

## When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn\*\***

**\*\*Chapter 71\*\***

Sophie, not wanting to add to Torin's evident distress, quickly slipped into the oversized sweatshirt he had offered her. It hung on her frame like a tent, the sleeves drooping far past her wrists. "Well, it's not exactly a tailored fit," she remarked, grimacing slightly as she adjusted the fabric.

Torin, however, seemed unfazed. "It looks perfect on you," he insisted, a hint of a smile creeping onto his lips. Sophie couldn't help but roll her eyes at his unwavering optimism. With a gentle tug, he helped her roll up the sleeves, his fingers brushing against her skin, sending a flutter of warmth through her. He took her hand firmly, leading her toward the living room with a sense of purpose.

As they entered, Sophie scanned the room, recognizing most of the faces gathered there, though a few were unfamiliar to her. The atmosphere shifted as Torin transformed into a figure of authority. He grasped her hand tightly and guided her to the table, settling her into the chair beside him. "I've called each of you here because it's crucial that you hear this as my enforcers first, before the rest of the pack. I'm sure you've caught wind of the rumors circulating," he began, his voice laced with palpable anger. "Levi has betrayed us," he declared, his frustration evident.

The room erupted into a cacophony of angry shouts and snarls, the tension palpable as everyone processed the weight of his words. Once the noise subsided, Torin continued, his voice low but intense. "We still don't know the full extent of his betrayal. He attempted to take my mate from me," he said, his teeth clenched, his grip on Sophie's hand tightening as if to anchor himself. A heavy silence enveloped the room as he paused, gathering his thoughts. "What I'm about to share with you tonight must remain within this group until I decide otherwise. Even then, we will have to guard this secret with our lives," he stated, his gaze locking onto Sophie's. The pain in his eyes struck her deeply, and she hated that she could see it so clearly. "Sophie, my mate, is a finder," he finally revealed.

The announcement hung in the air like a thick fog, rendering the room completely silent.

"For those who aren't aware of what that means," he explained, "it signifies that through touch, Sophie can reveal who your true mate is." Sophie's heart raced as she looked

around at the stunned expressions on the faces of the enforcers. Each man wore the same look—an expression of hope that was almost tangible. She swallowed hard, anxiety knotting in her stomach. She desperately wished Torin was right, and the weight of expectation didn't crush her under its pressure.

Before Torin could elaborate further, a sudden commotion erupted outside. The door swung open, and a man Sophie had never seen before strode in, his demeanor urgent. "Apologies for the interruption, Alpha, but the alpha from the Chicago pack has arrived," he announced. Sophie instantly sensed the shift in the atmosphere, an electric tension crackling in the air.

"Understood," Torin replied, his voice steady despite the turmoil brewing around them. "Tell him I'll be out shortly."

The man nodded and exited, leaving behind an almost suffocating silence. Sophie felt her heart pounding in her chest, fear gripping her tightly.

Torin released her hand and rose from his seat, his expression turning serious. "Remember, what I shared with you tonight must remain a secret. Guard it with your life. I shouldn't have to remind you how invaluable she is—not only because she's my mate, but because she is the finder. She represents your future. Protect her with every ounce of strength you possess," he commanded, his gaze sweeping over his enforcers, who nodded in solemn agreement.

He turned back to her, determination etched on his face. "I need to handle this situation. I'll return shortly. Make sure you eat something and rest," he instructed, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Sophie crossed her arms defiantly. "You said you weren't going to keep things from me anymore," she countered, her voice firm.

"Keep what from you?" Torin asked, feigning confusion.

"Keep me out of the loop," she replied, her eyes narrowing. "I'm going with you."

"No, you're not," he asserted, his voice rising slightly.

Sophie stared at him, incredulous. "Did we not just have this very conversation upstairs mere moments ago?"

"Did you not hear me say how precious you are and that you need to be safeguarded? I will not expose you to another alpha," he said, frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

"Torin, you promised me," she insisted, her voice rising with panic.

He exhaled heavily, his frustration palpable. “Fine, but if I say to return, you come back inside immediately. Let’s see what he wants,” he relented, extending his hand to her. As they stepped outside, several of his men flanked them, creating a protective barrier.

Torin approached the edge of the porch, calling out, “Samuel,” as a greeting.

Sophie’s gaze fell upon the man standing a short distance away, and she could sense the wolf within him. He was older than Torin by at least twenty years, his physique powerful and imposing, but his expression was cold and cruel. When his eyes met hers, she felt as though he was stripping her bare, assessing her from head to toe. A shiver ran down her spine, and she was grateful for the warmth of Torin’s sweatshirt. She felt his hand tighten around hers, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

“You know why I’m here,” Samuel called out, his voice devoid of warmth. “I’m here for the girl.”

This time, an unmistakable growl erupted from Torin’s throat. “Over my dead body,” he snarled, the words barely escaping his lips.

Samuel smirked, a predatory gleam in his eyes. “Then so be it. I formally challenge you to a fight to the death for the finder,” he declared, his tone dripping with malice.

“Challenge accepted,” Torin growled, his jaw set with determination.

“No,” Sophie cried out, spinning to face him in a panic. “Torin, you can’t do this!” But he was already shrugging off his shirt, his eyes locked on his opponent, unwavering. Moments later, he stood before her clad only in his pants. He turned to her, pulling her into a fierce kiss that stole her breath away. “I’ll be back for you,” he promised, urgency lacing his words. “Kyle,” he barked, nodding in her direction, and then he was gone—one moment at her side, the next charging down the steps, ready to confront the challenge ahead.

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“Listen, Sophie, I really don’t think you want to see this,” Kyle urged gently, his voice low and filled with concern as he stood beside her, casting a wary glance toward the unfolding scene.

Madison, sensing the tension, stepped up on Sophie’s other side, her presence a silent support.

“Not a chance,” Sophie replied defiantly, her eyes glued to the commotion ahead. “Where are they going?” she inquired, an edge of curiosity lacing her tone as she peered into the crowd.

Kyle’s gaze flicked to her face, reading the determination etched there, and he nodded slowly. “They’re heading to the fight circle. Come on, I’ll take you there,” he said, a hint of reluctance in his voice as he guided her in the direction the throng was moving.

It wasn’t long before the ground beneath her feet transformed into a familiar sight. She spotted the deep, worn grooves etched into the earth, forming a perfect circle that had witnessed countless confrontations. Within that circle, Torin and Samuel stood poised, ready to clash. Sophie felt an urge to step closer, to see every detail, but Kyle’s hand gently grasped her arm, halting her. “I can’t let you get any closer,” he said, his voice firm yet soft, a protective shield against the chaos to come.

Outside the circle, Max and Levi stood vigil, their expressions serious, while two other men flanked Samuel.

“What’s happening?” Sophie asked, her heart racing as she tried to make sense of the tension in the air.

“The top enforcer from each side ensures the fight remains fair and clean,” Kyle explained, his brow furrowed in concentration. “And the Beta is there to step in if the Alpha—” He suddenly paused, his eyes darting down to meet hers.

“If he’s killed,” Sophie finished for him, the weight of the words hanging heavily in the air. Kyle nodded, his expression somber.

Madison wrapped her arm around Sophie’s, offering a comforting squeeze. “You’ll be okay. Torin is strong,” she reassured her, though Sophie could hear the tremor in her voice.

“Ready?” Max’s voice boomed across the circle. When both alphas nodded, he shouted, “Fight!”

Sophie’s breath caught in her throat as she focused intently on Torin. If her eyes hadn’t been locked on him, she might have missed the swift transformation that unfolded. One moment he stood as a man, and the next, he was a magnificent wolf, leaping through the air with a fierce grace. The clash began immediately, an explosion of primal energy.

Sophie instinctively covered her mouth as Torin took his first hit. She had convinced herself she could handle this, but the reality was far more brutal than she had imagined. The fight devolved into a savage spectacle, blood spilling onto the ground in a gruesome display. Torin seemed to have the upper hand, nearly pinning the opposing Alpha, but then, in a shocking turn, the other wolf sank his teeth into Torin’s shoulder.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut, overwhelmed. "Stand tall," Madison whispered, her voice barely audible above the chaos. "You're the Alpha's mate."

