as much for me, even without our mate bond?

I wanted to ask him to break the thick tension lingering between us, but before I could form the words, his mouth crashed into mine.

As he kissed me, my own feelings sizzled up like fireworks. Everywhere Tyler touched me lit up as glorious need coursed through me.

I whimpered as his tongue found mine, tasting me, tangling with my own as if he were famished. His hands wound through my hair until they slipped down to my tank top and began to tug it off.

I lifted my arms eagerly, feeling bereft without the connection of his lips as we pulled apart for that brief moment. His bright blue stare raked over me, dipping down to the swell of my breasts, hungry and appreciative.

“Goddess, you’re beautiful,” he murmured, planting kisses and licking his way down the column of my neck. The intensity in his voice sent shivers through me as much as his touch did. His desire enveloped me, and I felt an electric charge sparking between us, pulling tighter and tighter until it was nearly impossible to breathe.

In one sweeping motion, he lifted me effortlessly, pressing me back against the sturdy oak table. Its cool surface contrasted sharply with the heat radiating from Tyler’s body over mine. The sensation of the solid wood against my skin heightened my awareness, making every inch of him feel even more intoxicatingly warm. He stared at me as if I were the most mouth-watering confection he’d ever put on this table. Which, for all the decadent desserts we’d made right here, really was saying something. He kissed his way down my chest, licking and teasing the swell of my breasts. I gasped, my hands grasping his shoulders as I lost myself to the sensations, feeling my body turn as molten as a chocolate lava cake.

He unclipped my bra, sliding it off, then grasped my wrists, pinning them above my head as he captured my nipple between his lips. I moaned as he tasted and teased my breasts. The combination of his mouth on my breasts and the firm hold he had on me made the feeling build in me.

“Tyler, Tyler.” This time, his name was heavy with need. I wanted more than just his kisses. I was aching for him, to feel him deep inside me.

He let go of me but only to pull off my leggings, bringing my knickers with them. As the fabric slid down my legs and the whisper of material landed on the floor, I felt deliciously bare. The intensity of want in his eyes ignited every part of me. His eyes tracking over my exposed skin had warmth pooling between my legs even before he’d touched me there.

His nostrils flared as he smelled my arousal, and he ran his thumb along my inner thigh, teasingly slow as he bent down. The look he gave was so decadent, his intent

on tasting every part of me written there so clearly.

He dove in with fervor, his lips trailing up the soft skin behind my knees, a fiery rush of desire propelling him upward. His movements were frantic and consuming as he reached the apex of my thighs, his body igniting a blaze against my skin. When he kissed that sensitive spot, I groaned, the sound echoing in the silent kitchen—a raw expression of need.

“Tyler,” my voice broke, the word laced with a mix of longing and impatience.

“I’m going to devour you,” he growled, his blue eyes darkening with an insatiable hunger.

True to his word, his mouth devoured me with fierce urgency. His tongue delved deep. A gasp escaped my lips, turning into a moan as I bucked against him, my body a taut wire strumming with need. Each flick and swirl sent ripples of ecstasy surging through me. I felt the world blur around us as sensation overwhelmed my senses, crashing over me like a raging river, pulling me into its depths.

“Please,” I gasped, arching my back and crying out.

Just as I thought I might drown, he surfaced with a devilish smile.

The way he looked at me—a visceral mixture of lust and longing—made my skin prickle with exhilaration. I felt vulnerable yet empowered, this beautiful kind of surrender paired with deep hunger, one perfectly mirrored in Tyler’s expression and body language.

I shot up, needing to feel his skin against mine, and greedily wrenched off his sweater. My fingers roved over his taut, muscled chest—worshipping every hard line of him, down to his flat stomach and the thin trail of dark hair that led lower.

I licked my lips in anticipation of what I wanted to taste, the bulge and feel of him through his jeans driving me wild. Swiftly, I undid his button. The sound of his zipper sent a wave of heady expectation pounding through me. I was hardly able to contain my excitement as his cock sprang free, hard and thick—and right before me. My mouth watered at the sight, and I couldn't help but grasp him firmly, my thumb gliding over the head and thrilling at Tyler's sharp intake of breath.

But before I could taste him, Tyler growled, grabbing me and turning me around to face the table. My breath hitched as he parted my thighs and stepped between them, fitting himself against my back. I could feel the warmth of his body radiating against my back, a tantalizing promise of what was to come.

“Seraphina,” he whispered, his voice thick with lust, his breath hot against my ear. “I need you.”

With one thrust, he buried himself in me, filling me with his warmth. I gasped as he claimed me, each thrust bringing him deeper and sending shocks of pleasure through me. Instinctively, I rolled back into him with every thrust, pushing him deeper inside. The groan he awarded me with had me quickening our pace as our need climbed together.

His fingers found their way to my clit, and he began to tease, stroking me until I bucked against him, moaning as blinding pleasure built within me. His free hand found its way to my breast, teasing my nipple as he kept up a devastating rhythm with his other hand. My legs felt weak, and I had to plant my hands on the table, straining my arms to stay upright, each thrust of his hips relentless as the sound of skin meeting skin flooded my senses.

The world faded away as we moved together in a rhythm that matched the wild beat of our hearts. Desire cocooned us, thick and intoxicating, building until it engulfed everything. Every doubt fell away as I was swept up in the wonder of us again. As he

brought me closer to the edge, all thoughts disappeared, utterly consumed by Tyler. This was how we were meant to be.

“Tyler! Yes!” I cried, my voice rising as a powerful climax tore through me. In a moment, Tyler found his release, too, letting out a guttural cry. Aftershocks of pleasure rippled through us as Tyler laid his hot cheek against my back, and I collapsed against the table, feeling both his panting breath and his racing heart against me.

Gradually, as rational thought returned in the wake of our desire, the first trickle of worry returned to me. I couldn’t help remembering the last time we’d done this together and how, afterward, Tyler had... regretted it. My throat tightened, and I almost didn’t want to move for fear that this exquisite feeling might crumble around us.

When our breaths had steadied, Tyler ghosted his fingers through my hair and peppered kisses down my back before drawing out of me. The absence of him created a fleeting ache, but as he turned me around, it was swiftly eclipsed by the insatiable look in his eyes. He lifted me into his strong arms, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms encircling his neck.

He was already walking us out of the kitchen. “Where are we going?” I asked, still a little breathless.

His grin was lopsided, a spark of mischief dancing in his eyes, but there was an edge to his voice that hinted at a deeper desire. “Your room or mine—I don’t care,” he replied, his words tumbling out with a breathless urgency. “But I’ve nowhere near had my fill of you.” His low voice sent a shiver down my spine, making my toes curl in heady anticipation.

As he mounted the stairs, carrying me effortlessly, a giddy excitement surged through

me, desire sparking in my veins. Tyler's bright blue eyes locked onto mine, still blazing with that primal heat. I could feel the unmistakable pressure of his arousal hardening against my ass, sending a thrill through me. In that moment, I didn't care where we were going; I was consumed by the unrestrained want radiating from him, utterly lost in the intoxicating connection between us.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

The morning light filtered softly through the curtains, casting gentle golden rays that painted the room in warm hues. For a fleeting moment, I found contentment in this space, nestled among sweet-smelling sheets that enveloped me in the comforting embrace of familiarity. I hadn't felt this whole in what seemed like forever.

But as the fragrance of honey lingered in the air, a disconcerting tension crept in, ripping me from my momentary peace. I knew that scent intimately—it was Seraphina's, as tantalizing as syrup drizzled over warm pancakes or the aroma of honey-crusted pastries fresh from the oven.

I blinked away the remnants of sleep, confusion clouding my mind until reality gradually seeped in. There, beside me, lay Seraphina, her soft black hair cascading over the white pillow. She lay on her side, turned away, revealing the shape of her body beneath the sheets that had slipped down to her waist. My gaze traveled over the smooth curve of her fair skin, the dip of her waist, and the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she slept, utterly unaware of the storm brewing within me.

Sudden flashes of yesterday invaded my thoughts with heart-stopping clarity—I had gone to Linda's. My mouth felt parched, and my throat constricted as I recalled the drink she had foisted upon me. A strange heat had burned through my veins, igniting a pleasure in my skin when Linda touched my arm that should have been repulsive. Instinctively, I had known something was wrong. The warmth consuming me screamed of a trap.

Desperate for escape, I had raced back here, seeking refuge from whatever effects

that potion had unleashed upon me, but everything that followed was a blur, lost in the fog of intoxication.

I racked my brain, straining to pull together the scattered remnants of my memories. My heart thudded furiously in my chest as I looked down at Seraphina. Thoughts spiraled out of control as I recalled the heat surging through my system, how it had dulled my senses and made Linda's touch feel welcome when it should have felt repellent. Oh, goddess, what had I done?

Flashes of the night raced before me: softness, honey-perfumed skin, silken hair, and luscious lips that replayed like a haunting dream. Had I forced myself on Seraphina? Disgust twisted violently within me, churning my stomach into knots.

I must have. Seraphina had a new fated mate. There was no other reason she would be here beside me. A fated bond was sacred, something to be revered—not cast aside. Yet, I had shattered that sanctity. I felt like a thief in the night, shame coursing through me. I had stolen something that could never be returned. I'd ruined the sacred bond for Seraphina a second time. Paralyzed by guilt, I couldn't bring myself to move.

As the sun climbed higher, the light flooding the room felt uninvited to my guilt-ridden heart. It illuminated Seraphina's bare form next to me like a damning accusation.

She stirred, and the light caught her hair as she rolled onto her back. Her jade green eyes fluttered open, blinking against the brightness and settling on me with confusion.

"I'm so sorry, Seraphina," I blurted out, urgency and panic forcing my words into the open. "I acted impulsively last night... I'm so sorry." My heart hammered against my chest, every beat feeling like a chastisement for my wretched apology. How could mere words ever encapsulate the weight of my remorse? I had violated both her trust

and the bond she shared with Logan.

“You’re sorry?” Her voice cracked, rising questioningly. I could only lower my head in shame, scrambling into a sitting position, desperate to convey my sincerity.

She was right. Those two words were far too light for what I had done. The enormity of my crime bore down on me, demanding to be articulated in a way that could barely scratch the surface. “There’s no excuse for my behavior,” I began, my voice a whisper of regret. “I acted without thinking. I shouldn’t have slept with you, but—”

“Get out,” she cut me off sharply.

Shame knotted my stomach. I deserved this. Despite how much it hurt to hear the tremor in her voice, the least I could do was follow her order now.

I bowed my head, pushing myself off the bed, guilt flooding every corner of my being. Where had I left my clothes from last night? A quick glance at the floor yielded nothing.

I hurried toward the door, but something compelled me to look back at Seraphina. She had wrapped her arms around herself, making her appear fragile. But the steel in her green gaze was a warrior’s ready for battle. The urge to go back to her, to envelope her in my arms and whisper apologies, clashed violently with the shame that weighed me down, propelling me out the door.

Tearing my gaze away, I slipped into the hallway, my heart a stone lodged in my chest as I closed the door behind me. All I wanted was to protect the girl I loved, yet I kept inflicting wounds that ran deep.

Entering my own bedroom, I shut the door behind me and tugged on clean clothes, my thoughts spiraling back to the source of my turmoil—Linda. Whatever she had

drugged me with still lingered in my system, the remnants of feverish heat in my chest felt all too familiar.

That sensation reminded me of the dark magic I had willingly infected myself with in the infirmary. I closed my eyes, focusing on the strange, heavy, slickness within me. Suspicion sprouted in my mind, anger and confusion entwining like a dark vine. This upheaval in my life was no accident. I was beginning to suspect that Linda had indeed orchestrated the illness that plagued our pack. Determined, I resolved to dig deeper into her involvement.

Just as I resolved to do so, Seraphina closed the bathroom door. I seized the chance, eager to give her the space she desperately deserved. With my suspicions swirling, I knew I had to confide in some of my packmates. After all, this investigation was my only hope of making amends for my grievous errors.

