

The Luna's Choice by Kat Silver Episode 191

Ayla and Briggs were already down in the cellar. I was waiting in the lobby for Kingston to come down. Dinner was about what I had expected – awkward and tense. I let Dad and Kingston do most of the talking. Leaving that time for them to discuss regular pack business. Now, I just had to get through the five minutes alone with him during the walk to the cellar.

Kingston exited the café with his Gamma, who had driven him here, and headed in my direction.

“Ayla and the others are already downstairs,” I told him. “Follow me.”

I led them through the packhouse to the back exit and turned toward the utility shed. It was a quiet walk. I couldn't tell if Kingston didn't want to risk starting a fight out in the open or if he was biding his time. But I highly doubted it was because he had nothing to say to me. His energy was telling me plenty.

I walked us down the stairs and met the others in the investigation room. We needed to talk before we started questioning the rogues. I took the seat next to Ayla at the table. Kingston sat across from us next to Briggs while his Gamma remained by the door. Mina already had everything ready to present her findings.

“Okay,” Mina said after I nodded to her to get started. “I know we're all ready to get some answers from those assholes stinking up the place down the hall. So, I'll make this brief for now. We can review any questions later.” She handed files to me and Kingston. “We know Harry was involved with the Waar Pak somehow. Our initial theory that he was helping them develop tactical weapons appears to be correct. In the folders, you'll find a list of schematics and chemical formulations found during my investigation.”

Kingston was looking over the documents. “There's not a lot here to tell us exactly what any of this was for. Just some possible applications.”

“Yes, that's about as far as I've gotten with that so far,” Mina said. “We'll have to send some of this off to a company specializing in this field to better understand Harry's research. Due to the sensitivity of the investigation, we're still narrowing down an appropriate candidate. But we have enough to give us a broad idea of what we could be up against.”

"I've deciphered about half of Harry's journal," Ayla said. "We know he was just using the Waar Pak for their resources. He couldn't use some of his prior contacts because of their loyalty to the pack. So we've been able to get a starting point from that."

"Do we know what his plan was regarding the Waar Pak?" Kingston asked.

"He was going to betray them once he... re-established my family name," Ayla put it delicately, not wanting to bring up his attempt to force her to mate with him. "He was working on fail-safes and counter agents to his work to help bring them down. We've included what we can find in the information that will be sent for analysis."

"It's one of our top priorities at this time," I stated. "Beta Briggs and Gamma Jimmy should have a decision by the end of the week to get started on the research and development project."

"Have you determined any more about why he was so fixated on Ayla, particularly why rebuilding the Onxycrown Pack was so important?" Kingston asked.

"I'm still working on that," Ayla said. "His journal gets a bit convoluted the further you get into it. His code is evolving as well. The best I can tell is it has something to do with the Blessed One story. However, we kind of assumed that already."

I gently squeezed Ayla's leg in support. Kingston had watched her intently through the whole interaction.

"Right now, the most important thing is that we know the Waar Pak is targeting her," I said. "That brings us to the rogues. I have a task force working our border and providing regular updates. You said you had more information on these attacks and who may be behind them."

"I do." Kingston replied, laying the file on the table. "The man behind the attacks is named Arthur Grogan. I've been tracking him for several months now."

"How are you so sure about this?" Briggs asked.

"Because I know him," Kingston said. "He was Jack's Gamma."

“What?” Ayla said. “You didn’t tell me that part, Kingston.”

“Forgive me, Ayla,” he said sincerely. “I wasn’t in my right mind that evening.”

Ayla nodded to him, gesturing for him to continue. I draped my arm around her shoulders.

“Grogan betrayed us,” Kingston continued. “He’s the reason the Waar Pak were able to get into the packhouse. Your father never figured it out and confronted him that night as we escaped. I wouldn’t have thought anyone could have survived what Jack did to him, but apparently, he did. Either way, he must have been working for the

Waar Pak ever since. My guess – he’s a higher-ranking member at this point.”

“That doesn’t tell us why you’re so sure about his identity,” I commented.

“He paid my private cabin a visit a few months ago,” Kingston said. “I caught his scent and have been searching for him since. He’s left other traces along the way. I got close once. Really close to catching him. By following up on one of our own rogue attacks, actually. After he slipped away, the bastard made contact. Trust me, it’s him.”

“And you think these rogues can give us information that can help us find him?” Ayla asked.

“That I’m not entirely sure about,” he replied apprehensively. “There’s likely only one rogue in any group that may have met him, if any. The ones I’ve questioned could only lead me to dead ends. Well, dead bodies, usually. He has a habit of dispatching his messengers once the job is done.”

I looked to Ayla. “Well, it’s good we’ve got the best person to question them.”

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We left the room and I led the way down the hall. The guards were still stationed outside the separate cells. I hadn’t allowed the prisoners to see each other, but I at least made sure they were relatively taken care of. It was one thing to deprive them of food, water, and sleep while questioning them. But torturing them when I didn’t have the time to deal with them wouldn’t allow them to break the command.

Besides, I didn't want Avla to have to see them like that from the start. If she broke the command and it led to that at some point, so be it. But if she could get through this without having to break someone's mind, I would be grateful. It wasn't something that was taken lightly. Even with a rogue, someone who wasn't tethered to your own subconscious, the feeling of asserting that kind of dominance and force leaves an impact I didn't think she was ready for.

"This is the one I started questioning in Bonnerville," I indicated. "I think Will spent a few moments with the other one while we were away. He'll be here tomorrow to help if we need it."

"We can start with the one you're familiar with," Ayla said. "We know for sure that he's under the command, so he must know something that would warrant it."

"Randy was telling me about this command," Kingston said. "It still seems strange for them to be using it to keep information from us. It doesn't really make sense."