Drawing in a shaky breath, Sophie opened her eyes just in time to witness the two wolves collide mid-air. Her body tensed as they met with a bone-jarring impact. Moments later, she watched in horror as Torin's wolf managed to pin the other Alpha down. "Close your eyes," Kyle murmured urgently. Without hesitation, Sophie obeyed.

A horrifying sound pierced the air, one that made her stomach churn violently. "Okay," Kyle said after a tense pause. Sophie hesitantly opened her eyes, her heart plummeting at the sight before her. The lifeless body of the opposing wolf lay sprawled on the ground, its throat gruesomely torn out. Panic surged through her, and she began to breathe rapidly, fighting the urge to vomit.

"Beta of the Chicago pack, do you wish to take your Alpha's place and challenge me?" Torin's voice rang out, gruff and commanding.

"No," the man replied, his voice steady despite the circumstances. "We acknowledge our Alpha's defeat. I have no desire to challenge you for the finder," he stated, bowing his head in submission. "We only ask that when the time is right, she be allowed to help our pack find their mates."

"Then you are now the Alpha of your pack," Torin declared with authority. "We will find a way to assist all the packs, but challenging me for her is not the solution. I will eliminate every Alpha that attempts it. Spread the word," he commanded harshly.

With that, he turned and strode toward Sophie, clad only in black sweatpants, his presence radiating a fierce energy. He grasped her elbow firmly, leading her away from the scene with a palpable fury emanating from him. Instinctively, she felt a sense of safety in his presence, yet her stomach churned at the brutality she had just witnessed. Her legs felt weak, as though they might give way at any moment. By the time they reached the house, Torin was nearly dragging her along, urgency in his every step.

Without uttering a word to anyone, he guided her inside the house and down the corridor leading to his room.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, Sophie bolted for the bathroom, her body revolting against the horror she had just seen. She knelt before the toilet, retching violently as the contents of her stomach spilled forth. Torin crouched beside her, his hand gently holding her hair back, a silent pillar of support.

When she finally stood, trembling and pale, he offered her a damp cloth.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern etched across his features.

"Am I okay?! You almost died!" Sophie exclaimed, her voice rising in disbelief and fear.

Torin shook his head, his expression resolute. “No, I didn’t.”

“But that other wolf, he—he,” she stammered, struggling to articulate the horror of what had transpired.

“I killed him, yes. If I hadn’t, he would have killed me. And if he had killed me, you would belong to him, Sophie. It’s a cruel world, but this is the reality we inhabit. These are the rules our wolves live by,” Torin stated, his voice devoid of emotion, as if he had resigned himself to the harsh truths of their existence.

Sophie nodded slowly, her heart heavy with understanding. “I know. I’m so sorry. I—” She paused, shaking her head as tears welled in her eyes. “That was horrific.”

“I know, and I regret that you had to witness it. I wish I could shield you from all of this, but this is the life I lead, the life of an Alpha,” Torin said softly, his gaze steady yet filled with an unspoken weight.

Sophie nodded, attempting to steady her racing thoughts. “I need to shower. Will you be okay for a few minutes?” he asked, his voice gentle yet firm.

She managed a weak smile, grateful for his concern, even amidst the chaos. “Yeah, I’ll be fine,” she replied, though her heart still raced with the echoes of the fight.

As Torin stepped into the bathroom, Sophie took a moment to breathe, the reality of the night settling heavily on her shoulders.

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**\*\*Chapter 73\*\***

Sophie took a deep breath, shaking off the lingering shock that clung to her like a heavy fog. “I’m really sorry,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “I should be the one helping you. You’re the one who’s injured.”

“It’s nothing,” he reassured her, his gaze steady as he leaned closer, searching her eyes for a spark of understanding. “I’ll heal. Just give me five minutes, okay?”

She nodded slowly, her heart still racing. “Okay,” she replied softly, the weight of her worry evident in her tone. With a gentle sigh, she moved to the edge of the bed and sat down, the mattress sinking slightly beneath her weight.

Her stomach churned uneasily, and her thoughts spiraled in a chaotic dance. The human part of her struggled to comprehend the terrifying events she had just witnessed. A sudden knock at the door broke her reverie.

"Come in," Sophie called out, her voice steadier than she felt.

Paul opened the door and stepped inside, his presence a welcome distraction. "Hey, Sophie," he greeted her warmly. "Torin sent me to check on you. I need to see how he's doing too, while I'm here. It's been quite the day, hasn't it?" His demeanor was calm, almost relaxed, in stark contrast to the turmoil swirling around them.

"You have no idea," Sophie replied, her eyes reflecting the turmoil she felt inside.

"Do you have any injuries that you know of besides that bruise on your forehead?" Paul inquired, his tone shifting to one of concern.

Sophie shook her head, her hair swaying gently. "I'm mostly just bruised and beat up," she admitted, her voice laced with a hint of vulnerability.

Paul regarded her with a compassionate gaze. "I'll do a quick once-over just to be sure, but I'll wait until the alpha gets here. I'd rather not meet my end today," he added with a teasing smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"Good thinking," Torin said as he strode into the room, his presence commanding attention. "I'm here now. Let's get started."

Paul turned his focus back to Sophie. "Let's have you lay back on the bed, shall we? And please, take off your sweatshirt."

A low growl rumbled in Torin's throat, a warning that Paul pretended not to hear. With the poise of a seasoned professional, Paul moved closer to Sophie. She quickly peeled off her sweatshirt and lay back, avoiding Torin's intense gaze. Paul leaned over her, examining the bruises that marred her arms. His fingers gently prodded her ribs and stomach, and she flinched when he pressed against a tender spot.

He frowned, concern etched on his features. "May I?" he asked, his voice softening as he sought her permission. Sophie nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. He carefully lifted her shirt to inspect her abdomen, and she winced, recalling the painful fall that had caused the bruising.

Torin's growl grew louder this time, a primal sound that sent a shiver down Sophie's spine. She glanced at Paul, anxiety creeping in. "Just tune him out," Paul advised quietly, his focus unwavering as he finished his examination. He helped her sit up, his hands gentle yet firm. "Everything looks good. Just some nasty bruising. It should clear up in a few days. If anything still hurts after that, let me know, and I'll take another look. Now, let's dress that wound on your forehead." He cleaned the area with careful precision before applying a bandage.

"Thank you," Sophie said, her voice filled with gratitude. Torin took her hand, helping her to a sitting position before guiding her to stand. He pulled her close, wrapping his arm around her waist, his warmth enveloping her like a protective cocoon.

Sophie looked up at Torin, noticing the scowl etched on his face as he glared at Paul. She winced and quickly apologized, "Sorry," she said, her voice a mix of embarrassment and concern.

Paul flashed her a reassuring smile. "I'm used to it. Thankfully, I don't have to treat many females because our pack is small. But when I do, there's usually an angry mate lurking nearby, plotting my demise," he joked, his light-heartedness cutting through the tension.

"Yep," Torin grunted, his expression still fierce.

Sophie nudged him lightly in the stomach with her elbow. "Stop it," she chided, half-serious. In response, he tightened his grip around her waist, a playful warning.

"All right, Alpha. Your turn," Paul said, gesturing toward the bed.

Torin shook his head defiantly. "I'm fine."

"I'm sure you are, but just let me check. That's what you pay me the big bucks for," Paul replied smoothly, his tone casual.

"I said I'm fine," Torin insisted, irritation creeping into his voice.

Sophie turned to face him, her expression earnest. "Torin, stop being so stubborn. Let him check you out." She could see the internal struggle in his eyes. "Please," she added, her voice softening. She sensed the moment he relented.

"Fine," he conceded, releasing her and stepping back. In a swift motion, he pulled his shirt off and handed it to her. Sophie's breath caught in her throat as she took in his massive chest, her eyes lingering a moment longer than intended. When she finally met his gaze, he was smiling at her, and she felt her cheeks flush with warmth.