As I stepped outside, trudging through the crisp snow that crunched beneath my feet, I vowed there would be no more moments of weakness. I would be strong—strong for Seraphina, keeping my distance as I should have done. Finding the traitor among us and exonerating her parents were the only paths to contribute to her happiness, and I committed myself wholly to that resolve.

The library came into view ahead, and the double doors were unlocked, meaning I was sure the elder I sought would be within. I spotted the familiar figure of Elder Carl bent over an aged leather tome. No matter the hour, he could usually be found here, lost in the ether of words and wisdom. I recalled how he had helped Seraphina research the herb to heal our pack and how he had stood and defended her before the Council. His empathetic nature made him a trustworthy ally, and he was the person I needed on my side.

“Hi, Alpha Tyler,” he greeted me, looking up, his blue eyes warm and welcoming. “Anything I can do for you?” At this hour, it was just the two of us, and the stillness

of the library was palpable.

“Yes, I need you to come to the Council Chamber,” I instructed, urgency lacing my voice. “If you could stop by Tara’s house and bring her with you, I’ll see you there.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was seated at my desk in the Council Chamber when Elder Carl and the young warrior Tara joined me, their presence reassuring amidst the turmoil roiling through me.

As Tara shut the door, the air thickened with anticipation. Elder Carl settled into the chair opposite me, and I wasted no time recounting the investigation that filled my mind with anger. I explained, with a steady voice, about Seraphina’s parents’ innocence and our suspicion that the same person who had framed them was responsible for the illness that had plagued the pack.

As I spoke, their expressions turned grim.

“Poor Seraphina,” Tara exclaimed, her voice a mixture of shock and compassion. “To think of everything she’s been through, and her parents were innocent!” Her hazel eyes sparkled with anguish for her friend—a testament to her growing bond with Seraphina. I had confided in her precisely because I knew she cared.

Guilt constricted my chest like a vise, a reminder of how I had deepened Seraphina’s suffering yet again.

Carl raised a brow, setting his lined face into a thoughtful frown. “If you give me a list of everything you and Seraphina know about the dark magic associated with this illness, I may uncover more in the library.”

I nodded, relief mingling with lingering dread. “I will.”

Tara's warrior instinct made her eager to know everything she could about the enemy. "What do you know about the illness and culprit so far?"

"The two females who died were briefly aides in the infirmary," I explained, my voice steady as the pieces fell into place. "I'm sure the illness originated there." My tone turned grim, the dread welling up within me. "When I infected myself, I felt a rush of dark magic, something I recently sensed from Linda."

I didn't expound on how I'd sensed that dark magic from her.

Elder Carl's expression turned more severe. "Elder Darius would not take kindly to accusation against his daughter without substantial proof."

"Precisely," I agreed, knowing I needed to tread carefully. "We need to gather evidence before any accusation is made within the Council."

"And we must avoid arousing her suspicion," Tara emphasized, her expression serious.

"My thoughts exactly," I said. "I've already informed Linda that more packmates will be assigned to harvesting duty so I can create a reason to visit the storeroom under the radar."

My resolve hardened, and I added, "Tara, I need you to prioritize protecting Seraphina. Whatever danger is lurking, it must not touch her again." Saying it pained me, but I also recognized that Logan was Seraphina's rightful protector, and I added, "Whenever Logan isn't with her, you're to be with her."

Tara straightened. Her warrior spirit ignited as her hazel eyes flared with determination. "I promise she'll be protected. You have my word. Can I let Seraphina know I'm aware of her parents' innocence? It might help to give her someone to

confide in.”

“Of course,” I replied. “But please refrain from mentioning my suspicions about Healer Linda.” A weight settled upon me. To think that Linda, who had once stood by my side as a potential mate, might now prove to be the source of darkness in our community was a bitter pill to swallow. That she had wrought more pain between Seraphina and me deepened my anger. I was determined to shield Seraphina from further upset.

Elder Carl soon bid me farewell before making his way to the library while Tara prepared to check on Seraphina. As they departed, I wrestled with the image of Seraphina—her arms wrapped around herself, her face a mask of steely resolve.

Determination coursed through my veins. There would be no room for mistakes. I was going to find a way to set things right. I’d fight for Seraphina’s happiness, even if it cost me everything.

Seraphina

As I awoke, the ache in my chest felt unbearable. I stared up at the ceiling, where shadows danced and played tricks with the dawn. I pushed back the covers, which felt heavier than lead, my emotions dragging me down. I wanted to curl up and hide under my duvet forever. I'd truly believed Tyler felt the same way I did this time. But, three long days had passed since the painful morning he'd made it abundantly clear, for the second time, that he regretted being intimate with me.

The thought stabbed deeper into my heart, twisting painfully. That was why my comings and goings had turned clandestine again. I found myself avoiding him, a skill I had practiced well. I snuck into the bathroom, the cool tiles biting against my bare feet as I quickly showered, the water refreshing but failing to wash away the ache.

I slipped into a pair of navy blue overalls. As I hurried down the staircase, slinging my bag of magic supplies over my shoulder, I took each step two at a time, eager to escape the confines of the house. I couldn't bear to see Tyler. Each time he looked at me with a flicker of remorse, it cut like a fresh wound.

We had crossed paths in the kitchen after our night together, and any thought of addressing what had happened melted into the air. The weight of his shame hung between us, suffocating and making any discussion feel impossible. So, I resolved to harden my heart. I was done allowing him to dictate the trajectory of my emotions.

From that moment, I hardened my heart. I swore to myself he'd no longer have any influence over me.

This morning, I skirted past the kitchen door, the heart of the house that now felt foreign, filled with memories of passion and tenderness. Where Tyler had once looked at me with ardor, he now saw only regrets. I stepped outside and let the fresh dawn air greet me, the coolness biting against my cheeks as I made my way to Tara's house.

Her cheerful presence brightened my day despite a violent yawn as she answered the door, wrapped in a fluffy dressing gown. "You should've waited for me to pick you up," she complained.

Tara had confided that she and Elder Carl were now in Tyler's confidence. They knew a traitor lurked among us and the truth about my parents being framed. Consequently, she had become even more protective lately.

"My magic's fully recovered now. I can handle a ten-minute walk without a babysitter," I griped, even as I appreciated her care. Rebuilding my magic with Tara had successfully returned my abilities to full capacity, but I relished having someone else besides Logan to confide in about the ongoing investigation.

"Stay for breakfast?" Neave called from the circular table in the kitchen's center, her voice inviting.

I had taken to sharing meals with Tara and her family, Ollie and Neave.

Ollie smiled from behind his scruffy beard, his blue overalls stained with the paint the pack had been busy whitewashing the houses with lately.

"Thanks, but I'm not really hungry," I said. "I'll see you guys out there." I waved as I joined Tara's sleek silver wolf as we wandered toward Logan's. She left me at Logan's front door, disappearing into the trees for her patrol.

Just as I was about to knock, Logan stepped out. He handed me a travel mug, one of his almost-smiles on his lips.

My eyebrows shot up as the nutty aroma wafted up to me. “Is that hazelnut?”

Logan nodded, his brown eyes sincere and warm, gazing at me with affection. “Your favorite.”

We had played a game about favorites yesterday, but I hadn’t expected him to immediately use my weaknesses against me. “You didn’t need to do that,” I said, taking a tentative sip, unable to stop the contented sigh escaping me.

He shrugged. “You needed cheering up.”

Embarrassment fluttered through me. Had he noticed how down I’d been?

Logan had been his usual quiet presence around me the last few days, and I hadn’t thought I’d been so transparent. But he surprised me even more as he said, “I can feel it, you know? Your feelings for Tyler.”

No accusation laced his tone, but I blurted out, “I don’t have feelings for him.” I wished desperately for that to be true, hoping for the pain to disappear, longing to cut out this ache that had become my ever-present companion.

With a gentleness that ignited something unexpected in my chest, Logan observed, “You wish you didn’t have feelings for him. I feel that, too.” He placed a hand over his own heart, a point of connection that made the world feel both vast and intimate.

The sincerity in his eyes made me feel transparent, and my cheeks heated under his steady gaze.

“It may not feel possible now, Seraphina,” he promised, “but I will bring you happiness. I will help lift the weight of Tyler’s shadow from your heart.”

His earnestness surged within me like a tide as I envisioned a future where that might just be possible. Feeling lighter than I’d thought possible, given everything, I enjoyed the rest of the day painting with Logan’s quiet presence stirring a new ease in me.

Each day, I found a new rhythm, allowing Logan to be the steady strength, lifting me from the shadows. With time, perhaps there could be happiness—or at least more hazelnut lattes.

The energy around us felt lighter. Ever since the jedra herb had cured the last of the Silver Moon warriors like Neave, the pack thrived. The sun filled the skies, warmth returning with a last burst of fair weather, and the camaraderie seemed to blanket us, a balm for our collective spirits.

One day, Logan and I were taking a break from painting and enjoying some brownies that Tara and I had made together when Neave wobbled on the ladder.

“Babe!” Ollie called out, startling me from my thoughts, and I turned to see Neave swaying precariously on a ladder.

“It’s probably just a sugar gap,” Neave laughed, batting Ollie away. Still, he helped her down, and she ambled over to join us on the tree rounds Logan and I were perched on.

Logan, with a mouthful of brownie, replied, “If this is your wicked plan to lay claim to one of my brownies, Neave, it’s working.”

A genuine smile lifted my lips. Logan’s enjoyment of the gooey brownies—his favorites—warmed my heart.

Neave helped herself to a sizeable slice of brownie, but a sudden worry pricked my gut at the clamminess she wore on her cheeks and brow. I walked over to examine her, pressing my palm against her forehead. Closing my eyes, to my horror, I felt it: a slick, oily presence that clung to her like tar. Dread twisted my insides.

“Ollie, you need to take Neave to the infirmary,” I ordered with urgency threading my voice.

Before Neave could protest, Ollie dashed forward, bundling her into his arms and racing toward the town center. I grabbed my bag of magic supplies from Logan’s porch, my heart pounding as I felt Logan trailing behind me.

The air changed. A choking fog seemed to envelop our town, swallowing the brightness that had dared to bloom. As we hurried toward the infirmary, dread settled heavily upon my chest, echoing in Logan’s worried gaze.

“It’ll be okay,” he murmured, but his voice crackled with uncertainty.

“How, Logan?” I shot back, frustration creeping into my tone. “The jedra was supposed to cure the illness. If it’s back—”

“This isn’t all on you, Seraphina.” His steady gaze cut right to the heart of my fears—how the suspicion of the pack weighed heavily on my shoulders. He sensed it, the bond we shared tethering our feelings together. But, with the illness returning, wasn’t it only a matter of time before their scrutiny turned back on me?

When we entered the infirmary, my stomach bottomed out: David already lay in one of the beds, his face pale and drawn. The illness was resurfacing in more packmates than just Neave. The jedra wasn’t the long-term solution we had believed it to be.

Logan went over to see his cousin, David, and my heart squeezed from the worry I

felt in my chest.

I unpacked my supplies, frantic energy coursing through my veins as if I couldn't work quickly enough. Only Kelly, one of the infirmiry aides, was present.

"I've called for Healer Linda," she informed me, but there was worry in her voice that mirrored my own.

Almost as if summoned by our fear, Healer Linda arrived. Soon, her arms were full of the jedra herbs and the remnants of the potions we had distilled. But I recognized the grim look on her face. She understood as acutely as I did that the jedra we had counted on hadn't worked.

The door swung open again, and Harry, the other Silver Moon warrior who had recovered recently, was brought in. His eyes were fever-bright and unseeing.

Panic surged through me as Logan brushed his hand down my arm in a gentle but firm gesture, grounding me as I felt the weight of the world resting on my shoulders. He helped me set up my makeshift station, washing the herbs and sanitizing the tools I needed to brew more of the jedra cure. It had alleviated the symptoms for some time. That was the best we could do for now.