"That's what I said," Ayla agreed, shaking her head.

"It has probably worked incredibly well until now," I replied. "There's only one possible person who could break the command. Add that that person either didn't exist or likely didn't know what they were capable of. They would have been pretty confident their secrets were safe. Even if their men were captured, whatever they could get out of them wouldn't lead back to the Waar Pak."

"But if they really believed the Blessed One would appear, they would have known that this wouldn't protect them for long," Kingston said. "And they know we're aware they are looking for her."

"Do they, though?" I asked. "They've been hunting Onyxcrown survivors for years. What's to say their attacks on you were anything other than that? The only reason they were brought to our attention was because of Randy. He's still feeding them false information."

"We have to assume it's the likelihood at this point," Kingston said.

"Agreed." I stated. I focused on Ayla, resting my hands on her arms. "I'll be there the entire time if you need help. But you're running this. We'll follow your lead."

We'd been practicing her commands together, and she was a natural now that she was getting the hang of it. But interrogation was more than just commands.

She nodded for the guard to open the cell and I followed her inside. The rogue had been chained to the chair again. However, the smell wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the first time we'd met. The sour scent of a rogue still hung in the air, but he was at least clean. He had a curious but nervous expression as he watched Ayla take a seat in front of him. I took a position behind him while Kingston took a spot in the corner.

They stared at each other for a few minutes. The rogue started to fidget under the weight of our energy filling the cell. I could see Ayla's mind ticking, her eyes a cool silver shining with intrigue. She was strategizing. Working out how to get what we needed.

"What's your name?" she finally asked.

He didn't respond. But Ayla just waited. Eventually, Kingston moved to say something, but Ayla lifted her hand to stop him.

"I think a name is a good place to start a conversation," Ayla said. "You give me yours and I'll give you mine."

The rogue looked up at her, considering her proposal.

"Denny," he spoke.

"Thank you, Denny," she replied. "I'm Ayla. I'm going to ask you some questions. I'm hoping you can answer them for me."

Denny shifted uncomfortably in his chair but remained quiet.

"Why are you a rogue?" Ayla asked.

"What?" Denny responded in surprise.

"I was a rogue once," she replied. "There's a million reasons someone becomes a rogue. I'd like to know yours."

Denny looked between me and Kingston in confusion. "My father was turned rogue when I was a kid for... causing my mother's death. No one wanted to take me in. So, I went with him."

"I'm sorry," Ayla said genuinely. "That must have been really hard for you."

He straightened in his chair. "It was better than an orphanage. At least as a rogue, I knew where I stood and could fight for what I needed. Instead of relying on someone to take pity on me."

"Like fighting our villagers?"

Denny turned his head, not looking at her. Ayla nodded slightly. She was reading him.

"What pack were you from?" Ayla asked, moving on for now.

"Shadow Claw," he replied quietly.

"I see," she said. "I'm familiar with their reputation. I had a rather unpleasant encounter with their last Alpha. I can understand feeling like you're better off without a pack than with that one. And why you would want to get as far away as possible. Is that how you ended up near our border?"

"We move around a lot," Denny said.

"You and your father?"

Denny shook his head. "Rogues in general. My old man died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry," Ayla said.

"Don't be," he said. "He deserved what he got."

"What about Bonnerville?" Ayla asked. "Do you think they got what they deserved? Why did you attack them?"

Denny stilled. So far, Ayla had just been making conversation. But there was just a hint of her power behind the last question. He knew now that he had a choice to make. He could try to fight what was coming but he wouldn't be able to or he could tell her what she wanted to know. Ayla had made some kind of decision about him. She was calm and collected. Like she knew what the outcome would be.

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“Okay,” I replied. “Thank you, Denny. Alpha Theo is right. We still have to command you. Being a rogue for so long, I understand that it can be uncomfortable. But as long as you stick to our agreement and don’t fight it, there shouldn’t be any pain.”

“I get it.” Denny replied.

I linked Theo to have him remove the chains holding Denny in place. I didn’t think keeping him restrained would encourage him that we were making a genuine offer. I was trying to gain some trust.

“Tell me if you recognize this man,” I commanded. Kingston handed me his phone, which had a grainy picture of a man.

Denny’s eyes narrowed as he examined the photo for a few moments.

“It could be him,” he said hesitantly. “I really didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Any details you can give us could help,” I said.

Again, he thought.

“Oh, he’s a lot of scars,” Denny said. “There’s a nasty one on his throat. Makes him sound strange. I didn’t really see it, but some of the others had mentioned it several times. And I did see his hands. They’re covered.”

I looked at Kingston. He nodded. It was Grogan.

“Okay, tell us everything that has happened since you first heard about the Boss,” I asked.

We spoke with Denny for a couple of hours, going over details multiple times. I was feeling the commands start to take a toll on me. I had to concentrate harder than I thought to maintain control of my energy without going too far. Several times, Theo had to link me to pull back before I started to hurt Denny.

“I think we have enough for today.” Theo finally insisted.

I nodded. It was getting late. Giving Denny a gentle smile, I rose from my seat. Theo’s hand went to the small of my back.

“We still have the other rogue here that was captured with you,” Theo said. “When we question him, can we expect the same kind of cooperation from him?”

Denny’s face contorted in disgust. “I don’t know,” he replied. “But he’s not nice. He was cast out of his pack once he turned eighteen. He’s killed at least two rogues that I know of. But I don’t know if he holds any real loyalty to the Boss. He just likes trouble.”

Theo nodded. He hesitated a moment. “There was a third rogue down in Bonnaville. Did you know him as well?”

Denny shrugged. “I’m not sure. They separated us pretty quick. But Lloyd had a lackey always following him around. If Lloyd got caught, I would bet so did Ratty. He’s not violent like Lloyd, but he’s still a right bastard. Likes to steal food and bully anyone he comes across.”