"Go ahead and take your pants off," Paul instructed, his tone professional. Torin let out a grunt of protest but began to comply.

"I'll wait out in the hall," Sophie said quickly, eager to escape the sudden tension. She slipped through the door, leaning against the wall as she waited for the all-clear to return.

A few minutes later, the door swung open. "Everything okay?" she asked, stepping back inside, her heart racing with anticipation.

"He looks good," Paul confirmed with a nod. "Nothing that won't heal in a few hours."

"Which is exactly what I said," Torin interjected, a hint of pride in his voice.

Sophie crossed her arms over her chest, feigning annoyance as she shot Torin a scowl. "Thank you for coming," she said gratefully to Paul.

Paul turned to Torin, his expression serious. "I know it's not my place, but when are you going to tell the pack about Sophie?"

Torin's scowl deepened. "You're right. It's not your business."

Paul nodded, undeterred. "Just letting you know, there are a lot of questions and assumptions swirling around, especially with the alpha of the Chicago pack preparing to challenge you."

Torin sighed, his shoulders heavy with responsibility. "I'll do it soon," he promised.

"All right then. You two take care and get some rest. Let me know if you need anything else," Paul said before stepping back out the door.

Sophie stood there, feeling the weight of uncertainty settle between them. Torin looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and she felt lost, unsure of how to bridge the growing distance.

"Are you going to talk to the pack tonight?" she asked cautiously, hoping not to upset him further. He nodded once, his expression unreadable. "Let me go with you," she urged, but he was already shaking his head.

"Just hear me out," she pressed, her heart pounding in her chest.

He regarded her with a brooding expression, arms crossed tightly. Sophie took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "If this," she hesitated, searching for the right words, "thing is going to work between us, we need to start being more open with each other."

"This is not a thing," he retorted, his voice gruff. "And you're the one who ran away from me," he added, disgust lacing his tone.

Sophie cringed at his words. "I know. I'm sorry," she replied, the weight of her regret heavy in the air. Clearly, she wasn't going to escape that moment anytime soon.

"I don't know what I'm doing. I know I messed up," she confessed, her voice trembling slightly. "The thing is, Torin, I'm probably going to mess up again. This is all so new to me."

Torin exhaled sharply, frustration evident in his breath. "I know. It's my fault too. I need to go talk to the guys."

"Then we'll go from there. Come with me?" he asked, his tone softening slightly.

Sophie nodded, determination surging within her as she followed him out of the room. As they descended the stairs, every pair of eyes in the room turned to face them, the air thick with anticipation and unspoken questions.

## Conclusion

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Sophie's gaze swept across the room, landing on familiar faces—Madison, Kyle, Liam, Wyatt, Paul, and a handful of others whose names eluded her. The tantalizing aroma of food wafted through the air, wrapping around her like a warm embrace, and her stomach responded with a loud growl that echoed her hunger. Torin turned to her with a knowing look. "You need to eat," he said, his voice firm yet gentle. Without waiting for a reply, he made his way to the island that was lavishly adorned with an array of food.

The sight was almost overwhelming. Foil containers brimmed with an assortment of culinary delights. Sophie couldn't quite place where the food had been ordered from, but the fragrant scents of chicken, beef, brisket, beans, rice, corn, chips and salsa, and warm tortillas beckoned her. Just as Torin reached for a plate, one of the guys intercepted him, drawing him into a conversation that seemed to require his full attention.

Sophie took advantage of the moment, maneuvering around the group to fill a plate for herself and a larger one for Torin. Unsure of his preferences, she decided to take a little bit of everything, piling on the meats with generous portions. She grabbed two bottles of water, balancing them with the plates as she made her way toward the table. As she approached, two guys stood up, instinctively moving aside.

"Oh, you don't have to get up," Sophie reassured them, her voice light. "You're fine." Yet, they insisted, shifting away regardless. She turned her attention to the forks and utensils, spotting Torin as he grabbed a plate while still engaged in conversation. With a soft touch, she placed her hand on his back, a silent gesture of support. "I got you a plate," she whispered, feeling a sense of satisfaction in caring for him.

After securing napkins and utensils, she headed back to the table, settling into a chair. As she began to eat, she couldn't shake the lingering heaviness in her heart from the day's events. Her appetite was muted, but she understood the importance of nourishment, especially for Torin. He slid into the seat beside her, gratitude evident in his eyes. "Thanks," he murmured, and Sophie nodded in acknowledgment.

"Liam, go ahead and make the call. Let the pack know we're gathering in thirty minutes," Torin instructed, his tone authoritative yet calm. Liam nodded and promptly left the table. "Wyatt, grab twelve enforcers and position them around the meeting hall. We'll only have one entrance open, and I want each person checked thoroughly as they come in." Wyatt responded with a quick nod, rallying a few guys before they departed.

"Kyle and Madison, you're on protection duty for Sophie, twenty-four seven. You'll stay with us until things settle down a bit. Whenever you go somewhere with Sophie, always have two more enforcers with you. She doesn't go anywhere without four enforcers, understood?" Torin's voice was steady, and both Kyle and Madison nodded, their

expressions serious. Sophie could sense the weight of guilt still clinging to them, a remnant of the incident at the coffee shop. She despised that they felt responsible; it was a burden she wished to lift from them.

“Ricky,” Torin called out to a guy she didn’t recognize. “I want four enforcers around this house, twenty-four seven, starting now. Max is working on something for me, but he’s aware of all this. He’ll inform you of the schedule going forward when he returns. For now, take charge.” Ricky nodded, quickly gathering two remaining guys before heading outside.

A serene quiet enveloped the room, leaving just Torin, Sophie, Madison, and Kyle in the house. Madison and Kyle soon stood up, disappearing into the background, leaving Sophie feeling a mix of relief and anxiety with Torin beside her. Torin rose, looking at her intently. “You ready?” he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

Sophie nodded toward his plate. “You need to eat something. You must be depleted after your fight,” she insisted, feeling a surge of protectiveness over him. “I should go change anyway,” she added, hoping to lighten the mood.

Torin’s eyes met hers, his expression softening. “You don’t need to change,” he replied, his voice low.

Sophie chuckled lightly, shaking her head. “I’m meeting your entire pack for the first time. I can’t do that wearing your sweatshirt,” she said playfully.

“You could, though,” he said, disappointment flickering across his face.

With a smile, she reassured him, “I’ll be right back.” Leaning forward, she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, feeling a rush of warmth. “Madison,” she called out as she made her way through the house.

“What do you need?” Madison asked, appearing almost instantly.

“I need help finding something suitable to wear for this first pack meeting,” Sophie explained, her excitement mingling with nerves.

“On it,” Madison declared, leading the way to Sophie’s room. They quickly rifled through the closet, and Madison pulled out a pair of skinny black jeans and a stylish black v-neck top adorned with crisscross straps that highlighted Sophie’s figure. “Put these on,” she instructed with determination. Then, digging deeper, she exclaimed, “Found them!” and handed Sophie a pair of black heeled boots.

“I didn’t even know those were in there,” Sophie admitted, surprised.

“I did,” Madison replied with a cheeky grin.

Before long, Sophie was dressed in the chic ensemble. She turned to Madison, seeking her opinion. "What do you think?"

Madison scrutinized her for a moment before declaring, "Hmm, I'll be right back." She dashed out of the room, returning moments later with a black leather jacket. "Here, try this on," she said, excitement bubbling in her voice.

"I can't wear this; it's yours," Sophie protested, feeling a twinge of guilt.

"Come on, just put it on. I want to see how it looks on you," Madison urged. Sophie slipped it on, and Madison's eyes lit up. "It's perfect. Now, wear these." She handed Sophie a pair of large hoop earrings. "And run your straightener through your hair quickly, leaving it down."

