

The One He Claimed Chapter 171

Chapter 171: Jocelyn's Healing

Sophie

When I walk to the Survivor's Center, there's more chatter than normal. I even hear soft laughter and pups talking excitedly. I follow the sounds of voices and walk out to the garden where nearly everyone is working in the dirt, planting seeds or plants.

"Luna! Come see what we're doing!" one of the pups shouts when they see me. Immediately, all of the pups come rushing over, taking my hands in their dirty ones and leading me to the garden.

"Careful with our Luna. She's pregnant!" one of the mothers says, sternly.

"Sorry, Luna!"

"Yeah, sorry, Luna."

I nod at the mothers, and smile at Jocelyn. "How are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm doing well, Sophie. After the pups show you around, we can talk," she says. The lines of stress, anger, and pain on her face have softened in just the day that I've been away. I'm anxious to hear how she's healing.

But I focus on the pups, knowing they need to feel my love just as much as the pack does. Since most of them aren't old enough to have their wolves yet, I make a point of hugging them, telling them what a great job they're doing, and ohhhing and ahhhhing over what they've planted. It's a good hour before I have a chance to really sit and talk to Jocelyn.

"Here, Luna, take my seat," Sandy says to me.

"I'd say it's not necessary, but unfortunately, if I sit on the ground, you're all going to have to help me back up again," I say, rubbing my stomach.

"How is our Alpha heir doing?" one of the women asks over her shoulder while she continues to work in the garden.

"Growing every day," I say, smiling down at my stomach. "So, how are you doing, Jocelyn?"

"I'm good. I'm really good. I went to the hospital today and Dr. Felicity took x-rays again. I think Cassidy is over-extending herself a bit, trying to heal me. Dr. Felicity got Dr.

Caspian on a video call and we looked over my x-rays. I'm healing much faster than he expected."

"That's wonderful. How long does he think it will be before you are completely healed?"

"He thinks maybe a week or two. He said that, depending on what happens with the birth of your sister's daughter, he may come back and do the surgery on my other leg so that at least from the waist down, I could be healed."

"Oh, Jocelyn. That's such great news!" I say, leaning over to hug her.

"You know, I didn't realize how much pain I was in. I guess my body just became accustomed to it, but now, having so little pain compared to what it was, I realize how much better I'm going to feel when all of these surgeries are done."

"I'm so happy for you, Jocelyn," I say, smiling at her.

She reaches over and takes my hand, squeezing it. "Thank you, Sophie. I know I've said it before, but I don't know how I can ever thank you for what you've done and continue to do for me."

"Your healing is enough thanks for me, Jocelyn."

She looks at me a moment. "They were right, you know."

"Who was right about what?" I ask.

"You really are worthy of being called The Legend."

The women around me chuckle as I huff.

"Did I say something funny?" Jocelyn asks, looking around.

"Our Luna is the only one who doesn't seem to realize how much she deserves the title she was given."

Jocelyn turns back to me. "Really, Sophie? You don't see it?"

I shrug. "I'm just doing what anyone else would do," I say.

"No one else has done what you've done, Sophie. No one. And let's be honest, most people would have kicked me out the minute I arrived with the massive chip I had on my shoulder."

I shrug. I don't really feel like I've done anything, except what was right. Thankfully, I have a supportive mate, someone who adores me and encourages me to be the best that I can be.

I spend another hour with everyone, enjoying the peacefulness and the gentle laughter that has started to come in this place. I can see that the women here have bonded together in their grief, supporting each other, being there when one of them breaks down, becoming a village that takes care of the pups.

When I return to the packhouse, let Hunter know that I want all of us to start taking turns visiting the Survivor Center. At least one of the ranked members should go by every day to support our pack members and most especially, the pups. I work with Kinsley and set up a schedule, knowing that I plan to go more than once a week and so does she. When we mention it to Penny, she tells us that she's already going by at least once a day, checking in to make sure the pups feel supported.

"What if we started bringing the pups to the packhouse?" Penny asks.

"I'm not sure they're ready for that yet," Kinsley says,

"Not all of them are, you're right, but I think some of them are. They either miss their friends, or they miss the companionship of being with other wolves. Some of the pups are old enough to shift but they haven't since their fathers died," Penny says.

"Maybe dinner a couple times a week, Pen. And then we could take them for a run afterward. Well, you can, Kinsley and I can't," I say, gesturing to my stomach,

"True," Penny says, smiling.

"Ohhh, and let's invite all of them to your birthday party, Penny," Kinsley says, turning to me. "I can begin planning her party while you're gone next weekend, Sophie."

"That's a great idea. I mean, you're already officially our Ga**a, but now you'll be able to mark your mate."

"I know. I'm SO excited! Jaime is too. Our bond already feels so strong..."

"Just wait, it's so much stronger when you turn eighteen," I say.

Over the next few days, we take turns going to see the survivors and I go by every day to see Jocelyn as well. Her healing continues to go well and mid-week I join her at the hospital for x-rays. Zahn had been asking to see her since our return and she finally agreed to allow him to come to see the x-rays on the day that I attended. Hunter made sure to assign additional guards in case Zahn tried anything.

He surprised me by behaving. Perhaps getting his a**kicked by our pack showed him that he wasn't going to get what he wanted by trying to force his way to being with Jocelyn.

Because she asked, I stayed when he entered the room.

"Wow, Jocelyn, you look great," he says, sounding surprised.

"Brooklyn told me this pack was special, and she was right. I feel good, stronger than I was when we arrived."

"That's good. That's really good. How are you healing?" he asks.

"Faster than anticipated. Dr. Caspian and Dr. Felicity think that Cassidy is present, but still silent, I have to agree since I'm healing much faster than a human would," she says as Dr. Felicity walks into the room with today's x-rays.

"Full house, today," she says, looking around at Jocelyn, Zahn, me, and the six guards that Hunter assigned. "Well, Luna, the

news continues to be good."

She puts the x-rays on the light box and all of us can see that her bones are straight and almost completely healed.

"You still have some fractures here, but Cassidy is doing an amazing job at healing you, Jocelyn."

"Yes, she is," Jocelyn says, squeezing my hand as she stares at the images.

"I've spoken to Dr. Caspian and he and I agree that it would be better to have your second surgery before Alpha Amelia delivers her pup," Dr. Felicity says

"Alpha Amelia?" Zahn asks, clarifying her title.

Dr. Felicity looks over at me. We're all so used to it that even I forgot that Zahn didn't know about my sister taking over my father's pack.

"Yes. My sister took over when Alpha Alaric killed my parents," I say

He frowns. "But she's a Luna."

"Not anymore," I say, mind linking Hunter

"Zahn just found out about Amelia. How do you want me to handle it?"

“Tell him to talk to me. I’ll deal with him. I don’t want him interfering with our pack competitions.”

Agreed.”

“What does her mate think of the,” he says, becoming agitated.

“Alpha Zahn, if you have questions about my sister running a pack, you should speak to Hunter about it.”

“I definitely will. What is the f**king world coming to? Women running packs? It’s absurd,” he says, as if his words aren’t insulting the three women in the room.

I look at Jocelyn who nods. “I think our time here is done, Alpha Zahn. Thank you for coming today,” I say, nodding to the guards.

“What? But we’re not done,” he says, looking at Jocelyn.

“Thank you for coming, Zahn,” she says, and he grits his teeth.

“Alpha Zahn, Jocelyn has requested that you leave. It’s time to go,” William says. I notice that they’ve moved around the room, putting themselves between Zahn and the three women in the room.

“Jocelyn, I apologize if my words offended you. But I am happy to see that you are healing and getting stronger,” he says, looking hopeful that his words may make her change her mind.

“Thank you,” is all she says.

He presses his lips together and turns, the guards falling in behind him, keeping a barrier between us and him.

Once he’s out the door, Dr. Felicity turns back to Jocelyn. “Anywho, what I was saying is that Dr. Caspian wants to do your other leg before Alpha Amelia delivers her baby. As you can see here,” she says, pointing to a second x-ray, “your legs are no longer the same length. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Yes, I’m forced to hobble now because of it,” Jocelyn says.

“Right. So, he’ll be here over the weekend, probably Sunday with a plan to complete your left side, from hip to toes, if you are in agreement, Jocelyn,” Dr. Felicity says, looking at her for confirmation.

She looks at me and then back at Dr. Felicity.

“Yes, definitely! As long as it won’t impact Cassidy in a negative way.”

“We don’t believe it will and the time between now and then should strengthen her even more, so hopefully, when Dr. Caspian returns from delivering our Luna’s niece, he can start on your arms and rib cage.”

“Wow! I was thinking a year, but you’re talking months, maybe even weeks until I’m completely healed.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’re saying.

I wrap my arms around Jocelyn as she bursts into happy tears.

The One He Claimed Chapter 172

Chapter 172: Preparations for War

Hunter

“Are you sure you can handle him?” I ask Lucas. “He’s becoming more agitated.”

Lucas gives me a look. “Really, Alpha? Are you trying to insult me? You left him with Penny and Jaime in charge, and when we came back the pack clearly left their mark on him.”

“He wasn’t agitated then. He’s been escalating this week, especially after hearing about Amelia taking over as Alpha of her pack. Now he’s practically salivating to know where I’m going and why Sophie and I are leaving again.”

“Trust me, his guards are on alert. Hell, the entire pack is on alert. I know you’ve seen the extra patrols running near the Survivor’s Center. I didn’t tell them to do that, did you?”

“No. They’re just being protective.”