Theo nodded.

We left the cell and headed back to the investigation room. I rubbed my temples as a headache started to form. Mina had taken one of the lab assistants with her to check out another lab for the day, so it was still empty. Theo had recorded the session and would have one of the assistants write down the pertinent information. Kingston had been incredibly quiet throughout most of the interview. He had asked a few questions, but for the most part, he stood off to the side, brooding.

It was a little annoying.

He was busy looking through the file we had given him earlier when Theo took my hand to take me upstairs for the night. I paused.

‘Can I have a minute?’ I asked. ‘I’ll meet you outside.’

He glanced toward Kingston behind me.

‘One of us needs to say something,’ I said.

Theo sighed quietly. I know.” He squeezed my hand. ‘Don’t take too long. You need some rest. And link me if you need me.’

‘I’ll be fine.’

He leaned in and gave me a quick but firm kiss. 'I love you.'

'I love you, too.'

I watched Theo leave before I returned to the table and sat across from Kingston. He was pretending not to notice it was just the two of us. But I knew he did.

"Why are you here, Kingston?" I finally asked, breaking the silence.

He glanced up at me. His eyes caught mine with a look that said I should know.

"Kingston," I warned. "Why are you here?"

"Is it so hard to believe that I just want to help? That all this concerns me, too, and it'll be better if we work together?"

"It's not hard to believe." I stated. "But it's also not hard to believe that you would use this opportunity just to get close to me again."

"And that's so bad?" he asked painfully.

I sighed, rubbing my temple again to ease the ache.

"You pushed too hard tonight," Kingston said, reaching over and lifting my chin with a finger. He looked into my eyes, examining them for a few moments before pulling away. "Commanding comes easy to Theo and me. We've been using the ability practically our entire lives. Yours has been dormant. You need to be more careful."

"I can take care of myself just fine, Kingston," I said. "I appreciate the concern, but I'll never get used to it if I don't push my boundaries. And it's my decision to make."

"You shouldn't have to be taking care of yourself," Kingston mumbled.

"Excuse me?" I was trying not to get angry. "I will always be in charge of my own life and well-being. I'm not an invalid. But if you think Theo doesn't bend over backward to take care of me, then you're blind." I pushed my chair up. "And this conversation is over."

Kingston winced, raising a hand to halt me. "Wait," he rushed. His expression was still pained and full of sadness. "No, please, you're right. I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

I slowly sat back down, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Kingston, I won't listen to your opinions about Theo's and my relationship," I said sternly. "We love each other. I'm happy. And quite frankly, that information is a courtesy because none of it is any of your damn business."

He grimaced again.

"You're not coming between us, Kingston," I said. "So, why are you here?"

Kingston rubbed the back of his neck with a deep breath. "I miss you, Ayla. I wanted to make sure you were okay," he said genuinely. "And yes, I wanted to be close to you again, but not to cause you trouble. Truly. Isn't there a way we can be friends again?"

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“Who ordered you?” I commanded.

Denny shook his head. "We don't know his name," he replied nervously. "We always just call him Boss."

"Okay, Denny," I said with a small smile. "But you've seen him, haven't you?"

"Just once," he replied. "But it was dark. There was a big group of us. Maybe thirty or forty rogues. They did some kind of ritual."

"Did the ritual mention someone named Dominis?" Theo commanded.

Denny nodded. "Yes."

"It was the command." I stated.

"Which has now been broken," Theo confirmed.

"How can you tell?" Kingston asked.

"Theo commanded information about the Dominis family. He wouldn't have been able to answer if I hadn't been commanding him," I explained. "Denny, do you know why they commanded you to attack us? Why do they want to organize the rogues against the Greytooth and Sablemane packs?"

"I... I don't know about Sablemane, but..." He swallowed hesitantly. He was scared.

"It's okay, Denny," I said calmly. "We won't hurt you. We just need your help. If you can give it to us."

I could feel Theo's and Kingston's eyes boring into me. This isn't how either of them had expected this conversation to go, but I didn't care. This man wasn't defiant. He was reluctant to answer me, but he wasn't fighting my commands either. I could feel it. He was scared.

"Denny, were you one of the rogues that hurt people in Bonnerville?" I ordered. "Did you kill any of our pack members?"

"No," he rushed honestly. "I only damaged property. I avoided the people. That's how I was caught. I was running from the big fight, and an officer grabbed me. But I swear, I didn't hurt anyone."

I nodded. "Okay." I looked at Theo. "Can I talk to you outside?" I linked him.

He nodded and I stood, motioning for Kingston to follow. We left the cell and returned to the investigation room.

"I want to offer him a place in the pack," I stated once we were away from the guards.

"What?" Kingston exclaimed. Theo sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Ayla," Kingston said, "A wolf who has been a rogue as long as he has wouldn't know what to do in a pack."

"Then we teach him," I replied.

"You saw him in there, Theo. He's scared, not angry."

"He doesn't seem like the same rogue I interviewed in Bonnaville, no," Theo conceded. "But it could just be an act, babe. He could be playing us. He's had over a week to get his story together, and you haven't put much pressure on him."

"I know that," I said. "That's why I want to offer to bring him into the pack. But I want to swear him in."

Theo chuckled.

"That's reckless. Ayla," Kingston said.

"Not if she is the Blessed One," Theo replied.

"There was a passage in Harry's journal," I explained. "He theorized that anyone sworn to the Blessed One's pack would have an unusually strong devotion to her and the pack."

"Essentially, they would be incapable of betraying us," Theo clarified.

"You really want to trust her safety to a theory?"

"It's a strong theory," I added.