Sophie swiftly brushed her hair and executed a quick straightening while Madison expertly applied her makeup. Once finished, Madison stepped back, her eyes sparkling with approval. "What do you think? Your hair and makeup give you a soft, sweet look, but your outfit adds an edge of 'don't mess with me.'"

Sophie shrugged, a hint of uncertainty creeping in. "I guess. The real test will be Torin."

"Well, lead the way," Madison said, her grin infectious.

Together, they exited the room and made their way to the kitchen. Sophie glanced at the clock, relieved they had managed to pull everything together in just about fifteen minutes. As they descended the stairs, she spotted Torin and Kyle engaged in conversation by the front door. They both turned their attention toward her, and Sophie could feel Torin's gaze assessing her outfit, his expression shifting to one of concern.

"That's what you thought she should wear?" Torin asked Madison, his voice edged with disbelief.

Sophie's heart sank. "I can go change," she offered quickly, anxiety bubbling to the surface.

"Don't you dare," Madison interjected firmly. "You look hot. Doesn't she, Torin?"

Torin shot Madison a scowl, but there was a flicker of admiration in his eyes. "Let's go. We're going to be late," he said, his tone brokering no argument. Kyle and Madison stepped outside, and Sophie began to follow, but Torin's hand caught her wrist, gently turning her back toward him.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her close, and Sophie felt her breath hitch at the sudden intimacy. "You look better than hot," he murmured, his voice low and sultry. "But I just don't want you around my men looking like that," he added, a hint of possessiveness lacing his words. "But there's nothing we can do about it now. Let's go. Do not leave my side tonight." With that, he released her but intertwined his fingers with

hers as they stepped out into the night, enforcers falling into formation around them, a protective barrier against the world outside.

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Sophie felt a flutter of anxiety in her stomach as they approached the waiting cars, the evening air thick with anticipation. Torin, ever the gentleman, opened the front passenger door and offered her a hand to help her inside. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down her spine. In the backseat, Kyle slid in beside her, and Garret took the driver's seat, his expression serious and focused. The short drive felt like an eternity, her mind racing with thoughts about what lay ahead.

As they arrived at a large building that bore a resemblance to a YMCA, Sophie's heart raced at the sight of the imposing structure. Torin grasped her hand once more, his grip reassuring as they navigated toward the entrance. He paused briefly, turning to her with a serious expression. "Do you want to be introduced as Sloane or Sophie?"

Sophie pondered the question, the weight of it settling on her shoulders. "I think I'd prefer Sophie. It feels more authentic to who I am now. Sloane is just a shadow of my past," she replied, her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions inside her. Torin nodded in understanding, and they continued their stride toward the door.

Once inside, the noise of chatter enveloped them, growing louder as they moved deeper into the gathering. Sophie had anticipated a crowd, but the sheer number of faces surprised her. Torin guided her to the front of the room, and as they approached the stage, a hush fell over the audience, every pair of eyes locking onto her.

With a deep breath, Sophie followed Torin up the three steps to the stage, her stomach churning with nerves. She fought the overwhelming urge to flee, scanning the crowd for familiar faces. Liam's bright smile from the front row and Madison's encouraging thumbs-up from the back provided a flicker of comfort amidst her anxiety.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice to our pack meeting tonight," Torin began, his voice steady yet commanding. "Due to recent events, I felt it was crucial to update you all without delay. First and foremost, allow me to introduce my mate. Pack, this is Sophie. Sophie, meet the Northwoods Pack."

A thunderous cheer erupted, filling the room with a wave of excitement as applause and whistles echoed around them. Torin turned to her, pulling her closer, and Sophie's heart raced. With wide eyes, she felt a surge of panic as he wrapped his arms around her. What is he doing? Before she could process her thoughts, his lips were on hers, and the kiss was unlike anything she had ever experienced—deep, passionate, and filled with a

sense of ownership. The crowd erupted in cheers, but in that moment, the world around her faded away.

When Torin finally pulled back, he gazed down at her, and she knew her expression must have been one of shock. He kissed her again, a quick peck that sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach, before turning back to the audience. "In case there was any doubt, Sophie is mine," he declared with a low, firm voice. "Don't test me on that." The weight of his words hung in the air, a protective promise that sent a thrill through her.

"Now, I have something to share with you all that must remain within these walls. This information cannot leave this room, understood?"

"Yes, Alpha!" the crowd responded in unison, heads bobbing in agreement. Torin took a deep breath, pulling Sophie into his side, his arm a comforting shield around her shoulder. "Sophie is a finder. For those who may not know, that means she has the unique ability to see who your mate is through touch."

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the audience, and Torin allowed a moment for the information to settle before continuing. "It's imperative that we keep this secret until we figure out how to approach the other packs. You all must understand how invaluable Sophie is to our community—not just because she is my mate, but because of her extraordinary gift. I've already informed our enforcers, but I want to make it clear to each of you: Sophie must be protected at all costs. Guard her life as you would mine. She is essential to the survival of this pack and our kind."

A chorus of agreement resonated through the room, voices rising in support of their Alpha's declaration.

"Another matter we need to address is the betrayal of one of our own." Sophie glanced around, noting the confusion etched on many faces. "Levi Brander has betrayed us. He was involved in Sophie's kidnapping and intended to sell her to other packs to help their wolves find mates." The room erupted into angry protests and growls, a collective outrage that sent a shiver down her spine. Torin raised his hands, demanding silence. "They pose no threat to us anymore." Cheers erupted once more, relief washing over the crowd at the news.

Sophie felt a flicker of unease at the mention of Levi, hoping fervently that she would never become the target of such betrayal from her own pack. "I've dealt with the Alpha of the Chicago pack and the Alpha from St. Louis, both of whom sought to challenge me for Sophie." Fierce growls filled the room again, a primal display of loyalty and anger. "I killed both of them," Torin proclaimed, his voice rising above the chaos. The cheers that followed were deafening, a roaring approval that made Sophie's heart swell with admiration for him.

"And I will not hesitate to do the same to any wolf who dares to lay claim to my mate, who will soon be our pack mother and our finder," he continued, his tone fierce and unwavering. The pack rose to their feet, stomping and howling in solidarity. Sophie felt

overwhelmed by the outpouring of support, realizing how deeply they respected Torin—and by extension, her.

As the noise began to settle, Torin's voice took on a more serious tone. "We will devise a system for navigating the pack. I know you are all eager to find your mates, but we don't fully understand how this process works yet. It's not simply a matter of connecting with Sophie; she only sees fleeting glimpses of your mates, sometimes nothing concrete to guide us. Patience will be essential as we figure this out together."

He paused, his gaze piercing as he spoke with authority. "However, let me be clear: if anyone threatens Sophie or attempts to seek her assistance before it is your turn, or does anything to her without my express permission, you will face dire consequences. I will not tolerate any disruption. There must be order, or this will never succeed. Sophie is new to our pack and our way of life. You will respect her and protect her. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha!" they chorused back, their voices united in affirmation.

Sophie felt a surge of gratitude and warmth, knowing she was not alone in this journey. The night, once filled with uncertainty, now glimmered with the promise of hope and belonging.

Conclusion

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn\*\***

"Hey, when's the mating ceremony happening?" someone called out from the crowd, their voice slicing through the air like a knife.

Sophie felt a sudden tension grip her body as she stood beside Torin. He sensed her discomfort immediately and began to gently stroke her arm, his touch both reassuring and warm. "We'll keep you posted," he replied, his tone casual and confident. "But for now, it's getting late. If anyone has any lingering concerns, feel free to approach Liam or me after this meeting. Otherwise, you're all dismissed. Enforcers, please remain here; I'll assign you your tasks shortly," he commanded, his voice firm yet calm.

As he released his hold on her shoulder, he extended his hand towards her, and she took it willingly. He guided her toward the back door, and she noticed that the audience remained seated until they reached the exit. It dawned on her moments later why—once they stepped outside, the crowd began to disperse, each person offering their congratulations as they passed by. Sophie's cheeks ached from the constant smiling by the time the last of them exited the building.