“Exactly. Worst case scenario, Alpha, is that you return and realize you’ll have to go to war again because we killed him.”

“Has anyone heard him on the phones? Do we know who he’s talking to or what he’s talking about?” I ask, Something feels off with Zahn. I feel like something’s about to happen, and it feels like he’ll take advantage of me being gone to do it.

“No. He’s been very quiet about it, but the warriors also haven’t made an effort to listen in,” Lucas says.

‘Jaime, Penny, can you come to my office please,’ I mind link my Ga*as.

"I have a gut feeling that something is going to happen, Lucas. He's too agitated, too...angry at the changes that are happening and not being able to see Jocelyn."

A moment later my G**as knock on the door and come in.

"I'm worried about leaving. I feel like Alpha Zahn is working up to doing something, but I don't know what that could be. Have either of you heard anything about his conversations with his pack members?"

They look at each other, then turn back to me.

"What are you thinking, Alpha?" Lucas asks me.

"One of two things. He either wants to get Jocelyn out of here by force, or he wants to hurt me and Sophie for putting him in this situation, even though he was warned."

"I think he'd go for Jocelyn first," Jaime says.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because killing you and our Luna will only make the pack more angry, more willing to fight and more willing to protect Jocelyn. He'd never get her if he attacked the two of your first," Lucas says, catching on to the thought.

"So, it's Jocelyn he's going to make a play for," I murmur, before looking up. "Penny, run a drill this morning, before Sophie and I leave. I want everyone ready for an attack while we're gone. Lucas, double the patrols and triple them around the Survivor Center. Jaime, see what you and the warriors can find out about what and who Zahn is talking to on the phone."

"Yes, Alpha."

Maybe going to the pack competition is a bad idea.

"He'll only bide his time if you don't go now, Hunter," Lucas says to me, reading my mind. "Next time, it could be both of us going, leaving Penny and Jaime here without either of us. Give him the opportunity he's looking for. Hell, lie to him about how long you'll be gone. Tell him you'll be gone longer than you intend to be gone, so he feels safer attacking now."

"You realize it goes against everything in me to leave knowing there's a potential attack on this pack?" I ask them.

"You leaving is the best chance he has to attack. Better to plan for an attack we know is coming than to risk being attacked when we're not ready."

"If his pack does attack, try to keep him alive and throw him in the cells. Kill anyone else that dares to attack us."

"Yes, Alpha."

I nod at Penny, and she heads out to prepare to alert the pack of an attack drill. It's breakfast time, so it will be interesting to see how everyone does. Maybe, hopefully, seeing how ready our pack is will dissuade Zahn from attacking.

I know Zahn is up to something, I just don't know what it is, but an attack to get Jocelyn out of my pack lands sounds right.

"We'll keep the pack safe, Alpha," Lucas says, just as Penny's alert goes up in the mind link.

'Everyone this is an attack drill. Get to your assigned safe rooms. Get into your fight positions. You have two minutes. This is a drill. I repeat, this IS a drill.'

The three of us walk out into the organized chaos of the pack rushing to get into position.

'Hunter?' Sophie's worried voice flitters into my mind.

'Just a drill, Soph. I'm worried about Zahn while we're away. I want to make sure that everyone is ready in case we're attacked,' I say, feeling her and Kinsley helping others into the safe rooms as Jaime and Lucas go outside to check on our patrols.

"What's going on? Is your pack under attack?" Alpha Zahn asks, rushing up to me.

"Just a drill, Alpha. We've been attacked so many times recently that it's good for everyone to remember where they are supposed to be in the event of another attack."

"What about Jocelyn? She's not here," he says, and he tries to make it seem like he's concerned about her, but it falls short.

"The survivors have their own safe room," I tell him vaguely. "Jocelyn is fine."

I notice he doesn't ask me where I would want HIM in the event of an attack. It just reinforces my gut feeling that he's going to do something. But Lucas is right, he'll be more likely to attack while I'm gone.

"Are you sure now's a good time for you to leave, Alpha Hunter. You haven't mentioned how long you'll be gone this time," Zahn says, much too casually.

"A couple of days, three at the most," I say, giving him the lie that Lucas suggested. I'll be gone two days tops. Battles start this afternoon. By tonight, we'll be down to our top

twenty-five. The pack should be won by midday tomorrow, and then we're coming home. "And Lucas is staying this time, so he'll be in charge."

"I see," Zahn says. "Well, have a good trip, wherever you're going."

"I intend to," I say, carefully keeping my voice neutral. When the drill is over, I pull Lucas, Penny, and Jaime aside.

"Alert the warriors, attack in imminent. We need to warn Jocelyn, but make sure those warriors are in place."

"I'll take her watch while you're gone, Alpha," Penny says.

"That will be good. If it were me, I'd send most of my warriors to distract the pack and my elite warriors to get my Luna. They'll be the toughest fighters, Penny."

"Good, I could use the practice," she says, and her confidence makes me feel better about leaving.

"Hunter?" Sophie asks, walking up.

I pull her into a hug, now needing to pull her into my side as our son continues to grow bigger. "Let's go say goodbye to Jocelyn, see how the drill went on their end, and then we can go, Sophie."

She looks up, searching my face, then nods. "Okay. I wanted to check on her anyway, since I think Dr. Caspian is coming home Sunday to perform another operation on her Monday."

I'd forgotten about Caspian and Brooklyn returning.

'I'll warn them,' Lucas says in the mind link.

I nod, letting him know that I agree before taking Sophie's hand and heading to the Survivor Center.

When we get there, I can see their nerves as the warriors watching them have already increased.

"Jocelyn, everyone, we expect Alpha Zahn to attack while Sophie and I are gone. We think you are the target, Jocelyn," I say, and her hand flutters to her chest.

"That's why we have extra patrols, well, guards really?" Sandy asks, looking around.

"Yes, and Penny will be assigned to you exclusively, Jocelyn. We don't expect you to fight, the pack will defend you, unless you tell me now that you want to leave with Alpha Zahn."

"I do not, but I don't want anyone to suffer..."

"My Beta and G**as have convinced me that Zahn will attack eventually. He knows I won't allow him to take you against your will, so the only way is by force through an attack on our pack. This pack is strong, Jocelyn. You have nothing to worry about."

She turns and looks at the women around her, their pups clinging to them. "I'm sorry I've brought this on you," she says.

"Nonsense. You're just as important as any of our other pack members, and in this pack, we protect our own," Sandy says, and the others nod.

I crouch down, looking at the pups. "You'll listen to your parents and the others if they tell you to hide, right? Now is not the time for games. We ran a drill this morning to make sure that everyone would be safe and knows where to go. Does anyone have any questions?"

"What if we're in the packhouse when we're attacked, Alpha? Do we come back here?" a young girl asks. It's a good question since they've started bringing the older pups in for dinner with the pack a couple nights a week.

I look up at Sophie and wait for her eyes to refocus. "Beta Kinsley is going to give you assignments for your safe rooms tomorrow before you go to the packhouse. She'll show you where your safe rooms are and who your room lead is in case the attack comes during dinner. I'm afraid that we're going to cancel the run this weekend, but we'll reschedule as soon as Hunter and I return," Sophie tells them.

"If you're closer to here than the packhouse, when the attack comes, run to this safe room," I tell them. "I know this is a bit scary, but it will okay. The pack will protect you. Follow the directions from your parents, the ranked members, and the warriors if you're out of this area. Don't wander off by yourselves. Now is the time to be vigilant."

Once I feel that everyone understands what to do and that they feel safe, I lead Sophie to the back of the packhouse where I've left our bags again. Lucas and Kinsley come out to say goodbye.

"I'll call you tonight," I tell him.

"Please be safe," Sophie says to Kinsley.

"We've got this Luna. You have nothing to worry about," she tells her.

Lucas helps Sophie onto Shaw's back, and I begin to make my way to the pack border. Feeling eyes on me, I turn, looking back at the packhouse. There, in one of the windows on the third floor is Zahn, watching us leave.

I turn and begin to run, howling to my pack members that we'll be back soon, and to stay alert for an attack.

I feel better when I hear the confident howls of my pack, letting me know that they are on high alert.

The One He Claimed Chapter 173

Chapter 173: Guards

Penny

'Penny, Jaime, let's meet briefly then you can take your positions,' Beta Lucas says in the mind link.

'Where are we meeting?' Jaime asks.

'My office,' he says.

I was working with the safe room leads, making sure that everyone had arrived and that they had timed them to under two minutes. There are a few individuals I need to speak to about moving faster, but otherwise, the drill went well.

When I arrive at Beta Lucas' office, Jaime is already there, as is Beta Kinsley.

"Penny, Luna asked me to make sure the safe rooms have availability for the pups from the Survivor Center. Let's talk about that before you head over to guard Jocelyn."

I run some quick numbers in my head. "How many pups?" I ask.

"No more than five."

"We can fit them, easily, if need be."

"Perfect."

A moment later, Brutus knocks and walks in.

He nods at me and Jaime, then looks at Beta Lucas. "We're expecting an attack?"

"Yes. Alpha Hunter believes that Zahn will attack while he's gone. We agree, and told him to go, knowing this is our best chance to be prepared for an attack. Alpha told Alpha

Zahn that he'd be gone 2-3 days, so I think we'll be attacked tonight or tomorrow, giving him plenty of time to get Jocelyn far away from here."

"We're letting him take her?" Brutus asks, concerned.

"Let me rephrase. Zahn thinks he'll have plenty of time to get her away from here. We're going to shut that s** down before it even starts," Lucas says, making all of us smile.

