The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 121

Before we leave–2

Not because I'd lost it. Because some things deserved space before they were spoken and this was one of them. I'd thought about this moment for a long time without knowing I was thinking about it. Every version of myself that had survived this pack had been moving toward this room and this morning and these words without knowing where they were going.

Now I was here.

"You'll be watched," I said. "Not as punishment. As accountability. There's a difference and I need you to understand it." I looked across the room. "Punishment is what happened to me. Accountability is what prevents it from happening to anyone else on this land again."

A woman near the center of the room pressed her lips together.

I held her gaze until she looked down.

"The wolves appointed to lead this pack going forward have been chosen because they didn't participate," I said. "Not because they're without fault. Because their faults didn't include deciding that another wolf's suffering was acceptable." I paused. "That's the standard now. It's a low one. It shouldn't be remarkable. But in Ashcrest it is and that's what this pack has to live with going forward."

Nobody argued.

Nobody tried.

The room had run out of the particular energy that fueled argument and denial. What was left was something quieter and less comfortable. The settling of truth into people who had been avoiding it and now had nowhere left to avoid it to.

I looked at them for one more moment.

"I grew up on this land," I said. "I know every path and every building and every face in this room. I know what it felt like to be invisible here." I held the room. "You won't forget what you allowed. I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to let it be the reason you don't allow it again."

The room held what I'd said without anyone trying to answer it.

That was how I knew it had landed the way it needed to. Not agreement exactly. Not relief. The particular stillness of people who had been given something true and were sitting inside the truth of it without being able to argue their way out. I'd spent twenty years in this pack having words used against me. It felt different to be the one who had just used them.

Vaela moved through me, slow and certain.

'It's done,' she said.

I didn't answer her out loud but I felt what she meant. Not just the speech. The whole of it. Everything that had needed to happen here had happened. Every name had been spoken. Every charge had been read. Every sentence had been delivered. And now I had stood in front of the full pack and said what I came to say and the hall had no more claims on me.

Caius spoke beside me, his voice carrying through the room with the finality of someone closing something permanently. "This hearing is closed," he said. "New leadership will be announced before we depart. Exiles leave before sundown. Transfers will be completed before nightfall. Ashcrest answers to the crown from this day forward."

The room absorbed it.

I looked at it one final time.

Not with anger. Not with grief. With the particular clarity of someone who has finished something they needed to finish and is ready to turn away from it completely.

Then I did.

I turned toward the doors and Caius fell into step beside me and the hall parted without being asked and we walked out together and the doors closed behind us.

I didn't look back.

I didn't need to.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 122

The last order

(Caius)

The exiles left first.

That was how I'd planned it. Not because the order mattered procedurally but because it mattered in every other way. Rodan and Maren would be off Ashcrest land before anything else was finalised, before the new leadership was announced, before the transfers were completed. I wanted them gone while the pack was still on the grounds and present. I wanted every wolf on this territory to watch exactly what happened to the people who had built what Ashcrest had been.

My warriors brought them out through the main doors.

Rodan came first.

He'd been stripped of his Alpha rank formally during the sentencing and whatever had been left of his composure after that had finished eroding somewhere between the holding chambers and this moment. He walked with his wrists bound in front of him and his eyes forward and the particular expression of a man who had spent his whole life understanding power and was now understanding for the first time what it felt like to have none.

The pack watched him cross the grounds.

Nobody spoke.

Nobody needed to.

Maren followed behind him under separate guard. She'd recovered some of her composure since the holding chambers, enough that she held her chin at a particular angle that might have read as dignity to someone who didn't know her. I knew her well enough by now to read it differently. It was the last available performance of a woman who had nothing left to perform with.

My warriors moved them toward the southern road that led to the border. Derek and Helene followed after. Then the others named for exile, each one escorted by two of my men, each one crossing the grounds under the eyes of the pack that had once answered to them.

None of them looked at Isla.

That told me everything.