Soon, only the enforcers remained, and then Max entered the space. "Enforcers!" he called out, his authoritative tone commanding their attention. The enforcers quickly moved to the front, ready to hear his orders.

Corin, ever the reliable companion, led Sophie outside towards the waiting car. Kyle and Madison followed closely behind, maintaining the same seating arrangements they had before. Once they were all settled in, Madison turned to Sophie and gave her shoulder a gentle pat. "You were fantastic up there," she said, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

Sophie chuckled softly, brushing off the compliment. "I didn't really do anything noteworthy," she replied modestly.

"Sure, but you didn't faint or throw up, which is definitely a win in my book," Madison replied with a grin that was infectious. Sophie laughed again, her gaze drifting to Torin, who offered her a small, encouraging smile.

They waited a few more moments until Max emerged with the enforcers. Once everyone was loaded into the vehicles, they began their journey back to Torin's house. The atmosphere was charged with a mix of excitement and the aftereffects of the meeting.

Upon arriving and climbing out of the vehicles, Max wasted no time barking orders at the enforcers, his leadership evident in every command. Sophie followed the others inside, her mind still buzzing with the events of the evening.

"I'm going to change," Sophie announced, her voice tinged with a sense of relief.

"I'll come with you," Madison replied, linking her arm with Sophie's as they made their way to her room. "I wasn't joking earlier. You really held it together up there, especially when Torin kissed you like that," she added, her grin widening.

Sophie felt a rush of heat rise to her cheeks at the memory of that public kiss. "Honestly, I didn't feel composed at all," she admitted as they entered her room. She quickly gathered her clothes and slipped into the bathroom to change. When she returned, she found Madison comfortably perched on her bed, a look of anticipation on her face.

"Training is at six tomorrow morning, right?" Madison asked, her tone playful yet serious.

"Absolutely," Sophie confirmed, feeling a sense of determination wash over her.

"Are you sure you'll be able to sleep tonight?" Madison asked, genuine concern etched across her features.

Sophie nodded reassuringly. "I'll be fine. You should get back to Kyle now." They shared a brief hug before exchanging goodnights.

As Sophie contemplated heading downstairs to say goodnight to Torin, she hesitated, unsure if it would feel awkward. Instead, she decided to finish her nighttime routine and prepare for bed. Just as she settled under the covers, a soft knock echoed from her door. Sitting up, she called out, "Come in."

The door creaked open, revealing Torin's tall figure as he stepped inside. He approached her bedside, and she instinctively shifted to make room for him.

"I just wanted to check in on you before you drift off to sleep. I know today was overwhelming. How are you handling everything?" he asked, his voice gentle and filled with concern.

"It's been a ridiculous day," Sophie sighed, feeling the weight of the events pressing down on her. After a moment's hesitation, she asked, "Do you think more challengers will come?"

Torin fell silent for a moment, contemplating her question. "I do," he finally admitted, his expression serious.

Sophie felt a wave of dread wash over her. "Will they always come? Will we never find peace as long as I'm part of your pack?"

"Things will settle down once we complete the mating bond," he replied, his deep voice steadying her racing thoughts. Sophie remained quiet, pondering the implications of his words. Perhaps it was time to embrace the next step.

Torin reached out, taking her hand in his. "I can see where your mind is wandering. There's no need to worry. I'll handle as many challenges as necessary. We're not rushing into anything. We'll wait until you're truly ready."

"Are you ready?" Sophie asked, curiosity lacing her tone.

Torin chuckled softly, a sound that warmed her heart. "Yeah, baby. I was ready the moment I first laid eyes on you. But I understand that you've been thrust into this life so suddenly. It's going to take time for you to adjust and for your heart to fully trust me. That's perfectly okay. I'll be here, ready to work for it."

Sophie felt a swell of gratitude for this remarkable man. "Thank you," she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper. She sat up and wrapped her arms around him, feeling a surge of courage. Turning her head slightly, she leaned in, and he met her halfway, their lips connecting in a kiss that ignited a spark between them.

He took control of the kiss effortlessly, pulling her closer until she found herself straddling him on the bed. The intensity of the moment escalated, and she felt his hand slip under her shirt, tracing her spine with gentle caresses that sent shivers through her body. After what felt like an eternity, he pulled back slightly, and Sophie gazed up at him, her heart racing.

"You're a good man, Torin. I could see how much your pack respects you tonight. You're a true leader to them," she said, her voice filled with sincerity.

"I hope so," he replied, a hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice. It was an odd contrast to his usual confidence, leaving her momentarily taken aback.

"You are," she affirmed, her conviction unwavering.

"Thank you," he said, his expression softening. "I should let you get some rest," he added reluctantly.

Sophie slipped off his lap and crawled back under the covers. He stood up, leaning over her to place a gentle kiss on her lips. "Sleep well, beautiful," he murmured in a low voice, and just like that, he was gone.

The moment he left, Sophie felt a pang of longing in her chest. Despite his imposing stature and the intensity he often exuded, he had an uncanny ability to envelop her in a sense of calm and peace. Those comforting feelings lingered with her as she slowly drifted off to sleep, the events of the day fading into the background of her dreams.

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn\*\***

It wasn't long before Sophie found her peaceful slumber disrupted by a series of unsettling dreams that left her feeling restless. Night after night, she was haunted by visions of ferocious wolves attacking her, and the terrifying thought of being kidnapped lingered in her mind. Thankfully, none of these dreams jolted her awake with screams echoing through the dark; nonetheless, the night felt interminable. As dawn approached, she was grateful for the opportunity to rise early and engage in a workout with Madison, a routine that always helped clear her mind.

With a sense of urgency, she quickly slipped into her workout clothes and made her way down to the basement. The absence of Torin and the other guys was a relief; she preferred the solitude of her training without their watchful eyes. Upon arriving in the basement, she was taken aback to find Kyle already there, chatting animatedly with Madison.

"I've got a proposition for you," Madison announced, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"What is it?" Sophie inquired, curiosity piqued.

"Well, every month, the pack organizes a fight night on the last Friday of the month. That's next Friday," she explained. "I think you should participate."

Sophie blinked in surprise. “Who fights?” she asked, trying to wrap her head around the idea.

Madison shrugged nonchalantly. “Anyone who wants to! Everyone shows up at six p.m. If you’re interested in fighting, you simply sign up. Torin assigns the matchups based on size, build, and skill level. The night culminates in the best fight, which usually features someone going head-to-head with Torin himself. The regular contenders are Max and Liam, or one of the other enforcers, but sometimes they forfeit their spots to let someone else have a shot. Kyle’s done it several times. I got to do it once,” she added, her grin widening.

“How did that go?” Sophie asked, intrigued.

Madison chuckled, reminiscing. “Oh, he let me land a couple of swings before pinning me in five seconds flat! But hey, at least I got the chance to try.”

Sophie couldn’t help but smile at the thought. “It sounds like a lot of fun. Just to clarify, you don’t fight in your wolf form, right?”

“Nope! If you shift, you forfeit immediately. We actually have training for fighting in our wolf forms too, but fight night is strictly for human form,” Madison clarified.

“I don’t know,” Sophie admitted, her uncertainty creeping in. “I’ve only ever sparred with you.”

“I know,” Madison replied, a determined look crossing her face. “That’s precisely why I brought Kyle today. You’re going to spar with him for the next few days to prepare for next Friday night.”

Sophie turned to Kyle, who flashed her an encouraging grin. “He’s going to decimate me, isn’t he?” she asked Madison, a grimace forming on her face.

“Yep, but it will be good for you,” Madison said, her tone unwavering.

“Oh boy. Whenever someone says something is good for you, it usually means it’s going to be terrible,” Sophie remarked, cringing at the thought. Madison’s laughter echoed in the basement, lightening the mood.

Without wasting another moment, Madison initiated the warm-up exercises, and soon it was time for Sophie to face Kyle. For the next two hours, he dedicated himself to training her, pushing her limits and helping her grow stronger. By the end of their session, Sophie felt utterly exhausted but accomplished.