"What do you need me to do?" Brutus asks.

"I need you and William to trade off. You're my two strongest warriors and one of you needs to be on Zahn 24/7. You can figure it out between you, but when the alarms go up, whoever isn't on his detail, gets there."

"Done."

"And, Brutus, when the alarms go off, take Zahn down. I'm not giving him a chance to do anything. He'll kill anyone to get to Jocelyn, I have no doubt. He's not in our alliance, so we don't have to worry about killing him..."

"Except for Jocelyn," Beta Kinsley jumps in.

"Right," Lucas says, pulling his mate, who is already in his lap, closer to him. "Jocelyn won't heal as quickly if Zahn is dead. Alpha has asked us to keep him alive and if that's not the reason, I'm sure he has a good one. So, take him out, keep him alive if you can, but throw him in the cells and keep a guard on him. I don't want his pack members springing him while we're fighting."

"What about the other members of his pack?" Brutus asks.

"Alpha has given the go ahead to kill anyone else who attacks us."

"Good. Who's protecting Jocelyn?" Brutus asks. I've heard he turned down a ranked position when he was younger. If I'm not mistaken, he's a second or third son of a ranked member, maybe a Beta. He definitely has the strategic thoughts of a man who is a ranked member.

"I am," I say. He nods, smiling at me.

"Well, then, she's well protected."

"Yeah, she is," Jaime says proudly, making me smile.

"Let me know what you and William decide Brutus," Lucas says to him.

"Will do. When do we think we'll be attacked?"

“Tonight or tomorrow.”

“Yeah, he and I will have to fight it out. My bet’s on tonight,” Brutus says.

“Mine too, and what are you fighting about?” Jaime asks him.

“Who gets to be on when the alarms go up. Both of us want a chance to punch that arrogant Alpha again,” he says, making me snort a laugh.

“Oh, come on, G***a. You know you do too,” he says to me.

“Yeah, I do. But I’ll settle for protecting Jocelyn. I’m sure I’ll get to punch someone,” I say, smiling.

He chuckles. “And that’s why she’s our G**a!” he says before heading to the door.

“Stay alert, Brutus,” Lucas says.

“The whole pack’s on alert, Beta. We’ll be ready.”

When he’s gone, Lucas looks back at us. “I know it’s not ideal to separate the two of you...”

“It’s okay, Beta. Jaime and I understand the expectations of our position. We know it’s only temporary,” I say, looking at my mate. It’s probably easier for me to say that, since I’m not eighteen yet, but I’m so close, and my need to be around Jaime increases every day.

“You can make up to me on your birthday, beautiful,” he says, pulling me into a hug.

“Deal.”

“Penny, since you’re going to be with Jocelyn, and I’m stuck not fighting, I’ll take lead on the safe rooms here in the packhouse,” Kinsley says.

“Thank you, Beta. There are a couple that need follow up. They didn’t get into their room within two minutes.”

“Leave me the list and I’ll follow up with them,” she says.

After our meeting, I take a moment to kiss Jaime. I’m not sure when I’ll see him again.

“Take care of my mate,” he says.

“Do I need to check in with Beth and Chloe?” I ask him. I know his sisters are part of the pack now, so they know what’s going on, but they’re both still young.

“Already done. Go look after Jocelyn and show any fighters who show up what happens when they go against the Ga**ma of THIS pack,” he growls, leaning in to kiss me.

When he pulls back, I smile up at him, loving this man so much already.

“What’s that smile?” he asks.

I bite my lip, not sure if it’s too early in our relationship to say anything, but, he’s my mate. “You’re so good with your sisters. I can’t wait to see what a great father you’ll be to our pups.”

He growls, pulling me even tighter against his body. “Pups, plural? More than one?”

“We should have at least one boy and one girl, don’t you think?” I ask him.

“Maybe we’ll have lots of girls and have to keep trying for a boy,” he says, making me laugh.

“Or maybe we’ll have lots of boys and have to keep trying for a girl,” I say. He growls softly, before kissing me again.

“So many good things in our future,” he says.

“So many,” I agree.

As I walk to the Survivor Center, there’s a lightness in my step, a happiness that’s incongruous with the upcoming battle. Maybe it’s because I know we’ll win, or maybe it’s because I know that my life is going to be great in this pack with Jaime at my side. Either way, it’s hard to not feel happy, even with the inconvenient battle coming soon.

The One He Claimed Chapter 174

Chapter 174: Attack

Jocelyn

I feel sick to my stomach in a way that I haven’t since the day that Zahn caught me in the woods and forced his mark on my neck, mating me in front of his ranked members while they cheered and I cried.

Just remembering that day has me rushing to the bathroom and emptying the contents of my stomach. Since I haven’t been able to eat much since Alpha Hunter and Luna Sophie stopped by this morning, there isn’t much to come up.

“Jocelyn, honey, you’re going to be fine,” Sandy says from outside the door.

I flush the toilet and wash my mouth out before opening the door.

“It’s not that. I mean, it is. The thought of returning to that pack makes me sick, but...Sandy, what if someone gets hurt or worse...what if someone else has to move into this area because of me?”

And there is the crux of my concern. These women have become like family to me in a very short amount of time. Their pups accepted me with no question, sitting beside me when I’ve been too weak to do more than watch as they plant their garden, or even to leave the house when I first got out of surgery. Some of the younger pups even brought books to read to me like their parents do for them when they’re sick, I don’t want to be responsible for more women and families having to become part of this survivor group.

I love every one of these people and the thought of Zahn’s pack members hurting them to get to me...well, it makes me want to agree to leave with him. And if I thought he’d leave it at that, I might do it. But I know Alpha Zahn. He holds grudges, he doesn’t let things go. He might pretend that he’s trying to make changes, but I’ve seen the real person that he is. He’s not sorry that he caught me, stripped me bare, raped me, and marked me in front of his pack members. He feels that it’s his right as an Alpha. He has no remorse at all. The only remorse that he has is that I absolutely refuse to have sex with him. And since Cassidy has been absent, and I’ve been so broken, he can’t exactly force himself on me without possibly killing me.

It’s why I know that he was excited to hear that Cassidy is healing me. It’s not because he’s happy that I’m healing. It’s because he wants his d**n heir. If I’m healed, and Cassidy is present, there’s nothing to stop him from raping me until I get pregnant.

What he didn’t expect was Sophie. I guess he also didn’t expect Alpha Hunter to be the kind of man who actually cares about his mate and Luna, giving her a place in the pack that is more than just a title. He truly lets her rule the pack beside him as an equal, something Zahn would never do. My role is to give him an heir, end of story.

So, coming here was merely a ploy to make others think he cared and then he’d been as shocked as I was when they actually followed through on their words and gave me back control of my life and my decisions.

And now, I’ve realized how true Brooklyn’s words were. This pack is special, almost magical in its cohesiveness. Everyone really does care about each other and Zahn’s an idiot for not seeing how strong it makes them.

Sandy wraps her arms around me. She’s a strong woman to have survived the loss of her mate, someone she absolutely adored. But I know she did it for her pup, her daughter, Samantha, who is a teenager. She told me that she couldn’t leave her daughter alone in this world with no family. So, she survived, and every day is a struggle for her, but every day she gets up and makes the most of her life. She says she

does it for her mate so he can continue to be proud of her as he watches over her from the Moon Goddess' realm.

"We're a strong pack, Jocelyn. And we know they're coming. Alpha Zahn doesn't know that we know and that give us the advantage. No one will get hurt, well, not from our pack anyway," she says fiercely. She still has a warrior's spirit, or maybe the spirit of her mate resides in her now. I hope that one day, I can tough like Sandy is.

"I know, I just...I care about all of you so much. You've all done so much to help me, to protect me, to heal me. And I don't just mean my body," I say.

"I know. There's a lot of emotional and m**al healing that has to happen too. Around here, we understand that very well."

"I know you do. It's why I feel a kindred spirit with all of you here. We're all healing from something, and everyone understands that, accepts that we'll have good days and bad days."

"We're a family. That's what families do, they support each other, protect each other, and love each other."

She nods her head. "Come back out to the living room. G**a Penny is here. She's apparently your personal guard until the battle is done."

Ga**a Penny. That's another first for me. Not only is she a woman, the first female Ga**a, but she's also underage. The woman was on the run, so she understands some of what I've been through. But she's tough as nails. Another woman for me to look up to and strive to be like.

"Jocelyn, I want you to know that I'll keep you safe. I know I'm underage but..."

"It's not that. Truly. I'm sure that you've earned your spot as the Ga**a. I've seen the respect that the other pack members have for you. My fear is for the others who may be injured. I'm protected, but what about them?"

She c**k*s her head at me. "We protect each other. We fight together. And we're a large pack. I don't know how large Alpha Zahn's pack is, or how many may make the trip to fight, but it won't matter. We'll take them down. Alpha Hunter makes sure that we train every day. Our warriors are the best. I'd put any of our warriors up against any other pack's warriors and bet every cent that I have I have on them."

I smile at her confidence. It's hard to worry when both women are looking at me as if I'm missing the big picture here.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask.

“Business as usual until the alarms go up,” she says.

“And then?”

“And then, we get you to the safe room. If you don’t get into the safe room, you’ll get a firsthand look at why I’m this pack’s G**a,” she says, smiling a nearly feral smile. She’s definitely the Ga**a for a reason.

