

Owned by the Alphas 2: Claimed by the Alphas |

The Council

DERIK

Another night, another council meeting where I had to pretend that I had all the answers.

I didn't. I didn't have a fucking clue, but I couldn't let that show.

So, I suffocated the fear that tried to leak out of my eyes, straightened my spine, and gave everyone the only attitude I ever wore around them. Confidence.

Because they were wolves, old and wise, and they could smell fear a mile away, I couldn't let it touch me.

Especially since it wasn't fear for the pack that made my stomach turn and my heart race, it was fear for my mate and the child she carried.

The birth was imminent, and every day that passed was becoming even more terrifying.

Lorelai was strong, but she had limitations with her human body, and not even she could will that to change.

Once she was one of us, it would be easier, but she had to survive first. That was getting harder to be sure of.

Which is exactly why I was bothering with the council again. We couldn't keep waiting for our wolves to get madder and the humans to attack.

We had to have a plan in place, take control of the situation. It was the only way I was going to keep my shit together.

I was not immune to the madness that plagued our kind in winter, and it was gnawing at my skin to shift despite not having the ability.

The lack of a full moon made us all on edge. I was used to having that burden, but with the humans somehow knowing it too and Lorelai on the edge of birth, I was finding it more difficult.

But it was my burden to bear.

So, I shoved all my anxieties and fears out of my head and faced the council, sitting in the chair at the head of the table.

The council members were buzzing with rumors and gossip from the city, all of which consisted of rampages, anger, fights, and utter chaos. That made my skin itch as much as not being able to shift.

“Council,” I called, wanting their attention.

They all respected the authority in my voice, even my parents, which was rare. They turned to me, waiting for me to talk.

“The humans have magic and knowledge they shouldn’t have,” I started, and that opened the table up to a whole bunch of growls, some fist clenching, which I had expected.

“Braxton said one of the humans he broke said a prophecy, rehearsed lines of one that has brainwashed them,” I said, then repeated the words for them: “Wolves will die at human hands before the moon is full. Humans will be victors, riches and spoils for all.”

The council fell silent.

“Seers have been extinct in our world for millennia,” Galen murmured, and I nodded.

“Indeed, and yet a prophecy has been given, one with careful words and many interpretations. One that the humans have trusted and believed in, leading them to our doorstep,” I said.

One of the more aggressive council members, a bigger wolf, Tatum, laughed.

He was all about ripping things to shreds and always voted for a more violent outcome. I had no hope for more when he opened his mouth.

I was not disappointed.

“Ha!” he barked. “Let the fuckers come. We all know a seer is not to be trusted. They serve themselves. Their prophecies will lead to their deaths. We all know it.”

Tatum cackled more, like the very fact a seer’s prediction was leading the humans was enough of a guarantee that the wolves would win.

He wasn’t far from the truth, but it was not a guarantee, and a seer being alive was much more concerning. If that’s what we were really dealing with.

“Seers do not have magic. They are gifted prophecies from the witches as warnings,” Galen said in his quiet, controlled voice.

He never broke his control; every winter he was the same aloof wolf, every heat. Even Fractum had not cracked it.

His will was strong and it showed, but the fact that he was entertaining the seer idea was a telltale sign of how much shit we were in.

“No. Which means either this prophecy has been hidden from the witches for years or we have something else working with the humans who knows exactly how a seer works.

“If it’s the first option, we have a chance because a prophecy from a seer is to pick out the greedy, punish those who kill for wealth and power.

“Following out the prophecy is obviously doing that, and we can rest assured we will enjoy victory. If it is the latter...”

“We’re fucked,” Tatum finished, and I found myself nodding.

“The second option is that there is a rogue working for the humans. A rogue witch or hybrid helping the humans with information and magic that will inevitably lead to the death of everything in its way.”

The silence to my words was deafening.

Rogues were few and far between. A rogue wolf? Not really an issue. They just choose to be a wolf, live only as their animal, and eventually lose themselves to their wolf, no longer able to shift back.

That had only happened a few times, usually when an unwanted mating happened or a mate died and the pain was too much as a human.

But a rogue witch? That was almost unheard of.

Only a few had ever broken the witch's oath for balance, and if it was one of the ones I could think of, then we were going to have to get stronger—and quickly.

"A rogue witch?" Galen asked, sitting straighter in his chair.

"It explains the prophecy and the magic." I shrugged, and Galen nodded, deep in thought.

"Then let the witches handle it. It is their rogue, why should it be our problem?" my mother snapped.

I wished it was that easy. "The witches don't exile their kind easily, and when they do, it is complete. I was under the impression that they were all dead by now, but maybe not."

"The witches are the balance. How do they exile each other?" Tatum scoffed.

"Witches are forbidden from interfering with humans. Forbidden from directly affecting the balance. If a witch broke those rules, they would be exiled, the others coming together to do so.