After lunch, she found herself reaching for her phone, contemplating whether to call Amy. It had been too long since she had checked in on her friend and Olivia. Scrolling through her contacts, she finally located Amy’s number. When her call went unanswered, Sophie decided to leave a heartfelt message.

“Hey, Amy, it’s Sophie. I’m really sorry for being such a terrible friend. I’ve basically vanished from your lives, and I feel awful about it. I just wanted to see how you and Olivia are doing. I’d love to catch up and maybe meet up sometime soon, if that’s okay with you. I really hope to hear from you. Bye.” She hung up, placing her phone down with a mix of hope and anxiety. Would Amy hold a grudge for her sudden absence? Sophie wished to mend their friendship, to reignite the connection they once shared.

Hours later, her phone chimed with a call from Amy. “Hey, Sophie!” Amy’s voice came through, warm and welcoming, easing Sophie’s apprehension.

“It’s so good to hear your voice. Please don’t apologize. Life happens; I get it. Olivia and I are doing really well. Torin helped us settle into an amazing apartment, and he arranged childcare for Olivia. He even offered me a job as a secretary at his firm! I can’t believe everything he’s done for us,” Amy shared, her voice trembling with emotion.

“He’s pretty amazing,” Sophie replied sincerely, feeling a swell of gratitude for Torin.

“Enough about us, though. How are you doing? Have you married him yet?” Amy asked playfully.

Sophie let out a laugh, though it was a bit choked. “Uh, no, not yet.”

“Well, I want an invite to the wedding,” Amy said, her laughter infectious.

Sophie smiled, feeling lighter as they chatted a little longer, promising to meet up for lunch soon. She would have to convince Torin to join them; perhaps he would agree if he accompanied her. She resolved to bring it up the next time she saw him—if she ever saw him again. A sigh escaped her lips, revealing the truth she had tried to ignore: she missed him.

Without overthinking it, she pulled out her phone and sent him a text.

Sophie: Thank you for helping Amy and Olivia. I can’t express how much I appreciate it. You’re a good man, Torin.

His reply was swift.

Torin: You’re welcome.

The rest of the day slipped by in a blur. After a brief rest, Sophie joined Madison in the kitchen to prepare dinner. They finished their tasks early and headed to bed at a reasonable hour, eager to rise and train again the next morning.

The following days passed in a flurry of activity. Her body was healing, growing stronger with each passing day as she fought alongside Kyle. Yet, the absence of Torin weighed heavily on her heart; she hadn’t seen him, nor had she crossed paths with Liam or Max.

She assumed they were preoccupied with pack matters, dealing with the aftermath of recent events.

Friday morning marked her final training session with Kyle and Madison before the anticipated fight night. Sophie felt a knot of uncertainty in her stomach. "I don't know about tonight," she confessed, her voice tinged with doubt.

"You can do it, Sophie," Madison encouraged, her confidence unwavering.

Kyle joined them, sitting down beside Sophie. "You're more than ready, and it would be good for you," he added.

"But what?" Sophie pressed, sensing there was more to his words.

Kyle shrugged, his expression serious. "I'm just not sure how Torin is going to take it. He might lose it."

"Why would you say that?" Madison countered, her brow furrowing. "He lets all the females fight."

"Yeah, but the women who fight are all shifters with shifter speed and strength. Sophie's human. And you've seen how protective he is of her," Kyle explained, concern lacing his tone.

"All the more reason to do it then," Sophie declared, determination rising within her. Kyle and Madison turned to her, surprise evident in their expressions. "I don't want him to worry about me all the time. I want him to know I can handle myself in a fight. Maybe it's time to show him that."

Madison erupted with excitement. "Yeah, girl! That's the spirit!" Sophie laughed, feeling a surge of adrenaline as Kyle pulled Madison close, beaming with pride.

"Tonight!" Madison cheered.

"Tonight," Sophie echoed, her voice steady with newfound confidence. The hours dragged on as anticipation built within her, until finally, Friday evening arrived. A knock on her door startled her from her thoughts.

"Are you ready?" Madison called out, her voice bright and eager, cutting through the tension in the air.

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Sophie burst through the door, her frustration palpable. "I don't know what to wear!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with panic.

Madison stepped into the room, her demeanor calm and collected. "Alright, take a deep breath, Sophie. We're heading to fight night, not a prom. Just wear what you usually wear when we hit the gym together," she suggested, her tone soothing.

"Are you suggesting I show up in my sports bra and yoga pants?" Sophie replied, incredulity lacing her words.

Madison raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. "That's your go-to outfit, isn't it?"

Sophie sighed, her mind racing. "Well, yes, but that's just between us and sometimes your husband. Tonight is different; the entire pack will be there, including Garret. I can't just waltz in wearing a sports bra in front of everyone!" she explained, the weight of her anxiety settling heavily on her shoulders.

Madison shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, that's what I'm wearing," she said, a hint of defiance in her voice.

"Do the other females wear that?" Sophie inquired, her curiosity piqued.

Madison inhaled deeply, determination shining in her eyes. "Sophie, we're going to fight night to show everyone that you're a fighter. This overthinking isn't helping you get into the right mindset. Honestly, I don't care what you wear. What matters is that you pull yourself together and get ready to fight."

Sophie nodded slowly, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. "You're right. I'm sorry for freaking out," she admitted, a wave of relief washing over her.

"Do you have any other t-shirts that would work?" Madison asked, her tone shifting to a more practical note.

Sophie bit her lip, feeling sheepish. "No, that's the problem. I've been panicking because we didn't buy any short-sleeved shirts that would be suitable."

Madison huffed, exasperation creeping into her voice. "Then wear the stinkin' bra and let's get moving."

With a determined nod, Sophie grabbed her clothes and dashed into the bathroom. She hurriedly pulled on her yoga pants and slipped into her purple and black sports bra, the most modest one she owned, featuring a high-cut front. The back displayed an intricate design of cross straps, while the pants boasted a matching purple band at the top. She quickly donned her socks and sneakers, then pulled her hair into a high ponytail. For a fleeting moment, she considered adding a touch of makeup but quickly dismissed the

idea. This wasn't the time to mask her determination with cosmetics; she needed to showcase her strength as a fighter.

As she gazed into the mirror, she attempted to summon feelings of confidence, hoping to project an aura of intimidation. Just then, a knock echoed from the door. "What are you doing in there? Hurry up!" Madison called.

"I'm coming!" Sophie replied, her heart racing as she grabbed her sweatshirt and phone, rushing to join Madison outside. In the living room, Kyle waited, his impatience evident.

"We're going to be late," he stated, glancing at his watch.

"I know, it's Sophie's fault," Madison said, frustration lacing her words.

"Sorry!" Sophie exclaimed as they hurried out to the car. Kyle and Madison settled into the front seats, while Sophie slid into the back. She shifted to the middle as two other enforcers joined them, introducing themselves as Noah and James. Sophie nodded politely at each of them but refrained from shaking hands, feeling a mix of nerves and determination.

Before long, they arrived at the massive gym. Sophie stepped out of the car, her heart pounding as she followed Madison and Kyle inside.

The atmosphere was electric. The music pulsed through the air, and the gym was alive with energy. Sophie scanned the crowd, uncertain if Torin was present. Madison had assured her he wouldn't miss this event, but doubt lingered in Sophie's mind. "I'll go sign you in," Madison said, her voice cutting through Sophie's thoughts. Sophie nodded, waving her on. Kyle accompanied Madison, leaving Sophie momentarily alone.

She took a deep breath, absorbing her surroundings. The bleachers were packed with spectators, a mix of wolves there to enjoy the night and those ready to fight. The fun-loving crowd clutched drinks and snacks, laughter mingling with the thumping music.

Suddenly, someone collided with her, nearly knocking her off balance. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't see you standing there," a voice chimed. Sophie turned to find two girls, likely a few years older than her, standing before her. They possessed the unmistakable beauty that came with wolf genes, their confidence radiating.