We go about the day, gardening in the afternoon, then making and eating dinner. As the evening wears on, I become more and more nervous. The chatter from earlier is gone and everyone is quiet. I’m too nervous to sleep, so Sandy turns on the television in the living room. I have no idea what we’re watching because I can’t focus on anything but every little noise I hear outside.

I keep glancing at Penny, and I see that she’s maintaining contact with the rest of the pack, probably the border patrols.

When her head snaps up, we all look at her. She turns, looking at something past the walls of the room where we’re sitting.

“Time to go,” she says, a moment before the howls of alarm go up.

We jump up, grabbing the bag of things sitting by the door to take to the safe room. They were right, better to be prepared and know that the battle is coming.

I follow Sandy and Samantha, with Penny right behind me. The safe room for the Survivor Center was built underground. I learned today during the drill where it was. As much time as I’d spent here, I’d never even seen the entrance, it’s that well- hidden.

The sounds of wolves’ paws pounding on the earth becomes muted by angry snarls and yelps of pain. A wolf races right at us and in one of the most elegant moves I’ve ever seen, Penny leaps and shifts, her wolf ripping out the throat of the attacking wolf. When she lands, her body spins and she shifts back into her human form, crouching down on all fours before looking up at me.

“GO!” she yells, startling me out of my shocked amazement.

I continue running to the safe room, helping some of the younger pups who are struggling to keep up. Penny stays behind me, her eyes going in every direction.

When we get to the safe room, there’s a bottleneck as the mothers send their pups down first. I see Penny leap again and turn just in time to see her take on another wolf, snapping and ripping its flesh.

“JOCELYN!” Sandy yells and I turn, seeing her holding out her hand to me.

I run forward and make my way inside the safe room as Sandy shuts and locks the door behind me.

"Is everyone here?" I ask.

"Yes, we're all accounted for," one of the other mothers says, holding her pups to her and rocking them. The scent of fear is palpable in the room, and I feel nausea roiling in my stomach again.

"Miss Jocelyn, will you come sit with me?" Samantha asks, patting the floor beside her.

I smile, knowing she's doing this more for me than for herself. But I go sit, wrapping my arm around her, as Sandy goes around and checks on everyone.

The sounds of fighting are muted inside the safe room, but we can still tell when they get close. I'm not sure how long it is before everything goes quiet.

We sit around, waiting to get the all-clear.

"It takes them longer to get to us out here," Sandy says to me quietly and I nod.

When the knock finally comes, Sandy is the one who opens the door. Standing at the door is a very b**dy Beta Lucas. Beside him and just as bl**dy are Penny and Jaime.

realize that Beta Lucas has a phone to his ear.

"Yes, Alpha, the pack is secure." He looks over at me. "Jocelyn is safe." Then he growls menacingly. "Zahn is unconscious in our cells."

The One He Claimed Chapter 175

Chapter 175: Sitting It Out

Hunter

I struggled the entire first day of the competition, my mind back on the pack, worried about the battle to come. It's not that I don't think that the pack is strong enough to handle an attack, but I'm their leader and I left them to fight without me. It goes against everything in me.

I'd let our friends know what was happening when I arrived, let them know that I may have to leave the competition early. So, they knew about and understood my distraction as the competition began.

There are five of us refereeing the competition and the first round of 200 individuals means we each have to ref forty fights. We had our mates draw the names and put up a

board with who was fighting whom and the referee assigned so that we could make sure that we never needed to be in two fights at once and everyone knew the order of their fight. So, if the fight I was refereeing finished quickly, then the next two could step in, and the competition would continue smoothly.

We set up our five areas and made sure our groups knew where to go. After that, it was up to our mates to help answer questions because the five of us went nearly non-stop for the next six hours. Sophie brought me water and updated me periodically that she hadn't heard anything from Lucas. No news is good news, Thope.

I had hoped to be down to 25 by the end of day one, but I hadn't taken into consideration how hard these individuals would be fighting. This is a huge opportunity, and they all realize that they are fighting to have their own pack. Thankfully, our mates were keeping track, so after a short break for dinner where I called Lucas and found out that nothing was happening in the pack, I went back in, this time for 20 fights.

Our mates made sure to keep it fair by putting winners of the early fights in the early second rounds. I was proud to see that many of my warriors had made it through to the second round and those that didn't asked if they could return home to help guard that pack. I was thankful to them. They didn't seem upset that they needed to leave, but rather, they seemed proud that they had competed and wanted to get back to work. And while I was happy that so many of my warriors made it through to the second round, I was thankful to have more warriors back home, protecting the pack.

The second round was even more grueling than the first round. This time, I had to end two fights where the person losing refused to give up. I knew Kayce had to end a fight in the first round and so did Ezra, but these were the first two that I'd had to stop. The loser wasn't happy, mouthing off about favoritism and getting in my face until Shaw pushed forward, putting him in his place, and forcing his submission. For both of the individuals that didn't want to give up, I made a note of who their Alpha was to have them follow up with them later.

It's late at night before the final match is over, mine going the longest because of the two fights that I had to end. By then, all of us were pretty tired and no one wanted to waste their down time by partying since the battles would continue tomorrow.

My warriors that didn't win in the second round, asked if they could return home, also wanting to be there if the pack is attacked. I told them to go together, in case they came across Zahn's pack on the way. I don't want to lose pack members because they accidentally crossed paths with the attacking pack.

"Hunter, come to bed," Sophie says, holding out her hand to me, I turn and look at her as I stop my pacing.

"Lucas will call if they are attacked. Or Kinsley will and then they'll call when it's done."

I go to her, setting the phone on the nightstand, kicking off my shoes and crawling into bed behind her, tugging her against me and burying my face in her hair.

"I feel like a terrible Alpha. I feel like Joshua or Elias, someone who leaves their pack to slaughter while I go hide," I tell her honestly.

She turns, uncomfortably shifting to try and face me. I push back, making room for our son between us.

"Now you listen to me, Hunter Reynolds. You are nothing like those worthless Alphas. You didn't leave your pack to be slaughtered. You left them prepared for a battle that we were able to plan for. You've strengthened them to the point that they know they can defend themselves without you there. That doesn't mean they don't need and want you as their leader. It's only because of you that they are this strong. Be proud of our pack and that they feel confident to protect themselves without you there," my mate says sternly.

I smile, looking at her, her eyes glimmering in the dark with the passion of her words.

"Have I told you how much I love you today?" I ask her.

She huffs out her breath. Then gives me a very seductive look. "Not nearly enough."

I'm just about to lean down and start something with my mate that will distract me for at least an hour when the phone rings.

I turn, snatching it off the nightstand, checking the caller ID before answering.

"Kinsley?" I answer, hearing controlled chaos in the background.

"They're here, Alpha."

I jump to my feet. "Do you need me?"

"We're good. We've almost got everyone in the safe rooms and the warriors are ready. We'll tear Zahn's pack members to shreds," she snarls.

"I want a call as soon as it's done, Kinsley."

"Yes, Alpha," she says. When she hangs up, the sound of commotion does too, leaving me in a very quiet room.

"Come hold me, Hunter. We'll wait together," my mate says.

I turn and look at her over my shoulder, struggling with the feeling of not being a good Alpha again.

“Hunter,” she says more insistently, tapping the bed beside her.

I lean back against the headrest, pulling my mate against my body as I feel her sending soothing waves of love to me.

“I’ve never felt so helpless, Sophie,” I say. She’s the only person in the world I can be this honest with, this vulnerable with.

“We wouldn’t be pushing Lucas to become an Alpha if we didn’t think he had it in him to lead a pack, Hunter. Let’s consider this a training opportunity for him. It’s a chance for him to see if he really wants this level of responsibility in his life, Hunter. You trust him, I trust him, and we both trust our pack. When we return tomorrow, we can let them feel how proud we are of them that they were able to protect each other without either of us there. Like I said before, they’re only this strong because you’ve made them this strong.”

“We’ve made them this strong, Sophie. The pack wasn’t this strong before you arrived.”

“Maybe they just needed some incentive,” my mate says, chuckling.

“I really do love.

Thank you for helping me to find some level of peace with this.”

“Isn’t that what a good Luna does, my mate?”

“Yes, and so much more.”

It’s less time than I thought it would take before my phone rings again. I look at the me, two am, before I look at the caller ID.

“Lucas?”

“Alpha, the pack is secure,” he says, and I can hear the fury of battle still in his voice.

“Jocelyn?” I ask, knowing that would have been Zahn’s primary target.

“Jocelyn is safe.”

“Zahn?”

He snarls. “Zahn is unconscious in our cells.”

I smile. “Who knocked him out?”

I can almost feel Lucas relaxing through the phone. "I'm not sure yet, but I think Brutus and William will say it was a tie."

"Injuries?" I ask.

"We're still getting the list, but so far, only minor injuries."

"Zahn's pack?"

"Ripped to shreds," he growls.

"Get everyone settled and get some sleep. We can burn the bodies tomorrow when I get home."

"Yes, Alpha."

"And Lucas?" I say before he hangs up. "Well done."

"Thank you, Alpha. It was a pack effort. You should be proud."

"I am," I say, hanging up and finally feeling like I can take a deep breath.

"Hunter?" Sophie asks, when I just sit for a moment.

I look down at her and smile. "I think our Betas have become quite blood-thirsty."

She laughs and I finally feel my mind settle. I strip off my clothes and lay down, curling around my mate who is sound asleep in minutes. I kiss her head once more, loving this woman so much for everything that she is, before I follow her into sleep.