"We've found supporting evidence. And Randy confirmed it was one of the wear Pak's concerns with the Blessed One's suspected abilities."

Kingston crossed his arms. "I still think it's too much of a risk."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not offering him to join Sablemane," I snapped.

Kingston backed off. I felt a little guilty for the jab, but he was babying me again.

Theo held my shoulders. "Look, Ayla, I trust you and your judgment. We can't guarantee him a fast or easy transition. But if you think doing this will help us, then that's what we'll do."

I took his hands. "Thank you." I turned to Kingston. "Do you have a picture or something of Grogan you could show him? It may help."

Kingston pulled out his phone. "I have a grainy capture from a surveillance camera, but it may work."

"Good."

We returned to the cell and I sat back down in front of our prisoner.

"Okay, Denny, "I said," I have a proposal for you."

He looked up at me nervously.

"I would like for you to tell us everything you know about the rogue groups and this Boss," I continued. "If you can do that, we would be willing to make you a member of our pack."

Denny's widened and his mouth fell open. "But... I... I don't... Why?"

"We need information," I said with a shrug. "And I'd rather not waste time trying to fight it out you. We all understand your position here, being a rogue. They typically don't survive this long within pack territory." Denny flinched. "Just a stated fact, not a threat," I assured him. "Either way, I'm not sure what else to offer a rogue. So, unless you have a different request, that's what is on the table."

Denny looked between the three of us. "I would never be accepted."

"If you help save and protect our Luna, you will be," Theo told him.

"You're a rogue because of someone else's actions," I said gently. "We won't hold that against you."

“Do you know why they are doing all of this?” Theo asked.

“They’re looking for someone,” Denny said. “They never actually told us who, but we started to hear stories about a Blessed One throughout the camps. It was all some nonsense about some family taking over all the packs and conquering the world or something.”

I snorted.

Theo rested his hands on my shoulders from behind me. “They want her.”

“And I will swear to you right now, Denny,” I said firmly, “I have no intention of taking over any other pack, let alone the world. So, if you are willing to tell us what you know about these groups, including your friend in the other cell, you’ll have a place here.”

“I don’t know much,” he insisted. “What if the information is useless?”

“As long as you tell us what you do know,” I said, “then the deal stands.”

“And if I say no?”

“We still need the information,” Theo said gravely. “We still have to command you to verify what you say is the truth. If you fight it, it won’t end well for you.”

Denny thought for a long while, but I was patient. I hoped he would see that this was more than a mercy to him. We didn’t need to offer him anything. But I wanted to. Finally, he took a deep breath.

“Okay.”

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I waited for her to say something. Despite my comments, I really could see that she was happy with Theo. It hurt like f***ing hell, and it was hard to keep my behavior in check. But I was trying. Ever since Randy had come to Sablemane and told me about their theory about Ayla’s effect on Alphas, I had been working to reconcile my feelings for her. It got easier after they had marked each other, but it was still hard.

Pierce had protested my coming here for this reason. He insisted he should go instead, but I didn’t want to hear it. I needed to see her. But it was

genuinely just to mend things between us. Ayla may have forgiven me back in the Onyxcrown ruins, but I knew she still thought of me as the person who tried to force his mark on her and kept her father's ring from her.

It was eating me up inside thinking about it.

"Ayla, I just want to try to make things right," I said again. "With our history... with our families... I'd hate for you to keep hating me."

"I don't hate you, Kingston," Ayla insisted. She shook her head. "Truth is, I've missed you, too. Your friendship. I still appreciate everything you did for me. But it can never be the way it was before."

"I know that," I said firmly. "Believe me, I know. But our packs are still allies. And I won't pretend that I could be friends with Theo any time. soon." Ayla gave me a look. "Simply out of jealousy," I said with a wry grin. "Forgive me my wolf's nature. Some things aren't so easily changed. But you're right. I'm not blind. Whatever mistakes he made before, he's not making them now. I can at least respect him for that."

"Thank you," she replied sweetly.

"But it would be nice to have some friendly company when we're doing business," I said.

She smiled slowly. "I think we can manage that," she confirmed. "But can we worry about that tomorrow? I'm wiped for the day."

I chuckled. "Of course," I said, standing from my chair.

I offered her a hand. She took and stood. I made an impulsive decision and pulled her against me, wrapping my arms around her in an embrace. She stiffened at first, but I just held her. As she realized it was meant as an innocent gesture, she relaxed, snaking her arms around my waist for a moment.

I thought it would have been a terrible, dangerous idea. Holding her again, breathing in her scent like this. Memories flashing through my mind. This should be torture.

But it wasn't.

I smiled as a calm settled through me. For the first time in weeks, it was just nice to hold Ayla and know she was safe and happy. That's all that mattered now. I would do whatever it took to keep it that way.

She pulled away, giving me a tentative smile.

"I better go," she said. "Theo's waiting for me."

"I'm sure he is," I teased. "I won't lie. It feels good making him squirm a little."

Ayla rolled her eyes. "He's handling it just fine. He knew we would have to talk at some point."

"You don't have to ruin all my fun."

"Yeah, yeah," she said as she made her way to the door. "If it helps, I wouldn't expect him to be overly friendly with you, either. So, I'd be playing mediator anyway."

I followed her out of the cellar. Theo was, of course, waiting nearby. I averted my eyes as he kissed her, looking over the utility building in which the cellar entrance was hidden.

"You know, I can't imagine this would stay hidden with all the traffic it's been seeing," I commented.

"Yeah." Theo answered. "We're addressing that. We never had much use for it before now. But setting up something more permanent and covert now makes sense. We're starting construction this week."

I nodded, matching their pace as we returned to the packhouse. We said our goodbyes at the junction where we would go our separate ways. I thought about the day as I walked back to my room. I had sent Lou, my Gamma, back a while ago. My phone buzzed in my pocket as I approached my door.