One girl had dark hair and olive skin, her features striking and flawless. The other was a perfect embodiment of a model, with long blonde hair, an enviable figure, and piercing blue eyes that were currently fixated on Sophie with a glare.

"Uh, hi, I'm Sophie," she introduced herself, extending her hand tentatively.

The blonde sniffed dismissively. "Yeah, we know. You're the only human around for miles. We could smell you before we even stepped through the door. We just wanted to have a little chat," she said, a smirk playing on her lips.

The olive-complexioned girl joined in, her expression mischievous. "Yeah, a chat."

Sophie crossed her arms defiantly. "Fine. Chat away," she replied, already sensing she wouldn't enjoy this conversation.

They moved closer, invading her personal space. "I don't know what kind of spell you've cast over Torin, but I'm here to tell you that it won't last," the blonde declared, her tone dripping with condescension.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sophie replied, her heart racing.

"Of course you don't," the dark-haired girl chimed in, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Do you really think that Torin, the most powerful alpha in the country, would choose to mate with a human?" the blonde asked incredulously. "Alphas don't mate humans. They need strong wolves to sire their pups."

Sophie lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm his mate," she asserted, her voice steady despite the tremor of doubt in her heart.

They both erupted into laughter. "Sure you are," the blonde scoffed.

"Has he slept with you yet?" the dark-haired girl probed, a wicked glint in her eyes.

"That's private," Sophie retorted, her cheeks flushing.

"Sounds like a no," the dark-haired girl replied smugly.

"He said wolves don't mess around; they wait for their mates." Sophie's words hung in the air, a desperate attempt to assert her place.

The girls burst into laughter, the sound ringing mockingly in her ears. "Oh, honey, how naïve can you be?" the blonde said, shaking her head. "Look around. Do you really think all these strong, sexy men are just waiting for their mates?"

Sophie felt a wave of confusion wash over her. The blonde stepped even closer, her voice low and taunting. "They're not. I don't know why Torin is interested in you right now. Maybe it's because you're human—a mystery, something new and shiny. But trust me, once he tires of you, he'll seek out a wolf, a real woman who can give him what he needs in bed. Wolves aren't like normal men, sweetheart. They require much more than you, a human, could ever provide."

Anger surged within Sophie, her voice firm. "Stay away from Torin; he's mine."

"Is he though?" the blonde challenged, invading her personal space. "He hasn't even marked you as his. He might be entertained by you for now, but just remember..." She stepped back slowly, her words hanging ominously in the air.

“You’re not his first,” she whispered before both girls walked away, their laughter echoing in Sophie’s ears.

Sophie stood frozen, watching them retreat. She turned away, struggling to catch her breath as the weight of their words settled heavily in her mind. Her hands trembled, and she felt a wave of nausea wash over her. How could she possibly fight now? Had everything Torin told her been a façade? Had he been with that... her mind recoiled at the thought.

Suddenly, the doors at the far end of the gym swung open, and Sophie’s heart skipped a beat as she spotted Torin, Kyle, and Max sauntering in. For a fleeting moment, her breath caught in her throat. They were all clad in matching black sweatpants, tight black t-shirts, and combat boots, exuding an aura of danger and power. Torin, leading the pack, looked especially formidable. Sophie quickly averted her gaze, unable to meet his intense stare. She raised her hands to shield her eyes, trying to block out the reality of the moment.

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan\*\***

“Excuse me, ma’am, are you feeling alright?” Sophie’s gaze lifted to meet that of one of the enforcers who had accompanied her on the ride over. His name eluded her—Joe? John? Something along those lines.

“Should I fetch the alpha?” he inquired, concern etching his features.

“Oh, no,” Sophie responded hastily, the thought sending a shiver down her spine. Anything but that. “I’m perfectly fine, thank you.” She cast her eyes around, desperately searching for a way through the throng of people blocking the exit. She needed to get out of this place, this tension-filled atmosphere. Madison had to be located, and she had to tell her that she simply couldn’t go through with it. Pushing forward, she squinted, trying to spot Madison among the sea of faces.

To her astonishment, the number of women present was far greater than she had anticipated. When Torin mentioned they had a small group, she had envisioned something much more diminutive. Yet here she stood, surrounded by at least thirty women, each one looking more robust and formidable than Sophie felt. Doubt began to gnaw at her resolve. She had to find Madison and get her name off that list for tonight’s fights.

Her gaze drifted toward the tables where Madison had said the sign-in sheets would be. There, she spotted Torin and Levi poring over the paperwork. Holding her breath, she clung to a flicker of hope—perhaps Madison hadn’t added her name yet. Just then,

Torin's head snapped up, and he exchanged words with Liam. Liam grabbed the clipboard and scrutinized it. Both of their heads turned toward the crowd.

Sophie instinctively ducked, her heart racing. They were searching for her. After a moment, she cautiously stood back up, only to lock eyes with Torin's furious glare.

"Shoot!" she muttered under her breath, panic washing over her as she tried to duck away again, but it was too late; he was already striding toward her. Desperation surged within her, and she scanned the room for a place to hide. She attempted to weave through the incoming crowd, but the sea of bodies was relentless. Suddenly, a firm hand grasped her elbow, and she instinctively closed her eyes for a brief moment before turning to face the storm brewing in Torin's expression.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, his voice laced with fury.

Sophie yanked her elbow free from his grip, and he released her, crossing his arms defiantly. Liam appeared beside him moments later, his usual easy-going demeanor replaced by a stern expression. His arms were crossed, and his eyes mirrored Torin's narrowed intensity. Sophie felt a surge of anger bubbling within her, directed at both men. Torin's lies had cut deep, and Liam was guilty by association.

"I'm fighting," she declared, her voice steady and defiant.

Torin and Liam shared a brief, incredulous laugh. Laughed! Rage surged through Sophie like wildfire. How dare they mock her? She hadn't intended to stick around and fight, but now the thought of it ignited a fire within her. Maybe she'd even get lucky and face off against Barbie in the ring. Torin's eyes narrowed further. "You're serious," he stated, disbelief coloring his tone.

Sophie remained silent, merely raising her eyebrows in response. "You're not fighting, Sophie. I forbid it," Torin asserted, turning to walk away as if the conversation was over.

"Why? Because I'm not a wolf?" Sophie challenged, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm just a weak human?"

Torin stiffened, spinning back to face her, his expression darkening with anger. "You're not fighting because you're my mate, and I refuse to stand by and watch you get hurt," he declared, his voice firm.

"Oh right, because I couldn't possibly hold my own," Sophie shot back, her tone laced with mockery.

"Sophie," Liam interjected, glancing between her and Torin, confusion etched on his face.

"You're. Not. Fighting," Torin reiterated, each word heavy with finality.

"You're not in charge of me," Sophie retorted, her anger flaring.

"I am the alpha of this pack!" Torin responded, his voice a low growl.

"Right. And I'm not a part of that pack, am I?" she countered, her eyes blazing with defiance.

Liam turned to her, bewilderment clear on his face, but Sophie paid him no mind, her focus locked on the furious man before her. Just then, Madison approached, her presence a welcome distraction. "Hey, what's going on here?" she asked, standing resolutely beside Sophie.

Torin's dark gaze shifted to Madison. "You brought her here."

Madison crossed her arms, her posture unwavering. "I did."

"Then you're responsible for what happens to her," he stated coldly before turning on his heel and striding away.

Without a word, Liam followed after him, leaving Sophie and Madison in a bubble of tension.

"What was all that about?" Madison asked, her eyes trailing after the two men. Sophie found herself at a loss for words. The hurt from earlier paled in comparison to the betrayal she felt now, watching Torin turn his back on her.

Madison turned to Sophie, placing her hands gently on her shoulders, grounding her. "I can't do this," Sophie confessed, her voice barely a whisper, filled with uncertainty.

Before Madison could respond, they heard Liam's voice booming through the microphone. "Gooooood evening, Pack, and welcome to fight night!" he shouted, his enthusiasm electrifying the room.