But as I turned to look at Logan again, fear clawed at my throat. A sheen clouded his forehead, and he looked clammy. I darted forward, pressing my hand against his brow.

Though surprised, the warmth of my touch sparked a moment of connection. But he must have clocked my serious expression, his lips becoming a grim line. "I've got it, haven't I?"

I nodded, my heart lurching. The slick, dark magic thrummed ominously within him,

and fear twisted in my stomach.

“Let’s get you to a bed,” I urged, guiding him to a nearby cot with gentle hands, careful to keep worry from spilling into my voice. But as I watched the feverish hue blanket Logan’s strong features, panic reverberated through every fiber of my being. Logan hadn’t been infected before. That meant the infection was spreading yet again.

Soon, there were more admissions, some packmates who had had the illness before—such as Monique and Ellie—while others like Susan and Craig, who hadn’t been infected before, were now struck down like Logan. As the beds began to fill up, I heard hushed voices out in the infirmary corridor. Packmates were muttering about calling the Council. Dread pooled in my gut. I knew it was only a matter of time before I was summoned.

Within the hour, the Council of three elders had convened. As Justin appeared in the infirmary doorway, I braced myself for the inevitable. “Seraphina, the Council of Elders would like to see you in the Council Chamber,” Justin ordered.

With a pounding heart, I followed him through the corridors, my steps heavy with dread. There were packmates in the corridor of the Council Chamber, many wearing flinty expressions, their eyes following me with fear and mistrust. My spirits sank, this feeling all too familiar.

Upon entering the council room, I found the three elders—Darius, Tom, and Carl. The shiny giak adorning the chamber was reminiscent of Elder Darius’s silver attire, and I knew in my bones that he had been the one to summon me here.

“These warriors—Neave, Harry, David—have all taken the potion containing the jedra, made by you, Seraphina,” Darius declared almost as soon as I entered, his voice cold and deliberate.

“Logan didn’t have the jedra potion,” Elder Carl countered, his voice steady and a kind smile on his face as he looked at me. My heart squeezed, and I was grateful that he knew the truth about the traitor in our midst and that Tyler had confided in him.

At the thought of Tyler, despite everything that had happened between us, I wished he were here now.

“But Seraphina’s been spending an inordinate amount of time with him,” Darius retorted sharply. “She could have easily slipped him something.”

The weight of his words felt like a blow, leaving me breathless. As the shock of the illness flaring, of Logan being infected, and of finding myself caught in the crosshairs once again flared through me, I wondered, was I always destined to be the scapegoat for our pack?

“We must hold her accountable,” Darius continued, his piercing gaze unwavering. “For the safety of our pack, the council must make an example of her.”

As the weight of his words echoed in the chamber, I felt as if the walls were closing in on me, shock holding me prisoner. If I’d been forced to, at that moment, I didn’t think I could have fought my way out of the Council Chamber.

Luckily, for once, fate was smiling on me. The air grew thick with a scent I recognized—fresh cedar and earthiness—the firm, unmistakable steps of Alpha Tyler resonated behind me as he strode into the chamber, unwavering and resolute.

“Enough!” he commanded, his voice slicing through the tension like lightning. Every pair of eyes now landed on him, and hope blazed through me.

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Tyler

The air in the Council Chamber was thick with tension, a palpable weight as Elder Darius once again pinned his dark gaze on Seraphina, heaping the blame on her for this illness. Fury pounded through me, but I had to keep it at bay. Our ill packmates needed Seraphina and I more than Darius needed a dressing down.

I stood at the door beside Seraphina, a sea of mistrustful voices behind us—packmates who were out of their minds with worry. Anger bristled through me as the voices of the pack murmured behind us, whispering their doubts about Seraphina once again.

I'd been out on patrol duty with the pack when Hudson had informed me of the resurgence of the illness. I'd hurried back as soon as I could, shocked to hear that Seraphina had been called before the Council of Elders.

"Seraphina is in no way responsible for this illness," I declared forcefully. I clenched my fists before releasing them, trying to relinquish some of the tension in me. I'd gotten here. Seraphina was safe.

"I thought I made it clear, Elder Darius," I gritted out, "that I wouldn't stand for Seraphina being disrespected or treated with suspicion any longer." My voice was low and scratchy, my wolf's growl rumbling through it.

I had hoped to have more time to investigate the supply of herbs in the infirmary, having already gained admittance by dropping off what I'd gathered over the last few days. Yet, for all my combing through the supply closet and trying to sense the dark

magic that I'd felt after Linda drugged me, I hadn't uncovered proof yet.

But the resurgence of the illness meant things had come to a head. The infirmary, which should be where treatment came from, was harming the pack. The need to get there as quickly as possible surged through me. But I needed Seraphina with me.

Elder Darius had the good sense to look cowed, his face paling as my eyes bore into him, a muscle in my jaw ticking.

"In light of the illness returning, we elders thought the circumstances had changed—" Darius began.

"Nothing has changed," I stated. "Seraphina has my complete faith and trust. She will be assisting me now as I examine the potions being administered to the sick."

Elder Darius's jaw slackened, but he clamped it shut. Doubt flickered across Elder Tom's face. I knew from Hudson's report detailing those in the infirmary that his wife Jackie was now ill. Fear for one's loved ones too easily led to one's judgment being clouded.

Yet, with my growing suspicion about Healer Linda and the illness's sudden resurgence, I knew Seraphina and I had to take action. Now.

Elder Carl spoke up, offering his support, "Good luck with your examination." The elder's kind eyes were solemn, and I knew his thoughts were likely centered on Linda and the supplies in the infirmary. The urgency pounding through me to get to the bottom of this was mirrored by the elder I'd taken into my trust.

"We elders will stay convened in the council," Elder Tom added, "Until you've sent word of how things are progressing."

I nodded, pleased by how Elder Tom was clearly being proactive and shadowing Elder Darius with this new development of the illness resurging and our suspicions being centered on Healer Linda and, by extension, her father, Darius.

With Darius and Tom's reluctant approval, Seraphina and I left the Council Chambers.

As Seraphina matched my quick strides across the snow-dusted path, the quiet was strained. We hadn't been alone for days. She'd been making herself scarce, leaving with the dawn and returning late ever since the atrocious way I'd behaved on the night Linda had drugged me with that heat potion. That familiar shame knotted my stomach as I thought about how I'd behaved. The worry that she might never forgive me for forcing myself upon her was eating away at me.

With the pace I was setting toward the infirmary, I felt as if I were trying to outstrip such thoughts. I'd heard from Hudson that the first to suffer relapses had been those recently recovered: those who had taken the jedra potion that Seraphina had brewed. But there were others who hadn't been ill who'd come down with the illness. My chest tightened: Logan was among them.

My gaze skirted over Seraphina's profile as I worried how she was holding up. Her fair skin was luminous in the falling dusk. Her eyes were bright, and her jaw was set with determination. My chest squeezed. She must be worried about her fated mate and eager to find a cure.

"I've examined all the herbs in the supply closet," I informed her. "But I haven't been able to sense the dark magic in any of them."

For a moment, she frowned, then said, "Perhaps whoever's corrupted the stock has used magic to conceal it." A smile edged her lips. "Good thing my magic's back to full capacity."

My heart hammered in my chest, that easy smile gracing her lips, even amidst these dark times, seeming as wonderful as the well of magic she possessed. Despite the resurgence of the illness, a thrill shot through me as I enjoyed Seraphina's closeness and the way I felt connected to her all of a sudden. The purpose of the investigation brought us together in a way I'd missed with all my heart.

As we entered the infirmary, I immediately ordered, "There's to be no more administration of the jedra tonics—not until Seraphina and I have conducted an investigation of the stock here. We are not to be disturbed."

My sharp instruction had Healer Linda paling, but she nodded brusquely, intimidated just like her father had been. My stare brushed over her. Was this reaction a show of guilt, I wondered.

"Collect the jedra potions, Tyler," Seraphina instructed me, her tone decisive. I tried to ignore the flush of happiness I felt again at hearing the ease with which my name rolled off her tongue. With anyone else, I'd have minded the lack of respect toward me as alpha, but with Seraphina, it didn't bother me. In fact, I felt relieved that she was comfortable enough to be so familiar. It signaled a return to the easy way of being with each other that I cherished. How I'd missed that this last week, being deprived of her yet again. I quickly gathered the tonics from Linda and Kelly.

In a moment, Seraphina had collected her bag from Logan's bedside. My chest clenched as I watched her press the back of her hand to his brow, concern etched across her face. The sight twisted my stomach into knots, a reminder of how close I was to losing her. I forced myself out to the supply closet.

As I stepped into the space, the familiar scents of spicy kulvitch and gentle palliks wrapped around me, instantly transporting me back to our last encounter here. The air had been thick with unspoken desires, a tension that had drawn us so close I could still feel the ghost of her warmth against me. That bittersweet memory lingered like

an ache in my chest, a reminder of what I longed for but couldn't possess.

I struggled to keep my emotions in check as Seraphina joined me. The vast metal shelves lined the stone walls. She began clearing one of the shelves, creating a workspace, while I gathered the pouches of jedra—the harvest of the infirmary aides and Silver Moon warriors. All of which, as I'd told Seraphina, I'd searched for any signs of dark magic.

But I hadn't had this fierce and determined witch with me then. My gaze brushed over the angle of her cheeks and her green eyes, which, in the low light of the one bulb hanging in the center of the closet, looked darker, like moss in the forest, full of ancient secrets. She'd always been wise beyond her years.

Once again, despite the pressing safety of our pack, the perfume of Seraphina's honeyed skin had me relishing the sense of closeness that I'd been lucky enough to be granted.

"I'm going to examine the potions for concealment charms, first," she said, pulling me from my distracted thoughts as she poured a little liquid from each tonic into separate beakers.

"Iri punaruk ," she intoned, holding her hands over the first jar.

I held my breath, then inhaled sharply as the liquid began to separate. Like oil sitting on top of water, a residue congealed on the potion's surface.

"Look," she whispered. "Do you sense the dark magic now?"

The hairs on the back of my arms stood on end as the slick feeling of dark magic prickled over me. "I do." Something spicy scented the air, too. "What's that spiciness?" I asked.

“Kiva—it’s an herb that grows in the Shadow Moon Pack, and it is particularly good for concealment as they harvest it beneath Igaluk’s dark moon. Whoever’s concealed the magic has cemented the concealment charm with a sprinkling of the herb. That’s why you couldn’t even sense the dark magic when you checked the herbs.”

Anger brimmed through me as the spicy aroma conjured to mind the exact scent the drink Linda had given me held.

Seraphina peered at the next beaker of liquid, the determined set to her jaw never wavering as she uttered the incantation, resulting in the same dark, congealed residue in each of the beakers.

She turned her attention to the herbs in the pouches next, working the same magic.

I blinked in astonishment as the black powder amidst the herbs became visible. Bile rose in my throat as I finally had confirmation that the very remedies meant to heal had been the means by which the pack was harmed. Fury fired through me as I stared at these little heaps of fine blackness lined up like gunpowder ready to be loaded.

“Can you cleanse the herbs, or are all of our supplies ruined?” I asked, worried about the sick in the infirmary.

“I can clean them,” Seraphina said confidently. Another few incantations had the herbs safely cleansed. She went one step further and was able to separate the already distilled jedra potions from the corrupt dark magic. I marveled as the oily residue on the surface was decanted into separate beakers, leaving the tonics as the curatives they were meant to be.

We wasted no time and brought the potions out into the infirmary, distributing them to Kelly and Linda to administer. I forced myself to treat Linda as normal.

The ill pack members were feverish, but all were able to take the potion. I watched in awe as they gradually began to recover over the next hour. Logan's pallid cheeks took on a hint of color, and he was able to sit up.

Blinking in disbelief at the change in all the packmates, relief flooded my veins, and my heart raced with gratitude and pride for Seraphina's talent and skill.