It was Pierce.

"Yeah," I answered lightly.

"So, how did it go?" he asked worriedly.

I sighed. "The interview was enlightening," I said. "They're definitely dealing with Grogan. We have one more rogue to interview, but I feel he won't be as forthcoming."

"How's the atmosphere between you all?"

"It was a long day. Let's just put it that way," I said. "But it ended on a high note. So, I'm surviving."

I could sense him relax through the phone.

"I'll be here at least another day," I said. "But I'll keep you posted on any updates."

"Okay," Pierce replied. "So, she's doing well?"

"Yeah," I said somberly. "She's doing really well. I'll call you in the morning."

I disconnected and entered my guest suite. Lou was already asleep, which was fine with me. I changed into a pair of sweats to sleep in and sat on the edge of the bed, playing with the file folder in my hand.

Ayla seemed to have been doing a lot of research into her family since her rescue. But there was still a lot she didn't know. My mind wandered back to the moonstone hidden in its spot back home. No one had mentioned it. I didn't think they knew about it. Harry must have mentioned it in his journal at some point. When Pierce confronted me about the maps of the Onyxcrown tunnels, I knew he had been looking for it.

I had lied to Pierce. Assuring him that his suspicions were wrong. I didn't like it, but I still felt it was necessary. It didn't matter how much I trusted Pierce, or anyone, for that matter. Unless we got wind that the Waar Pak were looking for it or suspected it still existed, I couldn't risk it.

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The Luna’s Choice by Kat Silver Episode 196

I went to the apartment after getting back to the packhouse to check on Ayla. Maggie had sent me a text that she had been a bit off throughout the day. She said it didn’t seem like anything serious, just that she wasn’t in the best of moods. I understood what she was talking about as soon as I got close to the suite. I could feel her anxiety through our connection.

I walked in to see her sitting at the dining table, chewing on a fingernail as she hunched over books and papers strewn across the surface. I rested my hands on her shoulders, kneading the tense muscles with my thumbs.

“What’s wrong, baby?” I asked as I kissed the top of her head.

She sighed. “I think I need to quit school.”

“What?” Now I was worried. I pulled the chair out beside and sat down, turning her to look at me. “Why would you think that, Ayla? You were so excited to go to college.”

“I don’t want to give it up entirely,” she said but there was still a sadness in her tone. “Just for this semester or this school year. I just feel like I can’t keep up.

There's so much going on. I've had to miss so much and we're not even a month in."

"Then we take some other things off your plate," I said.

"Like what?" she asked sardonically. "Your mother is still doing a lot of the Luna duties, plus planning our solstice ceremony. I haven't been working with her nearly as much as we had planned. I'd like to do more for Zeff and the magazine. I'm still having to translate Harry's journal and figure out Dad's books and research. Plus the Waar Pak investigation. Now the rogue attacks."

—

"You don't need to worry about the attacks, babe," I said. "We'll handle that. And as far as the investigation and this" — I took the journal that was sitting in front of her on the table and tossed it aside — "you can take a break from that. We have plenty of other things to focus on. Besides, if we can stop the Waar Pak now, we don't need to know what they or Harry were planning."

"But what he was doing could help us find..."

"It's not worth you going through this much stress," I interrupted. "We can handle the investigation and the Waar Pak and the border attacks without you for a while, okay? I'll keep you updated on everything, but you just let me worry about all of that."

"That's too much for you to do on your own, Theo," she insisted.

"I'm not on my own," I said. "I have a whole pack behind me. Just like you do. We have a good team, babe. We'll be okay. Taking care of yourself is more important."

"But you need me to question anyone who's under the command," she pointed out.

"Yeah, and so far, it seems like once it's broken, we can take it from there," I stated. She still looked like she was on the verge of tears. "Babe, it's okay. I swear, it's perfectly fine for you to focus on school for a while."

"But then I'll feel guilty because that's part of my job," she said. "I want to help. I want to be a good Luna and take care of my pack. I want to help get to the bottom of all this."

“Do you want that more than you want to go to school, then?” I asked.

She hesitated for a minute before shaking her head. “No, I want to be in school.”

“Then you’re staying in.”

“You just don’t get it,” she huffed, turning away and resting her face in her hands.

I pulled her to me, rubbing her back as I held her.

“Then explain it to me, babe,” I said. “I want to understand.”

She leaned into me. “I just feel overwhelmed, and I don’t know why.”

“Of course you’re feeling overwhelmed, Ayla,” I said. “You’ve taken on so much and so much has been put on you.”

“So?” she replied. “I once worked four jobs without a car while writing a book. I’ve handled a lot before. I don’t know why I can’t do this.”

“You should never have had to do that in the first place,” I said firmly. “You made it through then because losing your home and your family starving pushed you. There was no other option for you, Ayla. That was our failing back then. Now, you know there are options. You don’t have to go non-stop. We won’t fall apart if you don’t push yourself so hard.”

“But then I feel like I’m failing,” she murmured.

“Then we need to work on getting you past that,” I said. I pushed her up so she could look at me. “I would fall apart if you don’t take care of yourself. I won’t watch you work yourself sick, Ayla. You are still the strongest person I’ve ever known, babe. Now, you need to use that strength to put your health and well-being first. You’re no good to us burnt out.”

“But I feel selfish choosing college. It doesn’t help the pack.”

“So, I wasted my time getting my degree?” I asked wryly.

“You know what I mean,” she huffed. “You weren’t the acting Alpha and you were doing something that built a business that helps support us. I don’t even know what I’m going to study yet.”