The One He Claimed Chapter 176

Chapter 176: New Alpha

Sophie

We didn't get much sleep last night, but I can feel that Hunter is much calmer today, knowing that the battle is over and won. Over breakfast, he lets the other Alphas know that it's done.

"What are your thoughts on having a trial for this one?" Ezra asks.

"Why would there be a trial?" I ask him. Margot is watching him intently.

He looks at Margot. "Here me out on this one. In your case, you ran. In Zahn's case, he brought his mate to you, Hunter, and I'm sure he's saying you're keeping him from his mate," Ezra says.

"That is true. Do you think I'm wrong for what I've done?" Hunter asks him.

"No, I don't. But I think we can set a precedent right now to have true trials when one Alpha disagrees with another. If the roles were reversed, if he had Sophie and you attacked his pack..." Ezra begins but stops as Hunter snarls. The room goes quiet as I reach over to take Hunter's hand.

"I'm perfectly safe, my love."

"And you'll stay that way," he growls, tugging me to his side and wrapping a protective arm around me.

"I think Alpha Ezra has a point. Again, not that I in any way think that you are wrong Alpha Hunter, but I do believe we have an opportunity here. We will have a new Alpha, and we've talked about bringing the Lunas in to be part of Committee, although, we need to change the name, since it's not solely going to be a Committee of Alphas any longer," Nikki says.

"What are you thinking, baby?" Robin asks his mate.

"What if we have our new Alpha preside over the trial. It would be a good opportunity for him or her to get involved and to see what the rest of their tenure as Alpha will be like. But Zahn can't say that there is any bias, as the new Alpha hasn't been involved with any of this. Even if it is one of our Betas who wins the pack, they weren't at the Committee meeting where Hunter and Sophie were on trial, they weren't in the pack when Owen or Joshua attacked. It also gives us, the Lunas, an easy start to being in these trials, understanding how they run, when and how to ask questions, that sort of thing."

"So, it's not really a trial?" Dutton asks.

"Well, it is, but I think we already know what the verdict of this one will be. Although, having a new Alpha on board may change the way we look at things. And, it will be Amelia's first trial too, if she can attend. It would be good for her as well, I think," Nikki adds.

Robin looks at the group, smiling proudly. He's trying to hide it, but he can't. "Unless you have a really good argument, Hunter, you won't win this one. My girl doesn't like to lose, at anything," he says.

"He's an Alpha, baby. He doesn't like to lose either," Nikki says a bit too sweetly, making Robin smile even wider. Those two...

Hunter looks at me. "What do you think?"

I look at the group. Everyone watches, waiting to hear my thoughts. "I think Nikki's got a point, as does Alpha Ezra. It sets a precedent, and I can see the differences between this and what we've done in the past with the she-wolves on the run and even with Margot. I like the idea of making it official, especially, since I'm sure you plan to kill Zahn."

"He attacked our pack. Yes, I intend to kill him," Hunter growls.

"Then, let's have a trial. Although would suggest finding at new place to hold these events. The old council chambers feel tainted," I say.

"I agree," says Kayce. "But there's no reason why we can't hold these events in one of our packs, is there? Even if that's not permanent, we could do it until we build a new center for trials, not that we have them very often. But it would be nice to have a central location to meet for our Alpha meetings."

"Okay then, let's get through today and the second order of business for our new Alpha will be to preside over this trial," Ezra says.

"What's the first order of business?" Margot asks him.

"Getting his pack settled, of course," he says, his gaze so intense, that she looks away, blushing.

"Well, then, let's get this day started," Robin says, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

"How many do you have left in the competition?" Hunter asks Robin and the Alphas all begin talking about how many pack members they have left. It seems pretty even.

"Thank you for supporting me," Nikki says, linking her arm through mine.

"It's the right decision. I have no intention of letting Zahn off, but I think the idea behind it and the way you presented it, are very good. Plus, I'm perfectly fine letting Zahn rot in our cells until his trial date is set."

"How do you think Jocelyn will take it?" Margot asks.

"I'm not sure. She's getting stronger and her wolf is as well. I think, with us there to support her, she'll be okay. Dr. Caspian will be doing another surgery on her tomorrow or the next day because her right side is already healed."

"That's fantastic news!" Allison says.

"And it's a good sign that her wolf is strengthening," Margot says.

"What if we had the trial here?" Nikki asks, looking around. "It's a fairly neutral place and our new Alpha could host all of us for the first time. If he's mated, it would be a good opportunity for us to spend time with his new Luna, get to know her, and help her with anything she needs," Nikki suggests.

I chuckle at my friend. "You're working hard to be a trendsetter, aren't you?"

"You're damn right I am," she says as we get to the table where we've already put together today's pairings. "As it is, I'm having a boy, so I can't even be the first one to have a daughter who takes her place as Alpha."

I hear Robin chuckling and look over to see him smiling at his mate.

"He's obviously very proud," Nikki huffs, but I see her smile too.

"You wouldn't have been the first anyway, Nikki. My daughter will be older than your son, so even if you had a daughter, mine would have taken her place first," Allison says, beaming at her mate.

"And let's not forget that my sister is already an Alpha," I say, shaking my head at them as we split up, making sure everyone knows where and when they will fight and the day begins again.

Today, the battles are harder, but our jobs are easier. There are fewer pack members competing after each battle and our biggest issue was how to handle an odd number of contestants. We decided to offer points to the person who agreed to fight twice. They couldn't be eliminated in the same round if they fought twice, but if they won their second fight, they would be given extra points so that if they made it to the final round and the fight was determined to be a tie, they would automatically win because they'd fought one additional time and won.

By lunch time, we were down to our final six. Three hours later, we were down to our final three. In this event, the final three, who were no surprise to anyone, drew numbers. Since Lucas and Dutton's Beta, Miles, both decided to skip this competition and go for Alaric's old pack, the final three consisted of Ezra's, Robin's, and Kayce's Betas.

"I'm so torn," Nikki says, coming up beside me. "I want our Beta to win, but I also want Jake to win so Letti can become a Luna."

"These are good problems to have," I tell her.

"They really are," she says.

It's later than any of us expected when the final competition ends. After a three-hour battle to the final two, we had to give Beta Jake a break before battling Robin's Beta. Robin had to come over and wrap his arms around Nikki to keep her calm. I noticed his

hand going to her belly several times over the weekend and realized that her bump finally came out.

In the end, it was Beta Jake, now Alpha Jake who won the pack, Letti at his side. She made it to the final twelve. We made sure to never put her against Jake in the competition, knowing it wouldn't be a fair fight. But together, they will make a powerful Alpha and Luna of their pack.

We throw a party, well into the night, celebrating the new Alpha and Luna. Robin and Hunter spend time talking to the two of them about coming to our packs to meet with the previous pack members who want to rejoin the pack. Some of them are here, having competed to become Alpha of their previous pack and Jake and Letti spend a lot of time talking to them.

The festivities are still going on when Hunter leads me to our room. We're both exhausted after two long days and a long night of worry last night, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't take time to show me, as he always does, how much he loves me before we fall into a deep, deep sleep.

The One He Claimed Chapter 177

Chapter 177: New Alliances

Hunter

Before we leave for home, Robin, Kayce, Dutton, Ezra, and I all meet with Jake and Letti.

"I know you've got a lot going on, Alpha Jake," Ezra says to his former Beta, who frowns.

"Are we going to be this formal all the time?" he asks Ezra who smiles at him.

"That's up to you. Generally, when an Alpha enters into an alliance with another Alpha, their conversation becomes more casual."

Jake looks at Letti, then at all of us. "Well, most of you helped Letti when she was on the run, or took her in and gave her a place to live, or are dear friends of hers," he says looking from me, to Allison and Kayce, to Nikki And I know that I'm forever indebted to my former Alpha for giving me this opportunity, so, is it unheard of for an Alpha to create an alliance with many other Alphas?" he asks.

I smile, letting Ezra take the lead. "No, it's not and in this case, it's preferred. I, myself, have been neglectful in creating alliances with Alphas Robin, Kayce, and Dutton. Hunter and I have been in an alliance since I was mated to his sister," he says and I see the tightening around his mouth, the regret that he still holds for how things went with

Diana. I notice that Margot reaches out to put a hand on his arm. She noticed the stress as well.

"You may also want to consider creating an alliance with Alpha Amelia. She's not here because she's so close to her due date, but her pack borders mine and Hunter and I have already formed an alliance with her. I expect that whoever wins Alaric's old pack will do the same," Dutton says.

"When can I start setting up alliances?" Jake asks.

"I just so happened to bring an alliance agreement with me, in the event that you won this pack, Jake," Ezra tells him. "But, since you need to return to get your things anyway, we can sign it when you come back."

"We can sign it before you leave," Jake says excitedly, making Letti laugh at her mate.

"What about the rest of you?" Letti asks.

"Well, we talked about you coming to mine and Hunter's packs to talk to the pack members who used to live here. I'm happy to sign one then," Robin says.

"Same, but there is another matter we need to discuss with you, and we could all get caught up on our alliances at that time as well," I say, looking at Ezra. Jake has the closest relationship with him, and since he's Jake's mentor, he'll be the one spending the most time explaining everything to him.

Ezra nods. "We need to have a trial. While we were here, Alpha Zahn attacked Alpha Hunter's pack. His warriors were killed, but Alpha Zahn remains alive. There is a reason for that, but because of the circumstances, and because we are changing the laws of our alliance, we'd like for you to preside over the trial and we'd like you to host it here," Ezra tells him.

Both Jake and Letti look shocked.