With proof that someone had infected the herbs, I announced to Healer Linda, "I'm confiscating all sets of keys to the infirmary while I investigate who has infected the herbs." I made a point of ordering Justin to go get the elders' keys from all three of them, too.

Linda was as pale as earlier, but she administered the curatives with calm efficiency, handing over her keys without complaint.

Belatedly, I realized that now that Seraphina had successfully treated the packmates once again, the fleeting time we'd had together was over.

But, she caught my eye and drew over to the infirmary door. "We should bag up things in the cupboard, shouldn't we?"

The way she held my stare had my heart knocking violently. For a moment, the joyous thought that she desired time alone with me, too, had a thrill shooting me.

"Yes," I managed. The opportunity to be close to her again and mend some of the hurt I'd caused her of late was too good a chance to pass up.

In a moment, we were back in the supply closet. She found some plastic bags and moved the evidence of the black powder into them, and then she bottled up the dark magic in its liquid form.

She used her magic to levitate the substances, and once again, I was awed by her skill and efficiency. She didn't need me here to accomplish this task. The thought had hope drumming through my chest. She'd asked me in here anyway. The air simmered between us, expectation hanging between us like whispers.

As Seraphina bagged the last of the powder, our eyes locked. My breath hitched. In that moment, I couldn't fight the impulse any longer. I stepped closer, heart racing as I confided, "I need to tell you something about this dark magic. This powder reminds me of what Linda used to drug me the other night."

Seraphina frowned. "Linda drugged you?"

I nodded, holding her gaze. "The other night, just before you and I were together. When I returned from seeing her, I was under the influence of a heat potion she'd slipped into my drink. I recognized that chili scent."

"The kiva," she interjected. "She concealed a heat potion in your drink," she said, her jaw slack, looking stunned.

I nodded, my expression clouded, but I shook the darkness away. I needed to tell her everything. "The morning I woke beside you—that is what I was sorry about. I was sorry that the heat potion brought about my desire—"

"So, it wasn't real," she blurted out. Heat rose to her cheeks, and her beautiful moss-colored gaze fell away.

"It was real," I uttered, my heart drumming. "Everything I feel for you is real," I vowed, wanting with every ounce of my being for her gaze to return to me.

When I got my wish, along with her eyes lightening—was that hope she was looking at me with? I wanted nothing more than to keep her gaze on me. "I thought you

regretted it happening,” she said tentatively.

“I was only sorry for how it had come about. I wanted you with all my heart,” I assured her, my eyes burning with the sole desire to show her how much I wanted her.

I watched her lips part slightly. I took a tentative step closer, time suspending as I once more slipped into her orbit. I breathed in her honey perfume and felt something settle in my chest.

I touched her arm. She wore a pair of thick navy overalls, but even my palm on her upper arm sent a jolt of connection zipping through me. My palm trailed up, wanting more contact, but I gave her plenty of time to step away or tell me to stop. But she didn't. She seemed to be searching my gaze as much as I was hers. As my hand grazed her neck, cupping her cheek, she leaned into my touch, a sigh escaping her mouth.

The sound had my heart pounding, want coursing through me, and my hesitation dissolved. My lips dipped to hers, brushing her with a feather-soft touch. Is this okay? my kiss asked. The graze of her own plush lips answered me, the little whimper she made telling me that this was okay, that it was more than okay.

I deepened our kiss. I want you . I told her as my tongue found hers. Her fingers found the back of my neck, grazing the back of my head. Her deepening kiss seemed to tell me that she needed me. I lost myself in the heat of her, the feel of her hands on me, reveling that this had come about through my truth, not by anything external. This was what I had yearned for—a connection that had nothing to do with anyone else and everything to do with the trust and need pulsing between us.

But then the fragile magic shattered like glass. The sharp sound of footsteps echoed through the space, cutting through our moment of intimacy. I barely registered the

closet door swinging open before I felt Seraphina pull away, the warmth of her presence receding as reality crashed back in.

Seraphina

My heart dropped like a stone as Logan pushed open the door, his tall figure looming in the doorway, cutting off the warmth that had enveloped Tyler and me. Confusion flickered across his features, quickly morphing into something heavier—hurt—like a storm cloud darkening the sky.

Oh, goddess, what was I doing?

Panic coursed through me, and I jerked back from Tyler, suddenly painfully aware of how getting close to Tyler now was terribly timed. The warmth between us sputtered like a flame caught in a breeze, leaving a cold void in its wake. Yet my heart still raced, a wild drumbeat echoing in my ears as the intoxicating heat Tyler had ignited within me refused to fade completely.

Turning away, I focused on the shelves cluttered with evidence bags, needing to escape the weight of their stares. I picked up the plastic wallets, grasping at something to ground myself.

“All the evidence is bagged up,” I said, forcing resolve into my voice amid the storm of emotions roiling within me.

“Justin’s returned from seeing the elders. Here’s all three sets of keys,” Logan said, handing them to Tyler, his tone clipped.

I risked a glance at Logan. His brow was furrowed. His dark brown eyes sparked with a flintiness. We needed to get out of this closet. I was all too aware from the squeeze

of the mate bond in my chest that the thrum of pain there might soon turn to anger. The last thing we needed right now was to start fighting between ourselves—not when the real enemy who had poisoned the herbs with dark magic and tainted the cure was still out there.

I broached the topic with them both now. “How are we going to prove that Linda’s the one behind all this?”

“We need to question the infirmarium aides,” Tyler said decisively.

Thankfully, Logan turned out of the closet, following Tyler’s command.

I followed, relieved to be out of the confined space despite what lay ahead of us.

Kelly was still on duty monitoring the packmates alongside Healer Linda.

The night had long drawn in, and the infirmarium was dimly lit, the lamplight casting long shadows across the white walls. The scent of chamomile and jedra intermixed, creating a calming atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the turmoil roiling within me.

I noticed Tyler’s tactical presence as he deftly instructed Healer Linda, his voice low but authoritative. “The patients are doing fine. The jedra is proving effective. You can go home for the night, Linda.”

“But shouldn’t I be—”

“Seraphina’s more than capable of overseeing the treatment here alongside Kelly,” Tyler insisted.

His words, full of faith and trust, sent the same flutter of warmth through my chest

that his lips had coaxed.

His explanation about how he hadn't regretted what had happened between us, only how it had come about—through Linda's drugging him with a heat potion—had been a revelation. To think that Healer Linda, who was now freely walking out the door, had drugged Tyler was staggering. My stomach clenched. Was she really the one spreading this illness through our pack? Had Linda become so embittered by Tyler's decision to call off their mate ceremony that she would stoop to harming the entire pack out of revenge? Nausea rose within me as I realized we were inching closer to uncovering the truth behind the roots of this illness.

Now that Linda was gone, Tyler was straight on the phone. I heard him telling the other infirmiry aide, Laura, to come to his house. A spark of inspiration came to me. The infirmiry had a patient log detailing when and who the patients had been seen by. Sitting down at the desk, I scanned the neat handwriting of visitors over the last week, looking for any correlations that could shed light on how the black powder had been added to the herbs.

Purpose bloomed, blanketing the whirlwind of emotions that had threatened to overwhelm me earlier. I felt a sense of familiarity as I scoured through the recordings in the log, feeling as if I could almost be in the library, combing texts for answers.

"Here," I said, my finger hovering over a name. "Several of these patients who were newly infected—Jackie and Susan came into contact with both aides, Kelly and Lauren, right before the potions were brewed."

Tyler leaned down, his breath warm against my cheek as he looked over my shoulder. "Elder Darius approved their placements in the infirmiry. They've likely only been following Linda's orders, but we need to be sure."

Tyler, Logan, and I started toward Tyler's house after setting up Justin to watch over

the packmates and telling him to come to Tyler's if Healer Linda or anyone else appeared,

But Logan stopped, "Alpha Tyler?"

He gestured for me to go on. I walked onwards with Kelly, my heart drumming nervously. Logan wasn't about to get sidetracked about things with us, was he? Part of me understood him wanting to unravel the tangled mess we'd inadvertently woven, but frustration rang through me. We needed to focus on uncovering the traitor.

But I was utterly perplexed when Logan ran off a moment later in the opposite direction to Tyler's house. I opened my mouth to ask Tyler, but he shook his head as he joined me and Kelly.

Ten minutes later, back at Tyler's, Laura was already waiting at the back door. Calmly but with gravity, Tyler interrogated the two aides. They both affirmed that Linda had processed the herbs herself before handing them over to them to deliver treatment.

The confirmation ignited a spark of anger in Tyler's eyes. "Thank you both. I want you to go right home, Laura. Kelly, go back to the infirmary. Justin is standing guard all night. See that neither of you say anything about our conversation here," he said.

As the back door clicked shut and the infirmary aides left, quiet fell around us. I was suddenly very aware that this was the first time Tyler and I had been in the kitchen since... since I'd been laid out like a feast on this very table between us. My heart drummed, wondering whether his thoughts had gone to a similar place.

Fighting to clear my thoughts, I got up to get a glass of water. "Where did Logan go?"

“He had an idea about how to get concrete evidence,” Tyler said.

As if his ears were burning, Logan returned. He wasn’t alone. Tara was with him. She brought a laptop, which she promptly opened and sat on the table.

“Is it planted?” Tyler asked.

“Yes,” both Logan and Tara answered in unison.

I frowned, glancing around at all three of them.

Tyler pulled out his mobile, typing a text. He nodded. “I’ve disbanded the Council.”

Tara opened up something on the laptop, pressed a few buttons, and then said, “All set. Now, we wait.”

“Wait for what?” I asked, getting more and more bemused.

“We planted a recording device in Darius’s house.”

I gasped.

“We need to know whether both Elder Darius and Healer Linda are orchestrating this,” Logan explained. “So, we bugged his house.”

Suddenly, the silence felt loaded and every moment our anticipation grew as we waited. Every creak of the old house caused one of us to start.

Luckily, it wasn’t long before a bang resounded over the laptop speakers. A door closed over the tinny recording.

Not five minutes later, a knock sounded. Footsteps. The creak of a chair or sofa. More footsteps—someone pacing?

“So, the packmates are all on the mend. How can that be?” Darius’s sharp voice flew out of the speakers.

All four of us sitting around the table seemed to hold our breath.

“Seraphina discovered our concealment spell,” Linda said quietly. We all leaned in. “She cleansed the potions.”

“Do we have more poison?” Darius asked.

“No, I used the last of it in this last batch,” Linda answered.

“So, we’re back at square one again?” Darius exclaimed, exasperation evident in his voice as it crackled, increasing in volume over the speakers. “I’ll have to contact the Black Moon Pack for more poisons again.”

“Damn,” Tara breathed beside me.

My heart drummed. It was confirmation that Darius and Linda had been working with the Black Moons and their dark witch to create this illness and weaken our pack. Shock ricocheted through our group. Both Tyler and Logan looked furious, their stony expressions mirroring the sense of shock and anger echoing through me.

“If you’d only managed to get Tyler wrapped around your finger, then we’d be having a much easier time of things,” Darius complained.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I watched Tyler’s expression darken, his knuckles turning white on the tabletop as his hands curled into fists.

“I would have succeeded in handling him if it wasn’t for Seraphina,” Linda said exasperatedly.

“You’re right,” Darius said, a world-weary sigh trailing his words. “If it hadn’t been for her, you’d have been married to Tyler, and I’d already be alpha.”

Confusion surged through me as I tried to understand how Darius could have believed he would become alpha simply by having his daughter marry Tyler. There had to be more to the elder’s schemes, but the realization that Linda and Darius’s treachery extended all the way back to two years ago was staggering. Tyler had backed out of the mate ceremony to Linda because of his feelings for me. Anger blazed through my veins. Linda had only stood beside Tyler, the man I’d loved, because her father had wanted to seize power.

As they continued to speak, my heart raced, each word confirming their deception. My chest tightened as Darius exclaimed, “I knew that girl returning would be a problem. She’s as meddlesome as her parents. The day I rid this pack of her will be as great as the day I slew those two.”