“And you won’t figure that out by quitting,” I said. “And I may be taking over early, but that doesn’t mean you have to. You have my mother’s help, and anyone else’s that you need, for as long as you want it. So, for now, no more work on the investigation. You focus on school and the magazine column. If you find the time to work with Mom or plan our ceremony, then go ahead. But that’s it, okay?”

“What about Kingston?” she asked. “You know you both need me there to keep things civil.”

I sighed. “I think we can manage, but if it makes you feel better. You can help until Kingston leaves, but once he’s gone, no more.”

She hesitated, but with effort, she pushed her crestfallen expression away and replaced it with relief.

“Okay.”

The Luna’s Choice by Kat Silver Episode 197

Theo insisted I skip dinner with the family and had food brought up to me so I could get my schedule reorganized and work on homework. I was nervous about not going and sent Kingston a message letting him know I was fine and would see him in the cellar for the interrogation later. He questioned my absence at first, but when I told him I just had a lot to catch up on, he was understanding.

I had felt bad all day because he was having to fend for himself. Normally, schedules were cleared when another Alpha visited another pack, and the focus was primarily on them. However, considering why he was here, Theo thought it was best we didn’t draw too much attention to him. Besides, this was so unexpected that there wasn’t a lot either of us could move around. But I still felt like I was failing in my Luna duty as his host, and it was stressing me out.

And to be honest, I was just cranky.

I didn’t know why, but I had been in a bad mood all day. I snapped at Maggie at one point, which I felt awful about. And that nearly led me to tears. I apologized but still felt terrible. I didn’t want to be around anyone and risk it happening again. So, despite being worried about Theo and Kingston getting

along without me, I was grateful to have the time to myself and collect my thoughts.

After Theo left, I tried to focus on my reading assignment for my philosophy class. I was having a hard time getting into it when my phone rang.

“Hey, Zeff,” I answered.

“Hey, Ayls,” he said brightly. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Just in a mood today.”

“Uh—oh, what did Theo do?” he teased.

“He didn’t do anything,” I assured him. “He’s been great. I just woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“It sounds like you need some time with your best friend,” he hinted.

“Yeah, that could be it.” I chuckled. “Are you still set to arrive tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yep. My flight lands at four.”

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe I’ll try to be there to pick you up. We can grab some dinner.”

“That sounds great,” he said. “Also, have you had a chance to look over the new letters I sent you?”

“Not yet,” I said, my voice cracking as guilt and tears started to creep up again. “I’m sorry. With Kingston coming in and everything else. I’ve been swamped. But I’m working on clearing some things out tonight.”

“No worries, Ayls,” he said, his tone becoming more serious. “Honestly, sweetie, it’s no big deal. We have other content to post.”

“I know,” I said. “But I know the readers are expecting another article soon, and so many submitted requests, I just don’t want to let them down.”

“You won’t,” he insisted. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Don’t even think about it until then, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I pouted.

“I’ve got to let you go,” he replied. “But if you need anything, you just let me know.”

“I know.”

“Love you, Ayls,” Zeff said.

“Love you, too.”

I hung up the phone and set it back down on the table. I looked over the books and papers scattered in front of me. With a frustrated sigh, I forced my fingers through my hair and pushed my chair away from the table.

Studying wasn’t happening for me. So, I decided to take a long, hot bath to help calm my nerves and relax a little. I started the tap and picked out some aromatherapy salts and bubble bath. I checked the time and played music before stripping down and climbing into the steaming tub. I had a couple of hours before I needed to be ready to go to the cellar, so I just sank into the water and let it soothe me.

Theo was right. I needed to stop trying to take on the weight of the world all the time. I couldn’t remember how many times I had told my friends or colleagues there was nothing wrong with taking some for themselves. I needed to find balance. That meant slowing down a little and taking advantage that we weren’t under any immediate threat.

I took deep breaths until I was relaxed, my body feeling looser than it had most of the day. I was so comfortable that I barely noticed Theo come in. He brushed a hand over my hair and kissed my head before kneeling by the tub. He reached in, gently lifted my ankle, and began massaging my foot. I groaned as the pressure of his thumbs relieved the aches and pains. He moved to the next foot, then up my leg, kneading my calf, then my thigh.

Desire flared through my core as his fingers approached the apex of my legs. I lifted my hips, but right as I thought he would touch my folds, his hands moved down to my other leg.

“Theo.” I whimpered,

“Sshhh,” he hushed. “We have time, love.”

He continued working my muscles, moving on to my hands and arms, teasing my breasts in between. His hand lifted the nape of my neck as his mouth took mine. His hand slid smoothly beneath the water along my navel until it finally settled between my legs. I moaned against his lips as he deftly worked my clit, slipping a finger inside.

I gripped his shirt as he pushed me towards my release. His lips moved down my jaw, still holding my neck as he nipped at my mark, sending electricity straight to my core, throwing me over the edge as I cried out.

The Luna's Choice by Kat Silver Episode 198

After taking care of me, I coaxed Theo to join me in the bath, where we took care of each other before collapsing in the half-filled tub. I looked over the edge and laughed, realizing we had flooded the bathroom. But I couldn't be bothered to care.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Time to go," Theo sighed. "Are you feeling better?"

I nodded with a smile. "That was just what I needed."

"Good," he said, nuzzling my neck. "You had me worried earlier."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just in a bad mood."

"Regardless, we're taking some things off your plate," he said. "After tonight, no more worrying about rogues or the Waar Pak."

"Alright," I replied. "I'll try. I can't make any promises about the worrying part, but I can take a step back for a while. As long as you promise to keep me updated."

"Wouldn't dream of keeping anything from you," he insisted, kissing my temple.