Rodan had looked at her in the hall when he first understood what she was. He'd looked at her in the yard when the shift happened. He'd looked at her in the holding chambers when she stood in front of his cell and the bow had come without his permission. Every time

she'd been in front of him something in him had recognized what he was looking at and been unable to pretend otherwise.

Now he kept his eyes forward and walked toward the border and didn't look back.

Good.

Let him carry that forward. Let him spend whatever was left of his life knowing exactly what he'd tried to bury and exactly what it had become.

Isla stood beside me without speaking while they crossed the grounds. I felt her through the bond, not distressed, not triumphant. Something quieter and more settled than either. The expression of someone watching a necessary thing happen and finding it sufficient.

That was enough.

When the last of the exiles had passed through the gate and my warriors had confirmed the escort was underway I turned to Pryor who had been standing at my left with the transfer documents already prepared.

"The correctional transfers," I said.

"Ready," he said.

"Begin."

He moved immediately.

The correctional transfers took longer than the exiles.

Not because the process was complicated. Because the number of wolves being transferred was larger and each one required individual documentation, formal record of sentence, confirmation of receiving facility, and escort assignment. Pryor had prepared all of it in advance and my warriors executed it without gaps but it still took time and time was something I was content to give it.

Every step done properly mattered.

This wasn't just about today. The records being created right now would exist long after Ashcrest had rebuilt itself into something else. Every document Pryor filed, every transfer confirmed, every sentence formally executed would stand as evidence that what happened here had been answered for completely. No gaps. No informal arrangements. No quiet decisions made to spare someone discomfort at the expense of the record.

Everything by law.

The last order

Everything exact.

I watched the process from the steps while the pack moved around the edges of the grounds in the careful way they'd been moving since the hearing. Not dispersed. Not assembled. Present the way I'd asked Pryor to keep them, visible and aware of what was happening without being forced to stand in formal witness to every individual transfer.

Isla remained beside me through most of it.

She didn't ask questions and she didn't direct anything. She simply watched with those eyes that missed nothing and said very little and I understood that she was doing what she'd been doing since we arrived at Ashcrest, taking everything in completely before deciding what it meant.

Zeron came to my side halfway through the transfers.

"New leadership is ready," he said quietly.

"Where?"

"Waiting in the east corridor."

"Bring them out when the last transfer is confirmed," I said. "Not before."

He nodded and moved off.

The announcement of new leadership mattered in its sequencing as much as anything else today. The pack needed to see the old order removed completely before the new one was presented. If the two things overlapped even slightly it would create the impression of continuity between them and there was no continuity here. What was coming wasn't a continuation of what had been. It was a replacement of it.

That distinction needed to be visible.

The last transfer was confirmed as the sun moved past midday.

I gave Zeron the signal.

Three wolves came out of the east corridor and crossed the grounds to where I stood. Two men and a woman, all mid rank, all confirmed non complicit in the investigation, all chosen for specific reasons I had documented and would leave on record with the oversight structure being put in place today.

The pack noticed them immediately.

I watched recognition move through the assembled wolves as they understood what they

The last order were seeing. These weren't strangers. These were members of their own pack, people they knew, people who had lived on this land alongside them. That mattered. Ashcrest didn't need someone from outside to tell it what to become. It needed people from inside it who understood what had gone wrong and had chosen differently.

I introduced them by name and by appointment.

No ceremony.

No speech beyond what was necessary.

The oversight structure, the reporting requirements, the crown supervision terms, all of it had been documented and would be left with them in full. They knew what was expected and they knew the consequences of failing to meet it.

When I finished the pack was quiet.

Not the fear quiet of the earlier hours. Something different. The quiet of people absorbing a new shape of things and trying to understand what it required from them.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 123

The border behind us

(Isla)

Caius finished speaking and the grounds went quiet.

I stood beside him and watched the pack absorb what they'd just been told and felt something I hadn't expected to feel standing in Ashcrest. Not satisfaction. Not the particular relief of something finished. Something quieter than both, closer to the feeling I'd had when I first crossed Ashcrest's border coming back and understood that the guards at the gate were his and not Rodan's.