"The last one I heard of was a witch falling in love with a human who was fated to die. She used necromancy magic to thwart that fate.

"It took many sacrifices, one of every race, every full moon to keep him and the spell alive, and then that magic turned inside him and he became a monster. He tried to kill her. Clawed at her until she managed to crawl away.

"She begged the witches for help, forgiveness, but they shunned her, let her live out her consequences. They bound her to a shadow realm with the creature she had created.

"I assumed she had been killed, but maybe that isn't possible there."

I thought through the possibilities in my head when Lorelai was there in the link, her curiosity shining through the mating. She had been listening the whole time, which I should have expected.

"Derik. If she was bound to this shadow world, would that count as a contract?" she asked in my head, and I frowned.

"I suppose so," I admitted, but I wasn't entirely sure until the thought in her head locked in mine.

"Fractum," I whispered, my face draining. It broke all contracts.

Galen sucked in a breath. "She was released."

He was quick on the draw, and I nodded. The rest of the council were frowning, and I hated to be the one to drop the bomb on them.

"That witch and her creature were bound to a shadow realm, and that contract was with the witches." I took a deep breath. "Until Fractum. It broke the contract."

I let out my breath with the words and the entire table stilled, the words out loud hard to swallow. Not even Tatum had a fighting word to say.

"How do we kill a witch? They have magic. And what of this creature?" my father asked quietly.

I didn't have those answers.

"We are waiting to hear from Tabby. She is going to see the witches," I said, hoping like hell she had the answers for us.

"So the humans are working with the witch and have a creature of destruction up their sleeve?" Tatum arranged the conclusion for me, and I nodded.

"So it seems."

I had nothing more to add. Dread and horror were consuming me, and I had to get my shit together. The humans were not our only issue.

"If the humans attack, we fight as a pack. It'll be hard since we cannot turn, but we have an armory of weapons underground and we will use every damn one of them if we have to. Cain and Lorelai will help with the magic side of things.

"The humans can trap us in here, but we survive months every year isolated with no moon, and we will do the same this year," I vowed, needing to uplift the wolves, needing to help them see hope despite the trickling feelings of doubt leaking into me.

"We've got this, Derik. You've got this," Lorelai whispered down the link, and I closed my eyes at her voice, the comfort and caresses through the link pushing away the darkness.

I looked over the council and cleared my throat. *I've got this.*

"We'll wait for word from Tabby. In the meantime, I will keep the humans as far from the wolves as possible to help with their instincts, but I want every single member within the city to be training. Fighting, archery, swords.

"I want experts by the time we break through this barrier," I said, ready to organize the chaos of our city.

We had to, especially if the humans were the least of our adversaries.

"Should we tell the vampires about what is going on? They will be affected."

"They made it very clear they weren't willing to help us, and even if we wanted to, we have no way to communicate with them. They are the least of our worries."

"What about my brother?" Lorelai asked.

I sighed at that. It wasn't something I could say out loud. Only Galen knew.

"He is already here, beautiful. He was visiting, waiting for you when the barrier went up."

"It means he is stuck here, but we have made him comfortable. You can go see him tomorrow after you've had some rest," I said to her, then faced the council again.

"And you think being aggressive with training will stop the wolves from losing their shit?" Mother asked.

I nodded. "It will give them focus. Between that and fucking, they should be able to control themselves."

I hoped.

"I'll run point on training. I'll have groups and times organized by the end of the day.

"I'll try to keep the less aggressive wolves together so the others don't feed them their hostility. Then I'll train longer with them so they can get up to the other levels.

"The more aggressive wolves I'll have fight each other bare-knuckled, no rules, then put them on guarding the walls to work out that aggression before they hit the pubs and Juniper's place," Tatum said, and I was reminded why he was one of my favorite council members. He understood my need for structure.

I nodded in thanks to him, and he returned the gesture before scribbling notes down.

I turned to Carden, Anetta's mate, one of the few survivors from Kai's rampage when he got back from his time with the vampires.

He was strong, but he was even smarter, and he used those smarts to keep our crops and gardens alive.

"Carden, the food storage and crops, how are they faring?" I asked, wanting to hit all the points before going back to my room and crawling into the arms of my mate.

Carden winced, and I clenched my teeth. Another problem incoming. Not surprising, but still just as irritating because I just needed something to go our way, something I didn't need to sort out.

"They're...faring. We may need to look at some fertilizer from Galen to keep the crops growing. The barrier is somehow leeching our magic and stopping them from growing.

"The livestock are still breeding and we have meat to sustain us, but without wheat, grain, and vegetables, food may get scarce," he said, looking through his papers.

I smirked; my wishes had been answered.

I just happened to have a magically overloaded luna sitting in my room, and if pushing that magic into the soil was going to solve two of my problems, then I was damn grateful for it.