"What Ezra has failed to mention is that we will provide you with everything you need to know prior to the trial. Everyone

understands that this is your first trial and that you are a new Alpha, but you were chosen for this task for that reason, because you are unbiased. The rest of us have knowledge of, or experience with this situation," Margot says.

"Thank you, Margot," Ezra says, eyeing her. I wonder if she realizes that she just acted like his Luna.

"And we want to come help you get set up too, Letti. I mean, if you want our help. Since Lunas will now be part of the Committee, many of us will be new to this process. In

truth, we think this is a good starting point for all of us. It's a pretty clear case. But, the other side of that, Letti, is that it's not always easy to get your bearings as a Luna. If we're here, we can support you and help you find your way, especially since both of you will be new to all of your pack members: That transition might be difficult," Nikki says.

"I would love that," Letti breathes, obviously relieved.

"Good. Why don't the two of you get settled, I know Letti has to get her things from my pack as well. Then you can visit Robin and Hunter to talk to the pack members currently residing with them, and then we can set a date for the trial," Kayce suggests.

"Sounds good to me," Jake says, looking completely overwhelmed.

"You're going to be fine, Jake. I'm sure Alpha Ezra is a great mentor, and he wouldn't be so calm if he didn't have complete faith in you. All of us are here for you, for both of you, if you need anything. That's part of what the alliance is for, but it's also what friends are for," Sophie says to them, and I watch them both relax a bit.

Now it's my turn to smile at my mate. She has such a great way of calming those around her.

"Okay, good. That's good. I don't feel quite so terrified now," Jake says.

Ezra chuckles. "I won't let you fail, my friend. But it's not in you to fail. You're going to be a great Alpha, a great leader."

We make plans for Jake and Letti to come visit our pack in a couple of weeks and then we begin to say goodbye to our friends.

"When are we heading to Alaric's pack to let the contenders see what the pack looks like?" Allison asks.

"Alpha Amelia has asked if we can wait to do that until she delivers her pup. I understand she's pretty close, so perhaps Alpha Jake and Luna Letti can stop at Hunter's pack and then continue on to Alaric's," Dutton says.

I look at Sophie to see how she feels about that. "That would be a good excuse for me to meet my niece," she says excitedly.

"Yes, it would and will probably be close to the last time that you leave the pack until you have our pup. You're already getting pretty big, Soph."

"I can help with the competition again. Plus, Amelia will need someone to hold Athena while she refs the competitions," she says.

“Ohh, that’s right! We’ll have two more Alphas to referee the matches. Things should go faster next time,” Kayce says.

“Well, when word gets around, we may have more competing too,” Robin adds.

“Honestly, I think it’s good for the packs to get to know each. other and have these friendly competitions. Maybe once we have the community area built, we can add in quarterly or annual competitions to keep the packs motivated to train hard, to maintain cohesiveness between our packs, and to have bragging rights,” I say, already loving the idea of having regular competitions.”

“What community area?” Letti asks.

“Oh, we’ll add you to the group, Letti. The Lunas are in charge of putting the ideas together for a community area. If we’d had more time, we’d have done it while we were here, but it was busier than I expected,” Nikki says. —

“Busier than any of us expected. I’ll set up a call. I’d love to get started on the community area. I can send you what we’ve talked about already, Letti, but we’re looking at using the mountain that is in the center of all of our packs, well, except for Ezra’s, as the community area for our families to have a place to go and our wolves have a safe place to run.”

“The mountain where you kept food for the she-wolves on the run? I LOVE that idea,” Letti says excitedly.

“Trust me, now that you’ll be spending more time with Sophie, you’ll never have a dull moment in your life again,” Nikki says, teasing my mate.

“As if you’d ever allow your life to become dull, Nikki. I’m pretty sure your mate hasn’t had a dull moment since he met you,” Sophie teases her back.

“Not one, and I wouldn’t change it for a thing,” Robin says, pulling his mate to him and kissing her scowl away.

We finally say goodbye and Nikki helps Sophie onto my back again before needing to help Allison this time as well. Then we take off running towards home. I’m excited to return to our pack, ready to make sure that everyone is really okay, and ready to face Zahn and tell him he’s going to trial.

When Shaw howls our return, Hedda joins in the howl, and the pack welcomes us home. Pack members rush up to us in wolf form and I can feel their excitement to proudly tell us everything that they did to protect the pack while we were gone.

Sophie reaches out to touch the wolves as they corral around me while we walk to the packhouse, trying to help calm the excitement that is nearly overwhelming. Almost the

entire pack is yipping and howling with the thrill of defeating Zahn's pack. When we get to the packhouse, Shaw stops, growling to let everyone know they need to step back so Sophie can get off of his back.

The group quiets a bit, as Sophie slides off Shaw's back and h pull the shift, while most of the pack members shifting around me.

"Welcome home, Alpha, Welcome home, Luna," Lucas says from the back of the packhouse.

The pack echoes his welcome and then they all start telling me about the attack, their part in it, and how everyone worked together to defeat Zahn's warriors. I'm feeling protective of Sophie with so many pack members crowding us and wanting our attention, but she pushes her calm into me and into the pack, letting her pride and love flow through the pack bond.

I follow her lead, letting my pride flow through with hers, sending waves of gratitude to my pack so they know how much I appreciate their willingness to fight even without me here. It's probably close to an hour before we're finally able to get inside the packhouse doors.

"Soph, why don't you check in with Kinsley and Jocelyn. I'm going to go see Zahn," I tell her.

"I'll talk to her about the trial. She needs to be prepared," Sophie says.

"Agreed," I say, kissing her before she walks off.

O, there will be a trial?" Lucas asks.

I nod. "Come with me, we'll walk and talk." On our way to the cells, I fill him in on everything that happened, Jake and Letti winning the pack, their upcoming visit, and Zahn's trial.

"He's going to be so pi**sed when he sees she-wolves on his jury," Lucas says, an evil grin on his face.

"Hopefully everyone will agree that he deserves to die," I say as we walk in. The moment I open the doors, I can hear Zahn yelling.

"LET ME OUT OF HERE!"

"Alpha Zahn," I say, walking up. My warriors did not hold back if the residual bruises on his face and neck are any indication.

"You have no right to keep me in here," he snarls.

"I have every right. You attacked my pack, Zahn. Your warriors are dead, ready to be buried, and you will remain here until we can schedule a trial of your peers."

"My peers," he sneers. "You are no peer of mine."

"Wow, I can understand why two of your mates chose death over living with you," Lucas taunts.

Zahn snarls, rushing to the cell bars, which is dumb since they are made of silver. His skin sizzles and he hisses as he pulls away.

"There's a new Alpha, Alpha Jake. He will be presiding over your trial. That way there is no possibility of bias."

"Who the f**k is Alpha Jake?" he asks.

"He's the Alpha that just took over Owen's old pack," I say, smiling smugly as Zahn realizes what I was doing over the weekend. "For now, this is your home. I'll make sure you get food, but that's about it."

I turn, walking out the door, Lucas right behind me as Zahn screams his anger at the top of his lungs.

The One He Claimed Chapter 178

Chapter 178: Telling Jocelyn

Sophie

When Hunter and I return, the pack is so excited to see us. I know that Hunter is worried about me, but the pack would never hurt me, not even accidentally. I can feel how protective they are of me and of our pup. Hunter would be able to as well if it weren't for his concern for me and little Hunt.

So, I helped to calm him while letting the pack know how proud I am of them. I love how responsive they are to me, and I loved that Hunter followed my lead and sent waves of pride to the pack as well. They did a fantastic job of protecting our pack. No one died and anyone who was injured is already healed. I do need to get away from the packhouse though. The scent of the dead is making me feel nauseous.

So, I get Kinsley, and we head to the Survivor Center to check on Jocelyn. On the way, I let her know about what happened.

"I'm happy for Jake and Letti, but Sophie, why do we need a trial? Do the other Alphas think that Hunter is wrong?"

"No, they don't, but Nikki had a good point. It's a good opportunity for us as the Lunas and for Jake, as a new Alpha, to learn how to participate in a trial. If Lucas wins a pack, Kinsley, the two of you will become part of that trial process, too. Wouldn't you rather start with a trial that you already feel confident you know how it's going to go versus something that's a really difficult decision?" I ask her.

"I guess. I just...Jocelyn's been through enough. She shouldn't have to suffer any more or spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder and worrying about Zahn coming after her again," she says.

"I agree. But the trial is the right way to go," I say and explain to her the thought process of why Jocelyn and Zahn's case is different from the others who were on the run.

"I guess," she says, still not convinced.

When we arrive, I see that most of the survivors are out working in the garden. It looks like some of the new plants were trampled in the attack.

"You'd think those wolves were raised in a barn," one of the survivors gripes as she looks over a small plant that doesn't look like it's going to make it. "All these carefully planted seedlings and they just trampled over them. Oh, hello Luna. Welcome home," she says when she notices me.

"Hello. It's good to be home. How is everyone after the attack," I ask, looking around at everyone, noticing that Jocelyn is absent.

"We're good, Luna. We were all in the safe room. No one was injured. The pack warriors did an amazing job of keeping us safe," another survivor says.

"And our Betas were excellent at running the pack while you were gone," another says, smiling at Kinsley.

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. Not that I'm surprised. Lucas and Kinsley are born leaders," I say, smiling at my Beta.

"Thank you," Kinsley says humbly "Are you looking for Jocelyn?" the first woman asks me.

"Yes, do you where I can find her?"