“Slew?” I whispered, my gaze finding Tyler’s. His bright blue stare held me with tenderness as I realized, just as Tyler’s darkening face told me he was putting things together, that Darius had savagely murdered my parents. Just as he’d orchestrated their supposed treachery, he’d made their murder look like suicide.

My throat constricted with rage as the truth unfurled before me.

“The Black Moons are going to go back on our agreement if we keep being unable to deliver Tyler to them,” Linda said.

“They can’t go back on it,” Darius said. “Torin swore a Blood Oath that I would be Alpha of the Silver Moon Pack once the Silver Moons’ resources were in his hands.

Alpha Marcus reaffirmed the Blood Oath when he took over the leadership of the pack. Besides, with the new mine Elder Tom discovered, Torin's appetite for our territory has only intensified recently. Alpha Marcus knows our pack's territory is worth the wait."

So, this was the truth—a Blood Oath had been brokered between the Black Moon Pack and Elder Darius. The Black Moon Alpha was planning on granting Darius an alphahood over our pack in exchange for our precious resources.

Darius had the Black Moons invade our pack and massacre them with the goal of killing Tyler and seizing control of the pack. However, Tyler had led the pack and defeated the Black Moons. Subsequently, Darius had tried to use his daughter, through marriage, to gain influence and control.

Tyler said, "Darius is a fool if he thinks the Black Moon leader will ever share power."

I nodded. "No doubt the Black Moon witch would find a way to bypass the Blood Oath," I said.

Tyler's blue gaze, once darkened with fury, was now cleared with decisiveness.

"Mute it, Tara," he ordered.

In a moment, Tyler's phone was pressed to his ear. "Linda," he greeted, making us all hold our breath. "I need you to come to the infirmary. A few packmates' conditions have worsened. Thanks. See you soon. Oh, if you could stop by your father's, I'm convening the Council again, too." He ended the call.

Tara let out a huff, "Talk about a brilliant poker face, damn, Alpha Tyler."

Tyler gave her a smile that was more of a grimace. “Go gather the pack, Logan,” he ordered. “Tell them to head for the sparring ring.”

We were suddenly all heading in that direction, ready to ambush the traitors before they reached the infirmary. We’d reached the sparring ring, and seeing the wooden staked torches in the snow-dusted earth, I murmured, “ Kaumanik .”

The torches flared to life, throwing the already-gathering pack into sudden illumination. Almost the whole pack had gathered here—about forty members strong, standing around the circle, their faces taut with anticipation. Logan jogged back from the edges of the circle to join us in the center of the sparring ring.

“Tonight,” Tyler began, his voice steady, a deep timbre that commanded attention, “We’re here to address the horrors that have afflicted our pack. We have gathered evidence that reveals the truth behind the darkness that has poisoned our land and loved ones.”

Whispers rippled through the crowd like wildfire, the tension thickening as Tara stepped forward, clutching the recording device. My heart pounded in my chest, the weight of the moment crashing down on me as I stood alongside Tyler and Tara.

Tyler’s blue gaze held me, and he nodded, placing a reassuring hand on my back.

“Darius and Linda have conspired against us,” I declared, my voice rising as I felt the enormity of the moment settle on me. “They have been working in league with the Black Moon Pack, trading our lives for power and resources!”

Gasps echoed around the space outside the infirmary.

“Tara, show them,” Tyler said. “Show them.”

As Tara activated the recording on her phone, the pack fell silent, anticipation hanging in the air like a tightly drawn bowstring.

Shock waves rippled through the crowd, disbelief quickly morphing into fury. The tension intensified as the members surged with anger, their voices rising in disgust and horror.

Tyler remained resolute beside me, and I caught sight of Elder Tom's face, anger etched deeply within it.

Tyler pressed on, harnessing the swell of outrage rippling around us. "They have poisoned our pack, abused our trust, and sought to take our resources for their own greed."

His declaration was brilliantly timed as, at that very moment, Darius and Linda, their expressions twisted with surprise, strayed toward the outskirts of the sparring ring and our gathered assembly.

"Your alliance with the Black Moon Pack has been exposed," Tyler shouted. "The pack sees you for what you truly are—shifters without loyalty who deserve to be executed for the lives you've taken!"

Shock rippled over Linda as she stood at the edge of the ring. But Darius was quick to express his contempt, "You're fools to think you're capable of standing against the Black Moon Pack. We will crush you all."

My heart raced as I stood shoulder to shoulder with Tyler, Logan, and Tara, our resolve hardening as a collective force against the encroaching darkness. The anger of the pack around us erupted in shouts, some packmates even shifting and surging forward with outraged howls.

Elder Darius and Linda shifted, too, turned tail, and ran into the night. Their howls were answered by distant ones that curdled my blood. There were Black Moons in the distance. Linda and Darius had gone to gather their allies, who weren't far away.

“Let them go,” Tyler called to Justin and Hudson, who were chasing after them.

“We'll meet them in battle soon,” Tyler declared, his voice a fierce rallying cry that reverberated through the tense circle of the pack. “Warriors, prepare yourselves! We will not stand by while they take what is ours!”

Seraphina

In a whirlwind of action, Tyler and I prepared the pack for battle. Tyler barked urgent orders to the Silver Moon warriors, who scrambled to arrange the less skilled packmates into formation, designating different warriors to lead them. The elders and young rushed toward the infirmary, an island of safety amid the storm brewing outside.

I harnessed my magical supplies, my heart pounding in sync with the chaotic bustle around me. Beneath the flickering torches, I sketched a huge pentagram rune of protection over the sparring ring, casting a shimmering barrier—a safe zone, much like the circle I had conjured on the mountainside to shield Logan and Tyler. But as I carefully etched the final lines of the symbol, Logan hovered nearby. A swell of discomfort zipped through my chest.

Both he and Tyler were organizing the units of wolves they would be leading. But with Logan's unit organized, he was getting distracted. I felt the pull of the mate bond in my chest as he kept turning to watch me.

“Logan?” I asked. “Do you remember the tagiu stones in the Council Chamber?”

“The ashy blue ones?” he replied.

“Exactly. Can you pry out as many as you can?”

“On it.” In a moment, he'd gone.

I had been about to go and get the precious ores myself to reinforce the protective circle. But Logan needed to refocus his thoughts on the fight ahead. We couldn't afford to be distracted or have our attention divided.

But then, my gaze found Tyler amidst the ranks of the shifted wolves, the rumble of his voice roiling through the air, steady and reassuring, as solid as the strong lines of his body. He hadn't shifted into his wolf form yet, but his muscled body amidst the sea of silver fur looked just as magnificent as his mighty silver wolf.

Just then, his eyes found mine, and it felt as if the storm in them was all for me. As if we were back in the supply closet, his lips on mine, his kiss telling me he wanted me, the fierce flicker in his eyes seemed to tell me he felt the heat banking between us still.

As Logan re-entered the sparring ring, arms cradling a bundle of tagiu stones, I shook my head, feeling like the world's biggest hypocrite as I tried to clear my attention.

"Bury the tagiu at each point of the pentagram," I instructed Logan. "It'll reinforce the protective magic."

The howls in the north grew clearer: The Black Moons were drawing ever closer. Anticipation thrummed through me, aware that the witch who had used blood magic to frame my parents was about to emerge from the shadows.

Too soon, silence settled over our pack like a thick fog. Everyone, except for Tyler and me, had shifted into their wolf forms. I remained at the center of the sparring ring, feeling my magic surge around me, enveloping me like a warm summer breeze.

Shapes began to slip from the night as the first waves of Black Moon wolves emerged from the tree line, their obsidian-furred forms stalking forward. The air thickened, heavy with malice, as their silhouettes danced ominously in the flickering torchlight.

The formidable figure of Alpha Marcus emerged. His muscled chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath. The intricate tattoos coiling over his arms seemed to ripple like serpents. Each sinew tightened as he organized his pack with a commanding presence. In his grip, he wielded the medallion from our last encounter, its dark aura pulsating ominously and sending chills racing up my spine.

But he didn't keep it for long. He extended it towards another figure emerging from the shadows: Elvira, the dark witch of the Black Moons. Icy tendrils of terror curled around my heart as I felt the power intensify when it was transferred into her hands.

The two figures advanced across the land toward us, their pack of Black Moons stalking close behind them. Alpha Marcus stepped forward, his voice carrying across the night with cruel amusement.

"Tyler," he called, a mocking smirk on his face. "For too long, I've had my sights set on your precious Silver Moon lands. Tonight, I take them."

Tyler's jaw tightened, his gaze unwavering as he stared Marcus down. "We've chased you from our lands before, Marcus. We'll do it again!"

Marcus laughed, the sound chilling. "I believe your mighty pack these days is about as sharp as your sense of smell," he jabbed, glancing sideways at the ranks of wolves behind him. "How long was it before you discovered my own in your midst?" His voice dripped with mockery as he gestured to the two silvery wolves within the Black Moon ranks, Darius and Linda's eyes glinting with betrayal.

Tyler growled low in his throat, fury flashing in his eyes. "Their deceit will not go unpunished!"

With a scoff, Marcus stepped forward, the medallion's dark aura pulsing with energy in response. "No, tonight, I'm going to take everything from you—your pack, your

lands, and even your precious little witch.” He shot a glance in my direction, a wicked grin playing on his lips.

My heart raced, ferocity bubbling within me as I braced for the fight, already feeling Elvira’s infringing darkness radiating beside the Black Moon Alpha.

A low growl, filled with fury and resolve, sounded from Tyler. “Tonight, I’m going to tear you apart.”

With those words, Tyler’s muscles rippled, and silver sprouted as he shifted seamlessly into his mighty wolf form. The air vibrated with power as his eyes shone, the fierce spirit of the Alpha embodied in his majestic shape. With a roar that pierced the night, he let out the howl of battle, a sound that echoed through the trees.

In that very moment, Marcus followed suit. He, too, shifted, but his form transformed into a massive black wolf, sleek and powerful. He unleashed a howl, deep and resonant, a challenge that reverberated through the very ground beneath us.

The two Alphas stood poised, their forms exuding strength and authority, howling for dominance—making the air electric with the promise of impending conflict.

Suddenly, the howls and growls of battle erupted like an explosion around me. My heart raced, each thump screaming of what was at stake—our lives, our pack, and everyone I loved.

Elvira raised her arms and shouted an incantation that sliced through the night air. “U nnuak atuutluk tuku! ” Each word was aimed toward me as she tried to shred the protective circle I had created.

This time, I was ready for her dark magic, though. The tagiu stones Logan had buried at the pentagram’s points surged with energy, their glow merging with the rune of

protection I had drawn. I thrust my arms forward, channeling the pentagram's protective barrier.

A rush of dread hit me the moment Tyler breached the protective circle. I reached skyward, sending out a pulse from my shimmering barrier to collide with the first wave of Black Moon wolves, sending them crashing to the icy ground. They crumpled beneath the force, and the Silver Moon warriors seized their moment, fangs and claws descending upon their enemies.

Yet, my attention was pulled back to the dark witch as she closed in, her indigo robes swirling in the night. A silver-furred wolf lunged toward the witch in defiance, but with a single flick of her wrist, Elvira summoned a ball of dark energy that exploded, sending him crashing into a nearby tree.

In mere moments, injured wolves started to stream back into my protective circle. The sanctuary I had envisioned held firm. Drawing strength from the ores buried deep in the earth, as well as the tagiu ores and the pentagram rune, I felt my blood sing with raw power. With determination thrumming in my veins, I sent my magic rippling through the pentagram, hurling it toward Elvira like a comet.

But she was quick, too. Summoning the dark power of the medallion, she raised a churning wall of inky smoke, hurling it at my barrier. My magic collided violently with hers, but Elvira merely smirked, darkness spilling into the ground like a tide threatening to drown us all.