We moved to get out of the bath. I had put towels down on the floor so we wouldn't slip. We quickly got dressed and headed out of the apartment hand-in-hand. It was comforting. I did feel calmer and more collected now that we had a plan. I didn't feel like I was letting everyone down anymore.

with him this time, though. I had talked to him that morning, and he said Gamma Luis would help Jimmy with his Waar Pak project. Luis had been working alongside Kingston in tracking them down the last few months, so he had a good idea of what to look for.

We made our way to the cellar and down to the cell. I stopped in to say hello to Denny and ensure he was being treated well. We planned to move him somewhere else later, but settling everything would take a week or two. Plus, we wanted to check his intel first. Not that we thought he was lying. He wouldn't be able to while I was commanding him, especially not with Theo's and Kingston's Alpha energies also in the room. But we wanted to ensure it was usable and still protect him.

When I was done speaking with him, I prepared myself for the next interrogation. As we went over touching points, Theo's cousin Will joined us.

"Luna, it's good to see you again," he said to me with a smile after making introductions.

"It's good to see you, too," I said, giving him a hug. "Although, you really need to stop making a habit of showing up at times like these. I'm sure Beth would appreciate a more social visit."

"I'll be sure to make that happen soon," he chuckled.

"So, what do we know about this one?" Kingston spoke up, moving things along.

"The guards said he's been more difficult," Theo said. "At first, he was aggressive, but after a few days, when he realized there was no escaping, he became less violent but still belligerent — throwing food, tearing apart the cell, purposely injuring himself to the point he was nearly always restrained, etc. Apparently, he must be able to sense when we come down because it's the only time he's quiet."

I didn't know why, but that made me feel a little uneasy.

"They said that to me, too," Will said. "However, it must only be with you guys because he was a right asshole when I paid him a visit."

"Did you get anything out of him?" Theo asked.

“Not really,” he said. “Just some ramblings about a rogue pack taking what’s owed to them.”

“That must be what Grogan is promising them,” Kingston said. “He’s convinced them they can create their own pack if they push us out far enough.”

“Sounds like it,” Will confirmed.

“Well, that’s a good place to start, then,” I said. “And you think he’s under the command like Denny was?”

Will nodded.

“Alright, then, let’s get this over with,” I said.

We walked into the cell and the stench was overwhelming. He had also been refusing to clean himself as well as neglecting to use the toilet in the corner of the cell. But it was more than that. The bodily odors were nearly drowned out by the pungent odor of a rogue.

Denny’s scent hadn’t had the same intensity as this. I had to swallow the bile that threatened to come up with whatever contents were in my stomach. I glanced at Theo and Kingston. They weren’t impressed by the smell either, but it didn’t seem to bother them the same way.

Finally, I took in the man in front of me. He was chained to the chair like Denny had been. He was older than Denny, with dark brown hair that was greying along the sides and a filthy beard. He was bigger, too. Both taller and wider. I wasn’t surprised he was able to terrorize the other rogues. The various scars that were visible were a testament to the battles he had picked and won.

He was looking at the floor, refusing to acknowledge our presence. Theo set another chair that had been brought in a few feet away from him for me to sit in. This time, Theo stayed right by my side while Kingston instinctively moved behind him. They sensed something off about him, too.

He finally looked up at me. His eyes widened slightly, but he quickly masked his expression. Instead, he started laughing.

It was a sinister, maniacal laugh. I suppressed a shiver as my skin began to crawl. I waited until he slowly fell silent again. I wanted to see if he would start talking first, but I didn't know how much longer I could hold out. The smell was getting to be too much to handle.

"It's Lloyd, isn't it?" I finally asked.

The corner of his lip twitched. "I knew that little runt would squeal. It's a wonder the weakling survived so long as a rogue."

"Whereas you seem perfectly suited to the title," I replied. "I can't imagine you being anything else."

The Luna's Choice by Kat Silver Episode 199

It was taking more effort than I wanted to admit to keep from taking this bastard out right there. I had been around him before when he was transferred here, but it wasn't until now that I realized just how vile he was. It didn't help that I could sense Ayla's revulsion through our bond. I was worried she would be sick any moment.

Just break the command and get out of here, Ayla,' I linked her. 'I can handle this.'

"Where is your boss?" Ayla commanded.

A grunt escaped Lloyd as he flinched, but he didn't reply. He brushed off her command easily. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Something was off.

"Where is Grogan?" Ayla ordered again more forcefully.

Again, Lloyd pushed past the command. I felt Ayla's frustration surge through our mate bond. Her hands clenched into fists as she worked to focus. She commanded him again, putting more energy than I had felt from her before. This time, he had to fight hard against the command. It took several minutes before he was able to push past it entirely. And they were painful minutes. But the fact that he was still fighting – that he was still able to was concerning.

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He was still breathing heavily when he began to laugh again.

“Ya’ think I’m stupid enough to not recognize a binding ritual?” he spat.

Kinston’s gaze shot in my direction. He knew what the command would do. But did he know because Grogan told him or because he had seen it before? Either way, he was under the command. Ayla didn’t need to be here.

‘Ayla, go,’ I linked. ‘I’ve got this.’

She didn’t respond, but I felt a tangle of emotions coming from her. Primarily anger. She stood up slowly, taking a step closer to him.

“How can you recognize a binding ritual?” she commanded. Her voice was eerily calm.

Lloyd fought again, but it was harder this time. I thought for sure he would either give in or pass out. But he still somehow managed to withstand her. When the pain had passed, he looked up at her, taking her in as a vile grin spread across his face.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t answer,” Ayla said through gritted teeth. “I know how you know.”

“I expect you do,” he replied smugly.

She looked to Kingston. “Can’t you smell it?” she snapped.

He looked between the two of us, just as confused as I was. He shook his head.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he replied.

Lloyd chuckled. “Course he don’t. You’ll have to enlighten them.”