Something settling into place.

The three wolves standing in front of the pack were people I recognized by face if not by name. Mid rank. Ordinary in the way most wolves were ordinary, not remarkable in any way that would have drawn attention. I'd passed them on the grounds over the years and none of them had ever looked at me with cruelty. None of them had ever looked at me with particular kindness either.

They had simply existed here the way most wolves had existed here, going about their lives, staying inside the lines Rodan had drawn, not asking questions about what lived at the edge of the pack land.

But they hadn't participated.

In Ashcrest that had apparently been enough to qualify as a different kind of wolf.

I thought about what that said about the standard this territory had been operating under and

I understood why Caius had made the choice he made. You couldn't rebuild something broken by importing a new version of the same thing. You had to find what had survived intact inside the original structure and start from there.

Whether these three wolves were equal to what was being given to them I didn't know yet.

Neither did they, probably.

But they were standing there and the pack was looking at them and Ashcrest was beginning to understand that the shape of things had changed permanently and none of that would have happened without everything that came before it.

I looked out across the grounds one more time.

The grounds where I'd scrubbed stone and carried wood and kept my eyes down for years. The grounds where the pack had watched things happen and called their watching nothing.

The grounds where I'd stood after the shift and felt sixty wolves bow to something they hadn't expected to find here.

Vaela stirred inside me.

'We're done here,' she said.

I looked at Caius.

He was already looking at me.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He turned to Zeron and gave the signal and the grounds began their final movements. I didn't move toward the horses immediately. I stayed where I was for a moment and looked at the pack still assembled on the grounds. They were quieter than they'd been all day, the particular quiet of people who understood something was ending and were standing inside the last moments of it.

I let myself look.

Not at anyone specific. At the territory itself. The path that ran between the pack house and the outer buildings. The training yard empty at this hour. The eastern tree line visible beyond the far fence. I'd walked every part of this land for twenty years. I knew the way the light fell across the grounds at this time of day and where the mud collected after rain and which fence posts had been leaning for so long that nobody remembered when they'd been straight.

I knew this place completely.

That hadn't changed.

What had changed was what knowing it felt like now. It wasn't home anymore. It hadn't been home for a long time if it had ever been home at all. But it was the place I came from and standing here about to leave it for the last time I let myself hold that plainly without dressing it into something else.

Vaela moved inside me.

Not pushing. Just present.

Sera appeared at my side. "How are you feeling?"

"Ready," I said.

The border behind us

She nodded once and moved toward the horses without adding anything to it.

I followed her.

The horses were ready at the front of the pack house, the formation already taking shape around them. Caius's warriors mounted in sequence without instruction. Pryor stood to one side with the final documents under his arm, everything confirmed and sealed and leaving with us.

Caius moved toward his horse without breaking stride and I stopped walking.

He noticed before I said anything. He turned and looked at me.

“I want my own horse,” I said.

He held my gaze for a moment. Then he looked at Zeron. “Get her a horse.”

Zeron moved immediately. Nobody commented on it. Nobody made it into something it didn’t need to be. Two minutes later a horse was brought forward, a dark bay mare, calm and well built, and I crossed to her and stood beside her for a moment before mounting without help.

I settled into the saddle.

Caius was already watching me from his own horse, expression even, giving nothing away the way he gave nothing away when something had affected him and he’d decided not to make it visible.

“Beside you,” I said. “Not behind.”

“Yes,” he said.

Zeron took the front of the formation. The warriors fell into position. Everything was ready.

Nobody moved for a moment.

I felt the pack behind us, all the wolves still on the grounds, standing back and watching the way they’d been watching everything since the hearing. I didn’t turn to look at them. I could feel them through my senses, that layered complicated presence of sixty wolves who were going to have to figure out what came next without the structure they’d always operated inside.

That was their work now.

Mine was done.

I looked at the gate ahead.

The border behind us

Caius looked at me once more. I nodded.

Zeron moved and the formation followed and we began to ride through the grounds and the pack house passed on my left and the training yard on my right and every familiar marker of a territory I’d spent twenty years inside moved past one by one and I kept my eyes on the gate.