The atmosphere erupted with energy, drowning out any chance of conversation. Sophie realized there was no way she could hear Madison now. Liam continued to shout over the music, rallying the crowd. She watched as Torin handed him a piece of paper, then saw Liam glance down at it before looking back at Torin, who crossed his arms and nodded in approval.

"And now, what we've all been waiting for. It's time to fight!" he announced, the crowd erupting into thunderous applause that echoed off the walls.

"The first female fight of the evening... Trish the Terminator versus," he paused for dramatic effect, "Sophie the Extra!" he declared. Sophie shook her head in disbelief.

He had clearly just made that up.

"Oh no," Madison gasped beside her, her eyes wide with alarm.

“What’s wrong?” Sophie asked, turning to her friend, but she could already see the panic reflected in Madison’s gaze. It didn’t take a genius to deduce what Madison had already concluded: Torin intended to eliminate her in the very first round.

Conclusion

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Fina\*\***

Sophie stood at the threshold, a fleeting thought racing through her mind—what if she just walked out that door, leaving everything behind? But with a deep breath, she straightened her back and resolutely made her way towards the fight ring that Liam had pointed out moments earlier. Beside her, Madison walked in silence, her lips moving as if she were speaking, but the cacophony of the crowd drowned out her voice. Sophie could feel the palpable tension in the air, a current of energy that buzzed around her, with countless eyes fixated on her every move. It was overwhelming, but she steeled herself against the sensation, focusing intently on the ring ahead and deliberately avoiding the gaze of Liam and Torin, who stood off to the side.

As she reached the edge of the ring, Sophie paused, her heart racing. She slipped off her sweatshirt and handed it to Madison, who took it with a reassuring nod. Just then, Kyle approached, his presence a comforting anchor amidst the chaos. “You got this, Sophie,” he said, his voice steady and sincere. In that moment, Sophie felt a wave of warmth wash over her, a surge of confidence that she desperately needed. She turned to him, meeting his gaze, and could sense the unspoken encouragement radiating from him. He must have noticed the flicker of doubt in her eyes because he placed his hands on her shoulders, grounding her. “Sophie, you’ve taken me down more times than I can count, and trust me, it wasn’t because I was going easy on you. You are tough. You are a fighter. Now go out there and show everyone what you’re made of.”

Madison chimed in, her voice firm yet supportive. “Listen up, Sophie. You can do this. I’ve faced her many times before. Trish is tough, strong, and built like an ox. You can’t let her punches connect. And whatever you do, don’t end up on the floor—that’s where she thrives. If you go down, you won’t stand a chance against her brute strength. But remember, for all her power, she’s also slow. Use that to your advantage. Tire her out. Stay light on your feet. Make every hit count. Dance around her; make her work for every blow. She relies too much on her strength. Once she starts to slow down, that’s when you strike.” Sophie nodded, absorbing every word as if they were a lifeline.

“You gotta go,” Kyle shouted above the noise, breaking her reverie. Sophie nodded once more, summoning her resolve as she stepped into the ring. She cast one last glance at Kyle and Madison, both of whom nodded encouragingly. Sophie then turned her attention to Trish, the formidable opponent across from her. As she began to stretch and warm up, she took a moment to study Trish, noting the confidence radiating from her.

Suddenly, she heard Liam's voice booming through the microphone, followed by the sharp blast of an air horn, signaling the start of the fight.

In that instant, the world around Sophie faded into silence. Trish might have been standing there, but all Sophie could see were the faces of Brody and his friends, the people who had always doubted her abilities. The mocking laughter of Barbie and her dark-haired companion echoed in her mind. Regardless of her complicated feelings for Torin, Sophie understood that this fight was about her—about reclaiming her strength and proving her worth. She was no longer the frightened girl merely trying to survive; she had learned to fight back, and now was her time to shine.

As the fight began, Trish lunged at her with a fierce right hook. Sophie barely managed to evade it, the force of the swing snapping her back into focus. The adrenaline surged through her veins as she circled Trish, observing her movements and searching for an opening. Now was the time to implement Madison's advice; she needed to utilize her stamina to wear Trish down. With renewed determination, Sophie launched an offensive, landing a few solid hits that ignited Trish's fury. The other girl charged at her like a raging bull, but Sophie was ready. She deftly deflected each of Trish's strikes, dancing out of the way with a nimbleness that only fueled Trish's anger.

Sophie continued her evasive maneuvers, landing quick jabs while also absorbing a few punishing blows. Each hit felt like a reminder of the strength she was up against, and she knew she couldn't afford to take many more if she wanted to keep fighting. Shifters were inherently stronger and faster, and Sophie needed to quicken her strategy to bring Trish down.

With a renewed sense of urgency, she went on the offensive once again, not landing many significant blows, but making Trish work hard to deflect her attacks. Sophie had learned through countless training sessions that victory often lay in recognizing that fleeting moment when an opponent was off-balance or vulnerable. She had trained herself to identify that instant in every fight, knowing she could never rely on sheer strength or speed to win against a wolf. Finally, she spotted her opening and seized it. With a series of well-timed punches followed by a sweeping kick, Sophie sent Trish crashing onto her back, successfully pinning her down moments later.

Sophie held on tightly, feeling the weight of the moment. She just needed to maintain her grip for a few more seconds. The air horn blared, signaling her victory.

Breathless, she released her hold and rolled off Trish, extending a hand to help her opponent up. Trish stood, a grin breaking across her face. "Nice work," she said, her respect evident. They shook hands, and Sophie, buoyed by the moment, made her way to the edge of the ring. Madison enveloped her in a tight embrace, followed closely by Kyle.

"I knew you could do it!" Madison exclaimed, her voice brimming with pride. Sophie couldn't help but smile, a wave of satisfaction washing over her. She wanted to glance over to see if Torin was watching, but she held back.

"I'm next for my fight. I'll catch up with you soon," Kyle said to Madison before planting a quick kiss on her lips and rushing back to prepare. Madison handed Sophie her sweatshirt, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Let's go watch Kyle and grab something to eat before your next fight." Sophie followed her friend through the throngs of cheering spectators. Madison quickly procured an energy bar and a Gatorade for Sophie, who eagerly consumed them while watching Kyle dominate his match. He fought brilliantly, winning his round in record time, much to the delight of his ecstatic wife.

After several more rounds, it was finally Sophie's turn again. This time, she faced an opponent who was more evenly matched in size. Madison informed her that this girl was still learning the ropes of fighting in the ring. The match was swift, and Sophie emerged victorious with ease. Her next two fights were similarly uncomplicated, allowing her to conserve her energy. The single-round elimination format meant that the bouts progressed quickly, and Sophie was grateful for the chance to catch her breath.

However, her fifth fight of the night brought her face to face with a male wolf. She felt a surge of gratitude for the time she had spent training with Kyle; this guy was skilled, but he didn't measure up to Kyle's level. The fight was longer than the previous ones, but eventually, Sophie managed to take him down. As she prepared for her final round, she steeled herself, knowing she had to give it everything she had.

The match began, but her opponent was formidable—too big, too fast, and too strong. They grappled for a while, but ultimately, he pinned her down. At least he was gracious about it, showing respect as he helped her up the moment the air horn sounded.

Sophie made her way back to where Madison and Kyle awaited her, and Madison enveloped her in a tight hug.

"I'm so proud of you! You were incredible tonight!" she beamed.

Kyle nodded in agreement, his expression one of admiration. "Good job, Sophie."

Linking her arm through Sophie's, Madison declared, "Let's get you some fuel."

"We'll be back to cheer for you during your next fight," she told Kyle, who grinned and waved them off.

Sophie and Madison settled to watch Kyle's next three fights. As Sophie observed him in action, a realization dawned on her; he had likely been holding back during their training sessions, allowing her to take him down those few times. He was an exceptional fighter. Absently, she pondered how he would fare against Liam, Max, or even Torin. She had secretly hoped to witness a match between Max and Liam that night, but they hadn't entered the ring. She knew Torin had been fighting all evening, as his name echoed through the arena with each match. Until now, she had managed to avoid watching him, but that was about to change.

## Conclusion