Ayla’s breathing quickened as rage filled her. “He’s an Onyxcrown exile.”

Kingston and I both straightened. Lloyd’s expression confirmed her words, and I knew I was standing in a powder keg. I just hoped “It’s not worth it, Theo,” she snapped. “Just end it. Now,”

“It’s absolutely worth getting information to protect you,” I retorted. “He will get what he deserves, Ayla, I swear. But I’m not risking your safety out of anger.”

“Fine.” She straightened and pushed past me. “Then I’m leaving. I’m not staying in the same building as that bastard.”

I rushed after her. “Ayla, I know you’re upset. I understand. But just take a few minutes to calm down and think things through.”

She turned, glaring at me intensely. “Take care of this, Theo. Or I will.”

She stormed out of the cellar, leaving me behind to try to reconcile what just happened. I remembered leaving Kingston alone in the cell with Lloyd and immediately headed back, hoping he hadn’t done anything stupid. Thankfully, I returned to find the rogue sitting upright again. Bloody lacerations covered his face and chest, but nothing life-threatening. He would heal. Kingston stood in front of him. His posture was stiff, and I could tell he was also struggling.

I felt for the guy, but I was glad he understood why keeping him alive for now was important.

“Kingston,” I called to him.

His attention snapped to me. I tipped my head for him to leave the cell with me. He looked back at Lloyd, his fists clenching, but managed to walk away and follow me out.

“How is Ayla?” he asked quietly.

I pushed my fingers through my hair. “Pissed off, understandably.”

He just nodded.

“I need you to do me a favor,” I said. “I want you to question this guy, Kingston. You’re going to know how to approach this better. But please don’t do it alone. I know you understand the implications if he dies before we find out what he knows about the Waar Pak’s plans. But I also get that he may push some buttons...”

“It’s fine,” he interrupted. “I agree with you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I need to check on Ayla. I’ll have Will or Briggs come down.”

The Luna's Choice by Kat Silver Episode 200

I rushed upstairs to our apartment. When I entered, Ayla wasn't in the living room or kitchen. I went back to the bedroom and found her packing a suitcase. My heart fell into a pit in my stomach.

"What are you doing?"

She continued to grab clothes. "I told you," she stated, "I won't stay here while that murderer is alive."

"Fine," I said, going to the closet and pulling out my travel case. "We'll go to the lake house for a few days."

"You're not coming with me," she snapped.

"Excuse me?" I replied in disbelief. "You're not staying away from the packhouse alone, Ayla."

"You're the reason he's here," she yelled at me. "You're the reason he's still alive. Until you fix this, I don't want to be near you."

My heart was racing and I could hear my blood pulsing in my ears. I had no idea what was going on. Ayla didn't even react this way when Harry admitted to killing her father.

"So you're leaving me?" I exclaimed. "Because I need to protect you?"

"Because you're letting that abomination live," she bellowed.

She slammed the suitcase shut and zipped it. I shoved it back down as she moved to pick it up.

"What the f*** has gotten into you?" I said, my anger and fear and confusion getting the better of me. "Why am I having to explain this over and over? You want to take the assholes down but refuse to exploit the best resource we have at the moment? This isn't you, Ayla. You're smarter than this."

"Oh, so I'm stupid for wanting to avenge my pack?"

“This is your pack,” I roared. “And no, you are justified in wanting him dead, but you are being completely rash. And you are being ignorant if you think I’m just going to let you leave me.”

She pulled at the suitcase again, but I held it firmly in place. She glared at me with an anger I’d never seen directed at me before.

“Don’t make me command you,” she hissed.

I froze as shock ran through me. My body went numb at her words.

“Really?” I replied quietly. “That’s where you’re going to take this?”

She held my gaze. I waited, but she didn’t back down. I removed my hand from the case and stepped aside. I couldn’t believe she thought my actions were worth that kind of betrayal. We didn’t command our mates. We should never have to. Commands were a tool to maintain order within a pack. Not to manipulate our members to get what we want. That’s why our ability to command was taken seriously. It was a sacred gift that should never be abused. We sure as f*** didn’t take that free will from our mate.

Because that’s what a command was. That’s why it was painful to fight it. She had grown more powerful in the past few weeks. She would be able to take that from me.

Ayla brushed past me and I fought to stay on my feet. My chest was so tight I couldn’t breathe. She had cut off our connection. Blocking me from feeling her through our mate bond. Tears pricked my eyes as I tried to control the urge to grab and hold her here. I wanted to tell her I’d kill Lloyd. We’d go down and I’d rip his throat out right now. I wanted to scream that I would make it right and beg her to stay with me.

But my gut was also telling me that would be a mistake. That there was something else going on with Ayla. If I pushed her, would she still command me? Could I risk her crossing that line? Would our relationship withstand that damage? Would Ayla?

My head spun as I tried to make sense of what was happening. I waited to hear the apartment door close. Waited for the love of my life to walk out on me. Again. But I couldn’t even pretend to know what the right thing to do was this time.

But the sound never came.

The door didn't open.

It didn't slam shut.

I didn't even hear the knob turn.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and turned toward the living room. I got to the end of the hall, I saw Ayla. She was slumped on the floor by the door. Her back was to me and she was still. I slowly approached her, sitting down on the floor beside her.

I didn't touch her until I saw her expression. Silent tears fell down her cheeks. Her face held confusion and disbelief. Her body wasn't moving, but her eyes were darting around blankly as her mind raced.

"I..." she whispered. "I'm sorry."

I exhaled heavily, gathering her into my arms and holding her against my chest. Her arms snapped around my neck as she clung to me desperately. I rocked her as she started to sob. I shushed her gently as she continued to apologize and beg for my forgiveness.

"Baby, it's okay," I soothed. "I'm here. I promise I'm right here."