The gate came up and we rode through.

The border was a few minutes further down the road and when we crossed it I felt the difference. Not dramatic. Just a quiet release of something that had been sitting in me for so long I hadn't noticed the weight of it until it was gone.

The forest closed in on both sides.

The road curved.

Ashcrest disappeared behind the trees.

Caius rode beside me and the road went on ahead through cold air and old forest and neither of us spoke. Vaela was still inside me, settled and complete.

I kept my eyes forward.

The road went on.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 124

The road into wraithborne–1

(Caius)

Isla didn't look back.

I noticed it before anything else. Not once after Ashcrest disappeared behind the trees did her attention shift over her shoulder. She kept her eyes on the road ahead, one hand steady on the reins, her posture straight in the saddle. She looked like she belonged beside me.

That mattered.

She had asked for her own horse, and I had given it to her because the request was more than a request. It was a statement, one made in front of the pack that had spent years watching her walk behind everyone else. She wasn't leaving Ashcrest behind my back or under my protection. She was riding out beside me.

The road stretched ahead through the trees, colder now that the sun had moved lower. Zeron rode at the front with two warriors, keeping the pace even. Pryor rode behind us with the sealed records secured in a leather case. The rest of the formation moved around us in silence.

No one spoke for the first mile.

There was no need.

Ashcrest was behind us, and every hoofbeat carried us farther from it. The trees grew denser, the road narrowed, and the air lost the scent of old stone and pack grounds. I felt the difference through the bond before I saw it on Isla's face. She breathed deeper.

I looked at her without turning my head fully. "Do you want to stop?"

Her eyes stayed forward. "No."

"We can if you need to."

"I know."

That answer told me enough. She wasn't refusing because she thought stopping meant weakness. She was refusing because stopping between Ashcrest and Wraithborne wasn't what she wanted. I understood that before she said anything else.

A few moments passed before she spoke again. "I don't want to stop between there and home."

Home.

The word moved through me with more force than I expected. She said it calmly, like it belonged in her mouth now. Not Wraithborne. Not your territory. Home.

Vorak stirred beneath my skin but didn't speak.

Good.

Some moments didn't need his voice inside them.

I kept my eyes on the road. "Then we won't stop unless you ask."

"I won't ask."

"I know."

She looked at me then, and the corner of her mouth moved slightly. "You say that like you believe me."

"I do."

That seemed to satisfy her.

Pryor moved closer after another stretch of road. He waited until I looked toward him before speaking. He had always known when to bring me information. He also knew when to leave silence alone.

“Final confirmation from the rear escort,” he said. “Ashcrest border is sealed.”

“Exiles?”

“Past the southern line and under external escort.”

“Transfers?”

“Received by the correctional compound.”

“And the new leadership?”

“Installed under crown supervision. First report due in seven days.”

I nodded once. “Good.”

Pryor glanced toward Isla, not in question, only acknowledgment. “The records are complete.

Isla heard him.

I knew she did because her fingers shifted once on the reins. She didn’t look back. Pryor fell behind us again, and the formation returned to silence. I let the confirmation settle where it belonged.

Nothing unfinished remained behind us.

No open order. No loose sentence. No quiet exception waiting to become a problem later. Ashcrest had been answered. Now it had to live with the answer.

Isla rode quietly for a while after that.

I didn’t press her. The bond was open enough for me to feel the surface of her emotions, but I didn’t reach deeper than that. If she wanted to give me her thoughts, she would. I trusted her to do that now.

After a time, she said, “It feels strange.”

I looked toward her. “Leaving?”

“Yes.”

Her voice stayed calm, but there was thought beneath it. “I thought I would feel more.”

“More what?”

“I don’t know.” She looked ahead again. “Anger maybe. Sadness. Something bigger.”

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 125

The road into wraithborne–2

The road into wraithborne–2

“What do you feel?”

She considered it for a moment. “Clear.”

That word fit her.