"She's at Sandy's house. Dr. Caspian and Brooklyn arrived not too long ago and he wanted to look her over before surgery tomorrow.

"Thank you, I'll go see them."

Kinsley and I take a few moments to hug the pups, telling them how brave they were before we go to Sandy's house.

When we arrive, we knock, and Sandy opens the door for us.

"Luna, Beta, please come in. We have a full house today," she says, and I can hear Dr. Caspian talking to Jocelyn.

"Is that Sophie?" Jocelyn calls.

"It is I say, following the sound of her voice into the kitchen where she, Brooklyn, and Dr. Caspian are talking.

"Take my seat, Luna," Sandy says to me.

"Oh, I couldn't..."

"I'll get another one."

"And you take mine, Beta," Dr. Caspian says, standing.

"Thank you, I'd argue, but my back seems to ache all the time as this little one gets bigger."

Brooklyn smiles up at Dr. Caspian in a way I recognize. I lift my nose in the air and sniff.

'Hedda?'

'Yep, our doctor and nurse are going to have a pup of their own,' she confirms.

"Congratulations," I say, making Brooklyn look back at me.

"You and your sister have a great sense of smell," Brooklyn. "She smelled our pup the same day we found out we were pregnant."

"Alpha noses," I say. I'm really happy for them. Brooklyn deserved to find happiness and Dr. Caspian looks like he's about to burst from happiness and pride in his mate.

"I was just explaining to Jocelyn that I can't be in the operating room this time. The scent of blood..." she cuts off as she covers her mouth quickly and gags.

"I understand. When we got back, I could bare stand being in the packhouse, the scent of blood is so strong. I don't recommend that you go over there until the bodies are dealt with."

She nods and I see Kinsley's eyes go unfocused.

"It doesn't bother you, Kinsley?" I ask her.

"The scent of blood, no. Eggs...keep them away from my nose or my eyes. Just the sight of them has me rushing for the nearest bathroom."

Sandy chuckles as she brings in two more chairs. "I remember those days. Don't miss them at all."

When everyone is seated, I turn to Jocelyn. "I need to talk to you, but first, if you're willing, do you want to update me and Kinsley on next steps for your surgery?"

She nods and looks at Dr. Caspian before turning back to me. "Dr. Caspian says that my left side looks really good. I showed him how I can walk, but with a hobble because now my left side is longer than my right. He's going to fix that and hopefully, in another week or so, I'll be ready to start on my left arm and torso," she says.

"That's great. I know you were interested in coming to the next pack to see how the competition is run. We've decided to wait until after Amelia has her pup, so your legs should be completely healed by then. Depending on how quickly we schedule it after that, you may even be healing from your left arm surgery too," I tell her.

"That would be great, and I would love to do that, but...what's going on with Zahn?"

I look around. "Are you comfortable with me discussing it with everyone in this room?" I ask.

"We can leave," Brooklyn says.

Jocelyn smiles at her. "I'm pretty sure everyone in this room already knows everything that I've been through. I don't have a lot secrets when you've seen the decimation of my body. I don't mind if you stay," she tells them.

"I'd like to stay. As your doctor, I'd like to know how your healing might be impacted and if Alpha Zahn is going to have any ability to contact you," Dr. Caspian says.

I explain to Jocelyn about the trial, the reasons behind it, and that it would be to her benefit to attend and speak against Alpha Zahn.

"I'd have to speak?" she asks, the scent of her fear tainting the air.

"We'd be there, all of the Lunas. But you know Zahn is going to lie about what Hunter has done. This is a trial of peers, so it will be the Alphas and Lunas making the decision. Hunter and I won't be on the board because he'll obviously be part of the trial, and therefore, so will I."

"Will you be able to stand with me?" she asks.

"I don't actually know. It's the first time Lunas have been involved with this process. But I'll talk to the other Lunas. I think it makes sense and sets a good precedent for the future if the Luna who is either part of the trial or the Luna of the person on while trial has the option to stand with and support the person they speak."

"It would be easier for me if you were there with me, Sophie," she says.

"Then I'll make it happen," I say confidently. I'm sure Nikki will agree, and I'd assume Allison and the twins will too. Margot and Letti are the ones I'm not sure about.

"What about Alpha Zahn? What happens with him until the trial?" Dr. Caspian asks.

"He will remain in the cells until the trial date," I say, and Jocelyn lets out a breath.

"So, I don't have to worry about seeing him anymore?"

"Nope, not until the trial."

When we finish, I hug Jocelyn and let her know that I'll be back in the morning to get her, just like the last time.

"Thanks, Sophie," she whispers to me.

"Like I've always said, Jocelyn. I just want you to be happy and healthy."

"I'm getting there, with the help of you and your pack, I'm truly getting there."

The One He Claimed Chapter 179

Chapter 179: Emotional

Hunter

Lucas told me that Sophie was getting nauseous with the smell of the dead bodies. I had planned to bury them, but there are so many, possibly his entire pack of warriors, that I decide to just burn them. It was faster and thankfully didn't upset my mate's stomach any more than before.

Since it seems like Zahn's entire group of warriors came to attack my pack, I'm worried about the remaining pack members in his pack. Zahn's pack is farther away from all of our packs, making it open for attack by other Alphas. And, once again, Ezra is closest to Zahn's pack. So, the next day, while Sophie takes Jocelyn in for her next surgery, I call Ezra.

"Hunter, what problems are you causing now?" he says by way of greeting, making me chuckle.

"I don't cause problems, Ezra. I eliminate them. But I do have a favor for you and possibly for Margot as well."

"Hold on, let me put you on speakerphone," he says. Interesting. Margot's in his office already. I hope that means things

I continue to get better for them.

"Alpha Hunter, what can we help you do to eliminate a problem," Margot says, obviously having heard the conversation.

"I'm concerned about Zahn's pack," I say.

There's a beat of silence. "Come again?" Ezra asks.

"I think he sent all of his warriors here and they are now all dead. If that's the case, his pack is full of potentially dying, or at best, grieving widows and pups. With no warriors and no Alpha, his pack is at risk," I say.

"Shit!" Ezra says. "You want us to go see who's left and for me to bring them into my pack, is that about right?" he asks.

He already knows what's needed. I'm pretty sure he's just giving himself time to think about how he's going to do this.

"Those people need help, Ezra," Margot says.

"I know, Margot, but where are we going to put them? How many are we talking about, Hunter?"

"I'd say at least one hundred warriors attacked my pack."

I hear a low whistle. "How are your warriors? You said they were okay, but are they really?" Margot asks me.

"They are. Minimal injuries, no deaths."

It's quiet a moment and I imagine that the two of them are having an unspoken conversation on the other end of the line.

"What about Jake and Letti's pack, Ezra? They don't have to stay here. And Alaric's pack will be settled in another month. This could be short-term. Or maybe, if Alpha Hunter is right, we put Zahn's pack up third for competition and then these individuals will have the ability to return home. We can find room for them temporarily," Margot says.

“We?” he asks her, and I suddenly feel like I’m eavesdropping on a personal conversation.

“You can get back to me,” I say hurriedly.

Nothing. It’s quiet and I know they’re having another unspoken conversation between them. Since Margot hasn’t marked Ezra, it’s not in the mind link.

“We’ll make a plan and get over there as soon as possible,” Ezra says.

“Thank you, let me know if you anything,” I say.

“You owe me,” I hear Ezra say as start to hang up.

“What do you want?” Margot purrs as I quickly set down the receiver. Yep, that relationship is moving along. Good for them.

I reach out, wanting to feel connected to my mate and mentally bump up against her worry. I get up, going to find her, knowing that as she gets closer to her delivery, stress is not good for her or my son. I find her in the kitchen, scrubbing dishes and stressing out the omegas.

“Baby, what are you doing?” I ask her, coming up behind her and putting my hands on her stomach. Our pup has gotten so big that now it’s less hide and seek and more me rubbing my son’s head, butt, foot, or whatever is pushing against my mate’s stomach.

“I need a distraction. I know Jocelyn will be in surgery all day and while I’m sure it will be fine, I’m still worried.”

I kiss the top of her head, pulling her hands out of the soapy water.

“I have a better idea. Why don’t we let the omegas do their work, Soph. You’re making them worry that they aren’t doing a good job,” I tell her and see her look over at them.

“Oh no, you’re doing a great job. I’m very proud of all of you, I just...”

I feel her on the verge of tears. Her emotions are all over the place.

“Come on,” I say, “let’s go talk about my idea.”

I lead her from the kitchen and when we get to the stairwell, I scoop her into my arms.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Why am I so emotional? I was fine last time she went in for surgery,” she says, laying her head on my shoulder and breathing in my scent.

"You're pregnant, baby. I think aversion to some scents, being emotional, and being more possessive are all part of the deal."

She nods against my neck. "What's your idea?" she asks.

I set her down and open the door to the room beside ours. It's empty.

"We need a nursery, Soph. I thought maybe you could put some of that nervous and stressed-out energy into a nursery for our son."

"Oh, Hunter! That's a GREAT idea!" she says, moving to throw her arms around my neck but only making it to my shoulders because of her belly in the way.

"I can't even hug you properly," she says, and I smell salty tears.

"Baby, you're tired, you're worried about your friend, and you can hug me, it's just a bit different," I say, gently turning her around and wrapping my arms around her.

"Why don't you think about the furniture you want in here, let me know and I'll order it. Then you decide on colors and decorations, and we'll have the pack help paint and set up the furniture when it arrives. How does that sound?" I ask, rocking her from side to side as I feel her slowly starting to relax.