"I can do that," she said in my head, and I smiled.

"I'll escort Lorelai to the gardens every day if you can make sure the wolves clear those paths. She'll use her magic to keep the food sources healthy."

"Will do. Midday?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Done."

"And what of the attacks? The humans haven't attacked since the barrier went up, but are we going to look for any weaknesses or organize lookouts in case they do?" Mother asked.

"We're going to patrol. I've given each of you a roster and a section of the city. Those are your wolves to account for and the times you are on watch for. You can organize your group accordingly.

"If the humans attack, send out a howl—I don't trust the link at the moment—and then we'll all move on that signal. I want the wall covered, the mansion guarded, the arrows in the middle, shooting from rooftops, the swordsmen at the wall.

"The humans will be sent down into the armory, locked in where there is a stash of supplies and an underground system that leads to Tabitha's.

"Until that warning sounds off, I don't want a single wolf or soul to know the existence of that tunnel.

"We don't want that information in the wrong hands, and I haven't gone down there to check the state of it since Fractum, nor whether it is covered by the barrier."

"If it's not, why don't we get out?" Father scoffed. "Then we can attack the humans, surprise them."

"Because the barrier is for the wolves. The humans have been able to touch it, which means only they can escape that way," I snapped, sick of being the brain for them.

They were still trying to run things like they did last time, and it wasn't how we were doing it.

Kai, Brax, and I wanted more for our wolves and the humans that we had protected. They were the reason we were even fighting this battle.

The humans were still bitter over their treatment all those years ago, and it was tainting their view of everything, but I was not my parents.

“And without knowing where the witch is, whether it is the rogue or if she has a creature up her sleeve, we cannot risk that getting inside our walls.

“At the moment, we are safer in here than out there. Winter is here, the days are dark, the nights empty, and that means we need to rely on more than our ability to rip things to shreds.

“We need to make smarter decisions, and until we have the information from Tabitha, we are not moving on the humans,” I ordered, my alpha voice wavering at the end.

I had to make sure they knew I was not losing any more wolves as collateral because of dumb, half-cocked decisions.

We were on the defense. We weren't as strong, and the humans had put the barrier there for a reason.

If the witch was that reason, then she was getting ready to play her hand, and until I had an idea on what might be in it, I was not showing mine and I was not making the first move.

Not when everything I cared about was on the line.

I waited until I had a slight bow of the head from each of the council members, then nodded to release them.

“Dismissed,” I said, then stepped back as they all left the room.

All of them except Galen.

I spread my hands on the table and hung my head, blowing out a breath, trying to relieve some of the stress.

“You are much better at this than you think, Derik. Much better than they give you credit for,” Galen said, standing slowly.

I nodded but didn't look up at him. I wasn't sure if I believed him.

“I have to try. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure she survives this,” I breathed, and he nodded.

"I understand. Before my precious Pearl, I don't think I could have, but I do now."

He offered a small smile, and for him, that was huge.

I looked up at him, a smirk playing on my lips. Galen, our most feared withheld beast, and he was in love with a human? It was dangerous, but nothing in our world surprised me anymore.

"I'm saying this because I care, Galen. Be careful with her. She's human. If you mate with someone else—"

"—then I will rip my wolf from my soul and give that beast to my mate. I will not give up Pearl," he vowed.

I nodded. There was no point arguing with an obsession, especially one still so new.

"I wish you all the happiness," I said, and Galen nodded in respect.

He was on his way out the door when he turned to me with a knowing look.

"One more question," he said, and I waited for him to ask it. "If your human is not actually human, what makes you think her mother is?"

"Your winter born was birthed from the loins I now covet. I don't think that is a coincidence," he said, his face blank, his thoughts far away before he left me with the remnants of those.

I frowned after him and considered what he had said. But I shook my head. Of course it was a coincidence.

Lorelai and her brother were born early, in winter instead of spring. That was an accident. It had to be because I couldn't fit any more questions in my mind.

I shook it clear, then packed up the meeting paperwork, filing it in the cabinet before heading upstairs to find my mate.

She was curled up with Brax, him sleeping in his spot between her legs, her head leaning on Kai, her hair splayed over his chest as he curled her tighter against him.

She sighed in her sleep, a small snore escaping, and all my stresses melted away.

I shed off my clothes and climbed in next to her, spooning her, my hand resting on her stomach.

It was the only place I found peace, and with everything going on, I needed that more than anything or I was going to snap.

Not just a little, not get angry, but go full-blown alpha tyrant, ripping apart every wolf, human, or other that stood in the way of the world I wanted for my child to be born into and my mate to become luna of.

I would die for that cause, and thanks to the barrier, the probability of a rogue witch, and a bloodthirsty creature in the cards, that future was looking even more likely.