Tendrils of ink erupted from the snow, ensnaring an injured wolf within my circle. I felt the air crackle with tension as I concentrated fiercely on the ores arrayed before me, their flickering light a defiance against the encroaching shadows. Determined, I channeled the energies from the ores and runes, pushing back Elvira's dark tendrils from the circle.

Frustrated, Elvira unleashed her anger on our ranks. A courageous Silver Moon leaped forward, only to be brutally impaled on a jagged spear of ice she conjured.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, urgency pushing me to send my magic out to fight her, protecting the silver wolves arcing around her.

Tyler's howl cut through the cacophony, rallying the Silver Moon pack as they attacked the lines of Black Moons coming from the shadows. My heart hammered as I knew we were at a disadvantage—becoming overwhelmed by the surge of Black Moon wolves swarming our ranks all too quickly.

Every moment, another silver wolf came back to the confines of my protective barrier, their open wounds increasing my dread. I longed to turn my healing magic on them, but my energy was wholly spent maintaining the barrier and trying to combat Elvira's strikes.

Nearby, a wide-headed, silvery-furred wolf—Logan—clashed with a particularly large Black Moon attacker. Their confrontation erupted in a fury of snarls and snapping jaws, a fierce battle that interrupted my concentration.

I summoned my power, sending tendrils of magic outward, wrapping them around the paws of the Black Moon wolf engaging Logan.

Elvira was now a mere ten feet from me, her eyes glinting with dark satisfaction.

“You think you can save them?” she shouted, her hands weaving intricate patterns in the air, coaxing forth dark energy with every flick of her fingers.

Her incantations wormed through my mind, dragging painfully like nails on a chalkboard. The medallion pulsed, its dark magic nearly overwhelming.

Suddenly, howls erupted from the south, sending a jolt of panic through me. Were the Black Moons attacking from that direction, too?

Scanning the southern slope, past the bleach-white houses, a thrill of recognition bristled through me. A mix of yellow, gray, and red wolves surged through the night, pushing toward us with purpose. The yellow coats of the Shadow Moon wolves, the gray-furred Moonlight wolves, and the red-coated Blood Moon wolves had come to our aid.

Shock ricocheted through me. How had they arrived here in our hour of need? A brown wolf was the first to reach the sparring circle, accompanied by a massive yellow wolf. I blinked in disbelief. Only one brown wolf in all the packs I knew bore those markings—Selina. She had once belonged to the Nightwing Pack before finding her mate, Alexis, the Alpha of the Shadow Moon Pack, who was the golden wolf at her side.

In the heat of battle, there was no time to wonder more. But together, with their allies, they fell upon the Black Moons. I watched in awe as they charged valiantly, fierce determination glinting in their eyes.

Elvira's expression twisted into a scowl—fury feeding her magic. She redirected her icy spears toward them, but my resolve flared brighter. I poured energy into the pentagram, its light pulsing defiantly against the looming shadows. I drew strength from all my allies, feeling their willingness to fight fill my heart as they joined the fight, creating a tidal wave against Elvira's oppressive darkness.

A howl rose from our pack, a rallying cry that electrified the air. Fueled by the combined strength of our bonds, I channeled my magic forward, releasing a cascade of shimmering power toward Elvira. For a brief moment, her dark magic faltered, and my heart sang with excitement.

But she deflected my next attack, unleashing a wall of darkness against my waves of green light. Elvira's glare bore into me, a threat filled with promise as she began another incantation. Energy crackled through my fingertips as I prepared another blast for her. The night was thick with the sounds of battle—snarls and howls mingling with the whines of injured warriors.

Once again, I discerned Tyler's distinctive howl erupting nearby. I focused on the sound, drawing energy from the thought of his strength and fierceness. Grounding down into the depths of my magic, I focused on what we were fighting for: our packs, my parents' memory, and everyone we loved. I channeled everything I had into the well of my magic, feeling as if this could be the strike that finally ended Elvira's reign of terror.

But before I could unleash it, a sudden shift startled me from behind. All I saw was a flash of silver before I was sent sprawling forward, and the ground rushed up to meet me.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Tyler

As often as I could, I had been glancing back from the battle to check on Seraphina. A flash of silvery fur streaking across the sparring ring behind her caught my eye now. The wolf moved too quickly for any injured member of our pack. Panic unfurled in my chest as I recognized the threat: Linda. While Seraphina's wards kept out the Black Moons, Linda was technically a Silver Moon.

Adrenaline surged through me as I propelled myself toward the threat. My heart pounded fiercely in my furry chest as I lunged toward the pentagram's radiant lines, shimmering with Seraphina's vibrant green magic.

Time flickered into a cruel snapshot, and the world narrowed to a tunnel where only Linda remained, claws gleaming ominously in the flickering torchlight, teeth bared in a lethal snarl. I leaped forward to shield Seraphina, relieved as my body shielded her. Then, raw pain ignited as Linda's claws raked into my flank. It spread like fire and ice, slicing through my body and shoving the breath from my lungs as I crumpled to the ground, knocking into Seraphina as I fell.

"No!" Seraphina screamed, her voice slicing through the din, her voice laced with terror.

In an instant, a burst of brilliant light erupted around me, and the pressure on my side released. I caught a glimpse of Seraphina, radiant and fierce, her power enveloping me and catapulting Linda's wolf back.

Nearby, two silver warriors tore past—Logan and Tara, fierce and unstoppable, their

teeth flashing like silver daggers as they charged at Linda. They moved with synchronized ferocity, their instincts finely honed from years of fighting together. A savage yelp pierced the air, followed by a chilling silence as Linda crumpled, her treachery finally extinguished.

Shifting back into my human form, I gritted my teeth against the searing pain. I pressed my palm against it, feeling the warmth of blood coat my fingers.

“Tara! Logan!” I hollered. “Stay with Seraphina!” My gaze scanned the fighting lines beyond the circle, anxious that Darius might breach these defenses as Linda had.

Seraphina took in my wound, panic flooding her face. I could feel her magic brushing up against me, wanting to heal me, but that brilliant energy wasn’t meant for me—not now, not when the dark witch Elvira still chipped away at Seraphina’s protective barrier.

I pinned Seraphina with my fiercest look, pushing every ounce of Alpha authority into my voice. “Keep fighting, Seraphina!” I urged, my body vibrating with conviction, every fiber of my being urging her onward.

“Tyler—” she began, fear lacing her voice, but I wouldn’t hear it. Not now.

“Don’t worry about me! You need to finish Elvira!” A fire ignited within my heart, a certainty that together, we could vanquish the Black Moons once and for all.

Seraphina’s expression hardened, fire returning to her jade eyes. Doubt melted away as she straightened, channeling her energy into strengthening the pentagram’s protective force against Elvira’s darkness.

Blood trickled steadily from my wound, slow against the frantic tempo of battle swirling beyond the circle. I returned my focus there, knowing I still needed to lead

the pack to victory.

“Keep them out of the circle!” I bellowed back to Tara and Logan, who remained on the edges of the circle.

As I shifted, the wolves around me responded, renewed vigor sparking through their ranks as I ran with them. But unease wormed through my gut. The wound in my side would slow me down. Still, I couldn’t falter.

Our allies—the Shadow Moons, Moonlights, and Blood Moons—had surged into battle alongside us. I didn’t yet know how they’d known the Black Moons were attacking, but they were here. That’s what mattered. Every yellow, red, or gray wolf set my spirit ablaze with renewed hope. With the other packs alongside us, victory was within our grasp. My paws pounded against the snow-dusted earth as I plunged back into combat.

To my left, a massive gray wolf intercepted a charging Black Moon, his size indicating he was an alpha—Kyle, Alpha of the Moonlight Pack. With speed and nimbleness, he collided with our enemy, jaws snapping as he found purchase on the flank of the Black Moon wolf. The combination of their skills exploded in a vivid display of fur and muscle.

But I barely had time to breathe when a Black Moon lunged toward me, camouflaged in the night. Crouching low, I knew I only had brute strength on my side—not speed, not with this agonizing heat in my side.

In that crucial moment, I threw my weight into the attack, smashing into the wolf and sending him crashing to the ground. I sank my teeth into his side, tasting the sweet release of rage as his blood splattered across my tongue.

To my right, a huge yellow streak darted across the white snow, battling against a

silver wolf. Recognition surged through me: Elder Darius. The golden Shadow Moon Alpha was fighting the traitor who had framed Seraphina's parents. Everything that the elder had done suddenly whipped through my mind, fueling my movements. He'd led the Black Moons into our midst. He'd been the cause of the sickness spreading through our pack all because he'd wanted to claim my alphahood.

Darius's wolf fainted, pivoting to bite into the flank of the Shadow Moon Alpha, but I surged toward him, my heart roaring with fury. I wouldn't let him live. I launched myself at him, biting deep into his left side. He flinched, a whine escaping him, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Alpha Alexis seize the opportunity, launching his own assault on his other flank.

But Darius's blood belonged to me. I edged closer, aiming for a lethal strike as Darius raised his neck, exposing the softness of his throat. With every ounce of simmering fury, I drove my fangs deep into his flesh.

Time slowed, blood spraying warmly against my muzzle. Darius thrashed but couldn't escape; life seeped from him in crimson rivulets. In that moment, justice coursed through my veins.

As his body hit the snow, I exchanged a fierce, knowing look with Alexis. We both felt the weight of justice. For a heartbeat, a rumble of shared satisfaction passed between us, but there was no time to celebrate.

No sooner had I rejoined the battle than a vicious snarl sliced through the tumult. Alpha Marcus—massive and imposing—charged toward me, his great paws pounding the earth. I barely managed to leap out of his path, my heart thundering as he circled, relentless in his pursuit.

Marcus lunged with brutal precision. In one swift motion, he targeted my already injured flank, the very spot where Linda had marked me. His jaws snapped down,

teeth sinking deep into the raw flesh, igniting a new wave of blinding pain that radiated through my body before tossing me onto the wintry ground.

Heaving myself up, I felt the air rush past the wound, blood warm and sticky against my fur, and the pain bloomed anew, sharper than before. Desperation clawed at my insides; I wouldn't let it stop me. Not now.

Marcus prowled, a sinister grin stretching his flews up, teeth glinting in the darkness—a predator thriving upon my suffering.

Yet, a fire remained in my heart—righteous anger anchored me against the rising tide of pain. Fueled by the image of Seraphina on the periphery of my vision, I prowled low, pushing through the blinding agony, my blood mingling with the frosty earth beneath my paws. But Seraphina was the only thought I needed to keep on fighting.

A fierce snarl erupted from my throat as I charged, focused solely on the Alpha, who was the embodiment of all my pack's suffering. Each pounding heartbeat propelled my muscles forward, igniting a rage that enveloped me, drowning out the pain as I surged toward him.

Marcus lunged, jaws snapping wide. Timing was everything. I ducked beneath his attack, using the momentum to pivot into his side, slamming my body against him.

We collided with thunderous force. The impact jarred us both, but with it came a renewed fire in my belly. I rolled away and twisted, sinking my fangs deep into his shoulder, breaking skin and tearing flesh.

His enraged roar shattered the night, sending shockwaves through me and invigorating the fight with renewed conviction. I felt his power falter, his massive frame stumbling, granting me the opening I sought.

Striking where it counted, I pushed through the haze of pain, drawing upon the last reserves of my spirit. Prowling closer, I channeled every ounce of spirit within me as I launched at his throat. The world held its breath as my fangs bit down, savoring the visceral rush that flooded my senses as I felt life ebb from him.

With one final twist, I brought him into death's embrace. His mighty form collapsed against the unforgiving ground, lifeless.

As his body fell, the night rippled with triumph. Thrilling energy coursed through the ranks of Silver Moons and our allies. The Black Moon Alpha lay defeated, though scattered remnants of his pack still fought, their desperation giving rise to chaotic snarls and violent clashes. I staggered back, panting heavily, pain reverberating through my body, yet satisfaction seeded deep within me.

In the distance, a surge of light radiated. I turned back to Seraphina, surrounded by a halo of power as she held her ground against Elvira's fury, luminous and unwavering.