When she doesn't answer, I put my chin on her shoulder. "Sophie?"

I smell her tears again. "Soph?"

"You're so good to me, Hunter," she says, turning around in my arms. "Even when I'm acting...like this. You're so good to me."

"Well, I don't know about that, but I know that YOU are good FOR me. I know I'm a better man because of you and if our little man is making your hormones get all whacked out, then I can handle it for another month. I love you, Soph. So put all that nervous energy into our son's bedroom. Okay?"

She nods. "Okay."

"Good, I'll be back to check on you later. Let me get you a chair so you can sit while you figure out what you want in here."

I check on Sophie throughout the day and then I go with her to the pack hospital to hear that Jocelyn has made it through her second surgery well. Since we don't have to worry about Zahn, Sophie and I sit with Jocelyn until she wakes up, staying while Dr. Caspian tells her how the surgery went and then I bring my little mate back to our room and tuck her against me trying to help her sleep.

Over the next couple of weeks, Sophie works on the nursery, checking on Jocelyn daily. Jocelyn continues healing quickly which helps Sophie relax, and when we get the announcement that Amelia had her baby girl, Jocelyn is ready for her next surgery.

I get with the other Alphas, and we schedule our visit to Alaric's pack in preparation for the next competition. Sophie and I plan to go early to meet Athena and spend some time with Amelia, but before that, Jake and Letti are coming by to meet with Owen's previous pack members.

As always, my life is never dull but I'm getting more and more excited to meet my son. Less than one month until Sophie's due date.

The One He Claimed Chapter 180

Chapter 180: Jake and Letti

Sophie

My mate is so special. He somehow knew I needed an outlet for my emotional stress and creating a nursery was exactly what I needed. I could be in my son's room alone, if I needed space from everyone, or I could harass our warriors by having them move and remove the furniture just the way I wanted it. Thankfully, the pack loves me, and they tolerated my craziness with good humor.

After Jocelyn came out of her surgery, I felt a little bit better. find that some days I'm more in control of my emotions than others. I asked Dr. Felicity about it, and she said the same thing that Hunter did. It's normal that my hormones will be all over the place while I'm pregnant. Add to that, I'm getting less and less sleep each night, and then the general weight of being a Luna, and sometimes, it's just more than my body can handle. She assured me that once Huntington is born, that I'd start feeling back to normal.

Penny's birthday had been a success. No one was surprised when she and Jaime came downstairs for breakfast both looking exhausted but happy and both wearing fresh mate marks. The pack ended up celebrating her birthday most of the day and even Jocelyn and the survivors came to for the evening party. I could see Jocelyn constantly looking around, as if expecting Zahn to jump out at any moment. But, between me and Sandy, she was able to relax. Hunter, Lucas, Jaime, and Penny all took the pack, including the older pups from the survivor center on a pack run, howling and playing together as those of us left behind sat around talking and waiting for them to return. It was a beautiful night and then just a few days later, I received the call from Amelia that my niece had been born.

Today, Alpha Jake and Luna Letti are arriving to talk to the pack members that came from Owen's pack. Hunter has talked to Ezra and to Robin, since Jake and Letti already stayed and talked to the group there. Both have been impressed with how Jake is

handling the pack members and based on what Robin told Hunter, most of Owen's pack members will be returning to their old pack.

I'm pretty sure Hunter has mixed feelings about the pack members leaving. He feels like everyone should want to stay here because our pack is special, but I feel like every pack should be special in its own way. That will give people options for good packs to live in, especially when they find their mates. So, I'm okay with people not staying in our pack, as long as they make their own packs a positive environment for everyone.

When they arrive, Hunter and I meet them on the front steps of the pack house. I watch them get out of the car, Jake looking around for the first time, and Letti looking around after not being here for a while.

"It's strange coming in from the front," she says to me, walking up to hug me. "Luna Sophie, how much longer before this little guy makes his appearance?" she asks me, looking down at my stomach while Jake and Hunter say hello.

"Since when are you so formal, Letti? I've always just been Sophie to you."

"I wasn't sure. Things are different now, but Nikki said the same to me. I think I might have offended her a bit, which wasn't my intention."

"We're friends first, Lunas second," I say, sliding my arm through hers and greeting Jake.

"Your previous pack members are a bit nervous to meet you, but I understand that many of them have been in touch with their fellow pack members in Robin's pack. That group was very impressed with both of you," I say, smiling at Letti and turning to include Jake in the conversation.

I can feel Letti's nervousness at meeting these new pack members as we walk in. "You're going to be great," I whisper to her.

She looks at me and I nod. I know she will be. She may be a Gamma by birth, but much like Allison and Nikki, Letti is a compassionate person who will make a great Luna.

"I've set up a special room for the pack members to come hear what you have to say. I thought we could talk over lunch, and I've also offered others who have come seeking safety but have not joined my pack yet to come hear you speak. I think my mate is right that each pack has something different to offer its pack members and what Sophie and I are offering here, may not be for everyone. But what you intend to offer in your pack might be," Hunter says, making me smile at him.

"I see that hasn't changed," Letti says.

"What's that?" I ask.

“Alpha Hunter always listened to what you had to say and took your words to heart, Sophie. I remember how much I didn’t believe that it was real when I first got here, how I didn’t trust any Alphas. But he was always the real deal. You both were.”

We get them settled into their rooms, putting them at the end of the hall on our floor. Then, I show Letti what I’ve started in the Hunt’s room.

“You’re going with a hunter’s theme?” she asks me, looking at the murals on the wall.

“Yes. It’s Hunter’s family’s tradition with naming their children, so I decided to go with the pack on a hunt.” The mural spreads around the room, with wild animals being chased by a small group of wolves. I didn’t say anything to Hunter, but the pack is eight large – the size of the family he’s promised me.

—

Oh, I know that’s why there are eight wolves, my mate. I counted them the moment that part of the mural was done,’ Hunter says in the mind link. I’m glad you left room though, in case we decide for more later on.

I have to cover my laugh as Hunter walks up behind me and wraps his arms around me while we look over the room.

“There’s still more to do, but it’s coming along,” I say.

I watch Letti look at Jake, a pretty blush flushing her cheeks before she looks away. Interesting.

We head back downstairs and enter the room that is set up for lunch. It’s only a few moments before the pack members start tentatively coming into the room.

“Come in, get some food and have a seat. Once everyone is here, we’ll begin,” Hunter tells them.

“Did you want to eat now?” I ask Letti.

“I don’t think I could get anything down, Sophie. I’m so nervous,” Letti says.

The four of us stand near the door, greeting everyone as they come in. I watch the pack members assessing Jake and Letti as they walk through the door, or as they sit and begin to eat. Most of them are talking in low voices but I’m pretty sure they’re talking about their initial impressions of the two. No wonder poor Letti is nervous.

I squeeze her hand, trying to help calm her, as Hunter goes to close the door, and Jake takes her hand to lead her to the front of the room.

Hunter quickly grabs some food for me and takes me to a seat so we're next to where Jake and Letti are standing.

"Hello everyone. My name is Alpha Jake, this is my mate, Luna Letti. We're here today to talk with you about our plans for the pack that we won, what was previously Alpha Owen's pack lands."

For the next hour, I watch as Jake and Letti explain who they are, where they've come from, and talk about their plans for the pack. They've decided to rebuild the packhouse and to create homes around the pack lands. Jake talks about creating a pack with a new feeling while Letti talks about how she-wolves will be allowed to train, will be expected to participate in patrols, and will have equal rights and expectations as the males in the pack. They also let everyone know that there will absolutely be no public claimings in the pack and that Jake has already started alliances with Alpha Ezra and Alpha Robin with the intention of extending that to Hunter, Dutton, Kayce, and Amelia.

They take questions, some of which don't have answers, but they let the people know that they will make those decisions as a pack. In the end, I can feel the excitement of the group, as if they are ready to head home and begin their new life, in their new pack, with their new Alpha and Luna.

'I can see why Ezra and Robin spoke so highly of them. They're naturals,' Hunter says in our mind link.

'They are. They will be good allies and friends,' I say.

'I agree. Good thing I prepared that alliance agreement already,' he says.

'My mate. Always thinking ahead.'

When they're done, people linger, talking individually to Jake and Letti. While they do, Hunter goes to get the alliance agreement so that we can sign it today. He and I are leaving tomorrow to go see Amelia ahead of the initial review of Alaric's old pack. Jake and Letti will be coming the day after with everyone else.

When the last person finally leaves, Letti lets out a huge breath. "I think that went well."

Jake pulls her into his arms. "I think it went really well."

"I would agree," I say, going to get some food now that the talking is done.

We spend the rest of the afternoon signing an alliance agreement, talking about the pack members, and reminding them that we'll be leaving in the morning.

Just as we're finishing up, I get a mind link that Jocelyn is looking for me. I invited her to go with us to see Amelia and to be a part of the overview of Alaric's pack. I'm hoping

she's agreed to come along. I think it will be good for her to get out a bit and see how things are changing.

"Jocelyn?" I say, finding her standing near the back doors, looking out over the back of the pack lands.

"Sophie," she says, and we gently hug. While her legs are good, almost completely healed, her upper body still needs surgery.

"I was hoping the offer is still open for me to join you and Alpha Hunter tomorrow to go meet your sister and see Alpha Alaric's old pack."

"It is, we would love to have you."

"Then, I would love to go. I think maybe it's time I start to get back out into the world."