The remaining Black Moons still fought, but they were now scattered and disjointed, the loss of their leader sending shockwaves through their ranks. Nearby, I caught sight of Tara and Logan intercepting a pair of Black Moon warriors, their fierce growls cutting through the din. I felt a renewed surge of hope; our allies could hold their ground against these weakening wolves and give Seraphina the time she needed to finish Elvira.

The glorious illumination of green lit the night, as ethereal as the Aurora Borealis that often graced our Alaskan skies. Yet, for me, the world around me had begun to swirl and fade in and out, dulled by a haze that cloaked my senses, while each heartbeat thudded in my ears like a drum.

Seraphina's magic surged through the air, pulsing against the heavy weight of Elvira's darkness. I felt its energy brush against me as if trying to call me back from

the void my strength was slowly slipping into.

A blast of verdant energy struck Elvira, making her stumble and then crash to her knees.

Elation ignited the wolves' howls around her, a cacophony of fury and triumph filling the air as we surged forth. Mixed hues of red, silver, gray, and yellow closed in on the witch, eager to capitalize on the lull in her defenses, the descending fangs and claws proving her just as mortal and vulnerable as the rest of us.

Our victory was sung through the night in a chorus of howls and the last echoes of our enemies crashing to the ground. My heart swelled with joy—a euphoric liberation—but a painful weight buried itself within me, a sense of impending loss sinking ever deeper.

As the dark witch fell, exhaustion washed over me, overwhelming the remnants of adrenaline I had seized. I shifted into my human form, stumbling toward Seraphina, the green light she still radiated guiding me as I weaved my way over the battlefield's chaos.

But my knees buckled, and the deep, persistent pain I had managed to suppress finally broke free, flooding my chest and consuming me.

“Tyler!” I heard Seraphina's voice pierce through the chaos, panic threading through it. Her warmth enveloped me, her trembling arms cradling me as I collapsed.

“Seraphina,” I whispered, the words barely escaping my lips as my body succumbed to the weight of my wounds. The pain was overwhelming, but beneath it lay a deep, abiding warmth—the feeling of her presence—the person I had fought so hard to protect.

The biting pain in my lungs told me I didn't have long. I forced myself to make the most of whatever fleeting moments the Moon goddess allowed me.

There was so much I wanted to tell her. I longed to confess the foolishness of my mistakes—both the ones I'd made over the past few weeks and those from years ago. I longed to tell her that I should have cherished every second with her, both recently and in the past. But the truth was painfully clear: I was out of precious moments. There was only this one.

I thought of her voice, soft and pained, echoing in the supply closet of the infirmary when she had feared my being with her the other night had only been because of Linda's passion potion. The thought that she could still doubt my love for her was what pressed on me now.

"It was all real," I struggled to articulate again, my voice straining under the weight of my love, trying to condense everything I felt into these desperate breaths. "Every moment—being with you, kissing you, arguing with you... baking with you," I added, a smile tugging at my lips as I remembered the years of laughter and warmth she'd gifted me with. "It was all real. Through every heartbeat, I've loved you... All I've ever wanted... is for you to find the same happiness you've given me."

I paused, the gravity of my choices pressing heavily on my chest. "I'm sorry," I whispered, each word laced with the urgency of my fading strength. "I'm sorry for the times I pushed you away... I should have fought harder... for you—for us. I let pride stand in the way... I can never take those mistakes back... but... I'm sorry, Seraphina."

Keeping my gaze locked onto hers became a challenge. Her eyes, vibrant jade orbs, shone with a desperate intensity as if she could bring me back to life through sheer will alone.

Yet even those eyes began to dull, color fading as sound dwindled to a whisper, a numbing calm enveloping me. Love alone anchored me here, a flickering flame in the gathering darkness, as I savored the sensation of Seraphina's touch. Memories of our laughter, our arguments, and tender moments of quiet understanding washed over me, each buoying me up, keeping me from the abyss. I clung to them, never wanting to let them go. Never wanting to let her go.

But Seraphina's voice, a soft plea, "Tyler..." was suddenly snatched away. I longed to follow it, but it faded to nothing more than a whisper in the wind.

A cold wind snaked its way inside me, its howl suffocating my lungs, stripping away rational thought and all those cherished memories. The chilling grasp of ice that had settled into my bones began to melt away, leaving only silence in its wake—a silence that echoed with the weight of all I would leave behind.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

I kneeled beside Tyler, cradling him in my arms like the most precious treasure. Grief and despair pressed down on my chest, threatening to crush me under its unbearable weight. Distantly, I recognized that a crowd had joined us. I sensed Selina at my side and Tara on my other. But none of that mattered.

Neither did the battlefield on which we'd been victorious. Dawn's rosy fingers tinged the sky, but even that light felt bitter in the absence of Tyler's heartbeat.

My shifter senses kept trying to pick it up, but I'd heard it come to a close. My wolf started a mournful, haunting howl within as if... Tyler was gone.

The realization struck like an avalanche. I shook my head, even as my wolf told me the truth. But he couldn't be. Tyler was always beside me, protecting me, laughing with me... loving me.

My throat tightened as I leaned down, my forehead resting against Tyler's. The tears that had been threatening spilled down my cheeks, mingling with the dust and Tyler's blood.

Someone squeezed my shoulder, then stooped down to meet my tear-filled gaze: Logan. His brown stare was earnest and compassionate.

"Seraphina," he said softly, "You need to save him."

I shook my head, the ache in my chest intensifying. "He's slipped away from me... I

can't—”

“You can with the mate bond,” Logan said. “It could bring him back. You need to sever the bond you have with me. Now.”

The words hung in the air as disbelief flickered through me.

“I’m not just offering out of a sense of duty,” Logan added quickly, his voice steady. “Of course, Tyler deserves it but,” he cast his eyes downward, “I can see how much you two love each other.”

A lump formed in my throat at the magnitude of what Logan was offering to sacrifice pressed down on me. But a lick of hope ignited in my chest.

My pulse raced. Logan was right. Only that sacred bond could save Tyler’s life. And, after all, that’s what we’d been until so recently: mates. That’s what we had always been meant to be. My heart crashed against my ribcage, telling me that it was still possible. If I could reconnect it, I might once again feel his heart beating in rhythm with mine.

“Do it,” Logan said steadily. “You deserve happiness, and he deserves the chance to fight for his life. Call upon the Moon goddess, Seraphina. Now!”

My breath caught as he extended his resolve. The heaviness of our past hung between us, but his selflessness made my heart swell with a renewed sense of affection for Logan.

With a final glance at Tyler’s too still form, I grudgingly laid his head down on the ground so that I could draw the runes I needed around me in the churned-up snow. The compacted dirt of the arena was like a canvas.

I had only just written the final rune, pilak —cutting through, when I intoned, “Amaruq pilak qiviut ilak .” I only had to say the incantation once before the bond between Logan and I dissolved. It had been a fragile thing like a spring shoot just born, and with one pluck, it was gone.

I didn’t have time to think about it before I closed my eyes and settled into my trance. I knew the place I sought from all my meditations, and coming to a place where I could commune with Igaluk was as simple as opening the door. I summoned my magic and focused on the glimmer of silvery light immediately in my mind—Igaluk’s light. I reached for the Moon goddess, opening my heart, pouring out every ounce of love and pleading for a second chance.

“Igaluk,” I called into the void, “Please, help me. I ask for your mercy. I made a mistake. So many mistakes. I should have let your wisdom guide me from the start. Please, restore my mate bond with Tyler. My love for him is true and will not waver again. Please, help him return to me.”

The silvery light intensified, and the deep pool I’d seen in my dream appeared before me. The surface shimmered with my reflection but with the milky-white glow of the goddess’s complexion. Her luminous green eyes surged with the potent spring buds, recalling the re-vitalizing bond I’d just felt plucked from my chest.

The air crackled with energy, and the wind stirred around me in a celestial dance. I felt the presence of the Moon goddess, powerful yet gentle, wrapping me in her ethereal embrace. She looked thoughtful, searching my face as if looking for the truth of my words.

“Your bond is sacred, forged in love. It deserves to be treasured, and you must cherish one another. Only then will its true power shine.” My heart raced, each beat reverberating with the tension of uncertainty, praying for her mercy. Finally, she declared, “Let it be reborn.”

As her words struck deep within my soul, a golden light enveloped me, stretching outward toward Tyler. I felt the pull of the mate bond reigniting, the two halves of our souls reconnecting, and my life force rerouting into Tyler's.

Then, my shifter senses caught it: his heartbeat. Life and warmth began to return to Tyler's body, the magic of our bond granting some of its energy to the wound in his side.

With a gasp, Tyler's breath returned, and the flutter of his heartbeat synchronized with my own, growing steadier and stronger with each passing second.

Even as I was still swathed in darkness, concentrating on working the Goddess's magic from behind closed eyes, I heard the gasps and joyful murmurings of our packmates and friends around us.

As I dared to blink my eyes open, I took in the rise and fall of Tyler's chest, as well as the wound in his side knitting together.

I hurried forward, once again sweeping my arm beneath Tyler and drawing his body to me. "Please, Tyler, come back to me," I whispered, clutching him tightly, taking comfort in the bond tightening through my chest. If I felt that, he could, too. It would show him his way back to me.

Finally, Tyler's eyes fluttered open, their azure blue looking brighter than ever.

"Seraphina?" he murmured, his voice still raw with the remnants of pain but laced with wonder. The note of a question there.

"The goddess returned our mate bond, allowing me to bring you back," I whispered. He gazed up at me as if I'd hung the Moon, the mixture of reverence and passion settling over his face. I felt the flood of emotions crackling in the air around us as our

packmates and friends exchanged exclamations of joy.

“I almost lost you,” I breathed. The devastation from moments ago hadn’t yet released me from its jaws, and I stroked his face, marveling at the life and love etched across it. “I love you, Tyler. I never meant to sever our bond. I was just afraid of losing you,” I finally admitted. I locked my gaze with his, allowing myself to be as free with him as I’d always wanted.

Tyler sat up, even as I tried to push him back down, worried about his still-healing body. But his strong arms encircled me, holding me as if I were as necessary as the breath he was drawing in with great welcome shudders. “You’ll never lose me, Seraphina,” he said. “You’re my strength and home, always.”

My breath caught in my throat as I looked deep into Tyler’s eyes and felt that truth resonating through my chest, making it feel full to bursting. As I kissed him, I knew deep down that everything we had endured had brought us here for a reason, in the embrace of the Moon Goddess’s blessing. Our story was far from over. This was only the beginning.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:14 am

Seraphina

“The snow has stopped,” Kelly called from her post at the infirmary window.

Three months had passed since the battle with the Black Moons, and Kelly was back for the Yule holiday from Silver Moon University, working as one of the infirmary aides as usual. The infirmary, since Linda’s death, had become my domain.

Both Kelly and Laura were catching me up on the missing medical knowledge. But I had plenty of herbal and magical knowledge under my belt, making me a capable healer.

Not that we were working today. We’d vacated Tyler’s house to get ready here.

“Still time for one more prosecco potion,” Vivi said as she topped up mine and my friend’s glasses with fizz.

Vivian was one of the Black Moon Pack females who had sworn allegiance to our pack. There had been many Black Moon females and pups who had sworn their allegiance to our pack or to one of the other packs. Where the Black Moon females and pups had integrated, sadly, none of the males had shown any remorse, and they had been executed a month after the battle. But many like Vivi had integrated into our pack well, keen for the new chance at a happy, stable life, and it was heartening to see.

Tara was reclining on one of the beds, mussing up her short hair so that it was jagged, highlighting her delicate but angled features. My lips twitched. She seemed oblivious

to the way she was creasing her bridesmaid dress. To be fair, I thought we'd have to wrestle her into the dress. It was a testament to our friendship that the warrior had agreed to it.

On the other hand, my maid of honor, Selina, looked flawless in her long peach dress, her golden hair flowing down her back in ringlets.

Tyler and I had decided to hold a formal mate bond ceremony, wanting to finally celebrate our bond with the entire pack. Deep winter was drawing in, and Nahachoh would likely soon be cut off from the rest of the packs. I'd wanted to hold our mate ceremony while our friends could still join us.

It was tradition for Silver Moon brides-to-be to wear the giak-adorned gowns that Igaluk's handmaidens had supposedly worn. But, for me, those overly fussy gowns and official tunics would forever remind me of Linda and Elder Darius. So, I'd opted for an ivory gown, its color reminding me of the pristine snow that blanketed our beautiful lands.

"It's time," Selina said with a grin. "You ready?"

I nodded, taking a deep breath as I wandered to the door. The snow had been shoveled all the way up to the mansion's gardens, and as Tara and Selina held my train, it only took us a few minutes before we arrived in the gardens.

During our planning, Tyler had been happy for it to take place elsewhere if I'd desired. The last thing he'd wanted was for thoughts of the past—of memories of watching him standing on this lawn with Linda—to spoil my happiness. But I wanted our mate ceremony to take place in the place that had long been home to us both.

Besides, the way the pack turned towards me, their eyes centering on me with joy and their faces lighting up as they watched me walk up the aisle, couldn't be further from the past. I felt lit up from within as our pack shared in our night. I looked around at

the faces and people I had come to know, not just as packmates but as friends and loved ones. Perhaps no more was that clearer than the man who stood next to Tyler. The dark-haired, earnest-eyed warrior, who was once my bully, looked at me now with the firmest friendship. I was reminded of a promise Logan had made to me—that when my parents’ names had been cleared, I could have friends here, that I could belong, and I felt how true that was.

Once Logan and I had severed our mate bond, what remained was a friendship I was thankful for every day.

Right now, Logan whispered something in Tyler’s ear, making my mate smile and bright blue eyes brighten. I was even more thankful that the two men had been brought closer by what had happened.

As the music started from the string quartet, Selina whispered, “That’s it, Mia, you can start. Nice and slow, baby.”

Mia, my little flower girl, walked ahead of me, smiling as she scattered yellow pomenta flowers, red spray lilies, and silvery kiva petals along the aisle, the colors commemorating all our allied packs who had helped us win the war against the Black Moons.

This victory had been possible because the Shadow Moon Alpha and Luna, along with the Moonlight Alpha, were attending a meeting in Matsuna—a town bordering our lands—on the night the Black Moons attacked. Tyler had alerted our allies to the invasion, and fate smiled upon us, positioning them nearby. The Alphas and Luna were traveling with large units of warriors, allowing them to swiftly come to our aid.

As I walked down the aisle, I smiled at the friends from our neighboring packs gathered here. Leah stood with Alpha Kyle, holding their newborn son, Jason, along with their daughter Lina. Alexis stood beside them, a huge grin on his face for once as he watched little Mia ahead of me.

My heart seemed to miss a beat as I looked up ahead at the dais, enshrined by torchlight. Alpha Tyler, looking commanding yet relaxed, waited for me in his tux, not a hair out of place. Elder Carl was overseeing our ceremony, looking quite at home before the big ceremonial book as I mounted the dais to take my place opposite Tyler.

Elder Carl began the ceremony, his voice rich with joy and meaning.

“The mate bond is a sacred covenant in our pack and in all shifter society. But I defy any of you to present a couple who had displayed its sanctity better than the two people here tonight. Their love has proved that the mate bond is stronger even than death itself.”

My eyes shimmered with tears as I thought of how Tyler had come back to me. Gratitude and love swelled through my chest as the full fortune of how much the Moon goddess had blessed us with enveloped me.

Tyler took my hands, his warmth radiating through me as he gazed deeply into my eyes.

“Seraphina, I vow to be by your side, to protect you and cherish you through every trial and tribulation—to love you fiercely and support you unwaveringly.”

We’d decided to dispense with too much ceremony, and I grinned as Tyler finished his short but sweet vows, following with mine, “Tyler, I vow to stand by your side like the great twin peaks of Nuvuja. To be your strength in times of lightness and darkness.”

Elder Carl had promised to keep the ceremony brief, too, and now said, “By the power vested in me by Igaluk, I pronounce you mates.”

All the pounding, breathless anticipation that had filled me melted away as my lips

met Tyler's in a kiss, soft but electrifying.

Later, as we arrived back at the kitchen door, Tyler swept me into his arms, and I felt a thrill rush through me as he carried me over the threshold. The sight of our quaint kitchen glimmered with light, sending familiar warmth wrapping around me like the sweetest embrace.

He carried me over the threshold into the place that had always been the heart of our home. I grinned, my heart starting to skip as I caught sight of the kitchen table. There'd been many times in the last few months that we'd gotten cozy here again. For us, it was always our favorite place to be together. Baking sessions, just like in the early days we'd lived together, had become mandatory at the weekends.

"And there's my Luna thinking about chocolate as usual," Tyler joked again as he looked at my suggestive smile.

"Only if it's chocolate-coated Tyler." I licked my lips.

Tyler's throat bobbed, and the dark desire in his eyes told me he was thinking of one of the many afternoons in which I'd drizzled chocolate over him, licking and kissing my way down his body.

But Tyler toed off his shoes, then walked me through the kitchen, mounting the stairs.

"I want you in our bed," Tyler affirmed, the possessiveness in his deep, husky voice making my cheeks flush and heat pool between my legs instantly.

It was our bedroom these days. We'd turned "my" bedroom into my magic room. The altar, crystal, and herb preparation space was useful. I experimented with new herbs and ores there often before taking any with useful medicinal properties to the infirmary.

As Tyler carried me into our room, its cedar scent, once the most torturous form of temptation, was now the comfort and deliciousness it was allowed to be.

I eased off the flats I was wearing as Tyler laid me down on our king-sized bed.

His eyes skated over me with a mixture of hunger and awe as he shrugged out of his tux jacket. Breathing deeply, I looked up at him, feeling something different in his bright blue eyes.

He lowered himself over me, his lips meeting mine with a probing, almost questioning kiss.

“Seraphina,” he whispered against my mouth, reverence coating the word. “Are you finally really mine?” he asked, his gaze cascading over me, as if he still couldn’t believe it. It was the same look he’d given me when he’d gazed up at me when the Moon goddess had returned him to me.

The heady thrill that Tyler really was my mate now, that we’d stood and declared our love before our pack, sparked something deep within me, urgency twirling in my stomach.

“I am yours, and you are mine.” I breathed back, the weight of the moment unfurling around us until the heat in our gaze simmered like a pot boiling over. Our hands were suddenly greedy for one another.

Tyler pulled me up, dragging my dress’s zipper down. There was too much fabric, and as it pooled around my waist, I smiled, suddenly pleased I hadn’t gone for the dress with buttons.

“What’s funny?” he asked, so attuned to my body these days and the subtlest of movements.

“I almost went for buttons.”

He smiled into my neck, his big hands sweeping my bare shoulders and tracing the skin down my collarbone. A shudder of anticipation swept through me.

“You little tease,” he murmured, his lips at the swell of my breasts.

His hands skated down my curves, removing the dress completely, unveiling the silk ivory bra and knickers for this very moment. I’d imagined this so many times. But the fire in Tyler’s blue eyes was something none of my imaginings could ever do justice. His body pressed me deeper into the bed, his hardness through his trousers making my hips wiggle with want and impatience.

That was the thing. I wasn’t the tease, Tyler was. In the same way he liked to savor whatever we baked, he liked to savor me . With soft caresses and brushes of his lips, he set my skin ablaze. Time seemed to slow as his hands explored my body, touching me with familiarity and yet still with that same sense of wonder.

But he surprised me again. “I can’t wait any longer,” he murmured, his voice thick with desire.

The way I was looking at him must have spurred him on as his fingers flew deftly over the buttons of his trousers. I helped him, my hands tearing at the buttons of his shirt, needing the heat of his skin against mine. Soon, his chest was bare, and I ran my fingernails down his chest, drinking in the sight of him, loving his rippling muscle, the hardness above me, straining taught like a bowstring.

It was only his boxers now. My breath caught in my throat, anticipation curling within me as he wrenched the fabric away. Just the sight of him made my desire thrum louder. He leaned closer, his skin warm against mine, the cedar scent of him heady. I could see the pulse in his neck, a rhythm that matched the wild thumping rhythm of my heart. When he pressed himself against me, the hardness of him nestled

against my thigh and sent a jolt of want through my core.

His lips trailed down my neck, exploring the tender place just below my ear, sending waves of shivers cascading down my spine. I leaned back into the plush comfort of the bed, offering him my skin and craving more of his. His mouth traveled lower, moving with reverence and urgency, tasting every inch of my bare skin.

The softness of my silk bra contrasted against the heat of his hands as he traced its delicate edges. He hovered there for an agonizing heartbeat, leaving me breathless with anticipation before finally unhooking it with a flick of his fingers. It fell away, and his mouth lingered over my breasts. I let out a soft moan of approval as his tongue and then his teeth tasted my nipple.

“Tyler...” The plea hung in the air, hanging between us like a promise and compelling him forward. I wanted his tongue and teeth down there, something he knew with just the way my hips rolled. I loved that he knew my body so well these days.

He nosed the hem of my underwear, his fingers slipping beneath it to splay possessively over my lower belly. His movements sent electric thrills coursing through me, heightening my anticipation as he fought my knickers downward.

With a thrust of my hips, I responded to his touch, welcoming his fingers deep inside me, chasing our rhythm. But Tyler pulled away, hovering above me with a teasing warmth that left me breathless as his breath ghosted along my collarbone, his fangs brushing my neck.

“Yes,” I said, cravingly, my voice sounding husky and full of want.

With every calculated flick of his tongue against my skin, desire unfurled. I tilted my neck, urging him to forever cement the connection we had always been destined to share.

The moment his fangs pierced the surface, an exquisite rush flooded through me. It was as if the world erupted in flames—raw and electric, drawing us closer into one another.

With that bite, a wave of bliss surged within me, ecstasy overwhelming my senses as heat spread from my neck, igniting a fire that blossomed in the pit of my belly. Tyler crooked a finger and touched me between my legs again, and the feeling built. I cried out, pleasure washing over me like a tide, leaving me breathless as waves of bliss crested and crashed, echoing the strength of our bond.

Tyler held me as my body was racked by pleasure, and then, as he licked my neck, he nudged my thighs apart, burying himself in me. Each time he thrust, I rose to meet him, our need building as we chased our bliss and then found it together.

That night, we found our bliss many times, and having worked up an appetite, some of those times were in the kitchen. It was in a pleasure-hazed sleep that we finally fell asleep in each other's arms. But the Moon goddess had one final gift for me.

Five years later, I gazed upon the sprawling grounds of Nahachoh in the summer. Golden sunlight spilled over the horizon, bathing the dewy grass and illuminating the shiny, snow-dusted apples hanging heavy on the branches. Meanwhile, our children's laughter filled the air, mingling with the warmth of the summer sun and the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers.

The goddess's pool showed me our two children—twins like the twin peaks of the Nuvuja Mountains, a symbol and blessing for the deep devotion and love that Tyler and I held for one another.

Our boy, with my green eyes, and our girl, with Tyler's tousled dark hair, chased one another. The girl wore a crown of flowers, her eyes flaring with determination—a reflection of her father's spirit, while the boy's were wide with wonder as if he were looking beyond the waking world.

Their laughter filled our home as they made it over the threshold. I saw a slightly older Tyler launch into a fighting pose, a smile edging his lips as he mirrored our daughter, who mimicked one of the training poses of the Silver Moon warriors.

I felt my heart swell with pride as I watched our little ones, knowing we'd raise them to lead our pack into a future fortified by strength and compassion and to stand together just as Tyler and I did, partners and leaders in everything we did. As I drifted deeper into slumber, the dreams settled like warm embers of a fire, illuminating the future with fullness and certainty.