It fit the way she sat in the saddle. It fit the way she hadn’t looked back. It fit the quiet around her that wasn’t empty anymore. It was settled.

“Then clear is enough,” I said.

She looked at me again. “You don’t think I should feel something else?”

“No.”

“Most people would.”

“I’m not most people.”

That earned a small look from her.

“No,” she said. “You’re not.”

The road curved, and the trees opened slightly ahead. The sky beyond us had started to change color, the late day light thinning through the branches. We would not reach Wraithborne before full dark. We would reach the outer border before night settled completely.

That was enough.

The closer we came, the more aware I became of the land ahead. Wraithborne had always answered me. Not in words. It was an old bond between king and territory, one built through bloodline, rule, and recognition.

But today there was something else beneath it.

A waiting.

I felt it once, then again.

Vorak lifted his head inside me.

He felt it too.

I looked toward the trees ahead.

The road into wraithborne–2

Isla's horse slowed half a step before she corrected it. She had felt something. I saw it in the way her hand tightened on the reins. I saw it in the way her attention sharpened toward the road ahead.

"What is it?" I asked.

Isla didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes stayed on the trees.

"I don't know."

That made my focus shift fully.

Zeron looked back from the front, sensing the change in us before anyone else did. I lifted one hand slightly, and the formation slowed at once. The horses settled into a quieter pace as we approached the border markers hidden among the trees. Then the stone posts came into view.

Old black stone.

Carved with the crown sigil and the first markings of Wraithborne territory.

I had crossed this border more times than I could count. It had always felt like mine. This time, before the land reached for me, it reached for her. Isla drew in a breath.

The bond between us warmed at once.

Not from me.

From the land.

Every warrior in the formation felt the change, though none of them spoke. Horses shifted. Wolves lifted their heads. The air itself seemed to recognize something moving through it. Something older than title and stronger than ceremony.

Isla stared at the border stones.

“What is that?” she asked quietly.

“Wraithborne,” I said.

Her eyes moved to mine.

“It’s answering you.”

She went still.

The road into wraithbome–2

Not afraid.

Not overwhelmed.

Still in the way someone became when a truth arrived and stood directly in front of them.

“It shouldn’t do that,” she said.

“No,” I said. “Not yet.”

Because she wasn’t marked. Because she hadn’t been crowned. Because the kingdom had no formal reason to recognize her as anything beyond my accepted mate. But Vaela was not ordinary.

And neither was Isla.

The mare beneath her shifted once, then settled again as if the land itself had calmed her. Isla looked down briefly, then back at the stones. I watched her process it, not with panic, but with the same careful attention she gave everything important.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

I could have given her law. I could have given her history. I could have told her that territories didn't answer to mates before the mark. Instead, I gave her the truth.

"It means Wraithborne knows you."

Her lips parted slightly.

The words landed.

I felt them land through the bond.

She looked at the stones again, and something in her expression changed. Not pride. Not shock. Something quieter. Something that looked almost like belonging finding her before she had decided whether to reach for it.

Zeron lowered his head from the front of the formation.

Then the warriors behind him did the same.

One by one.

No command.

No order.

Isla noticed.

The road into wraithborne–2

Her eyes moved over them, then back to me.

I didn't lower my head. I was her mate. Her king. The man riding beside her. But I let the others show what the land had already made clear.

Wraithborne had felt its queen coming home.

Isla swallowed once.

Only once.

Then she straightened in the saddle.

Vaela moved beneath her skin, and this time every wolf present felt it. The air changed again, not enough to force submission, but enough to make recognition pass through the formation. Isla looked at the border ahead.

“Do we cross?” she asked.

The question was simple.

The meaning wasn’t.

I held her gaze. “Together.”

She nodded once.

Zeron moved first, guiding the front of the formation through the markers. The warriors followed, slower now, more aware of what they were witnessing. I waited until Isla moved her horse forward. Then I matched her pace exactly.

We crossed the border side by side.

The moment her horse stepped onto Wraithborne land, the bond between us opened wider. Isla’s breath caught, but she didn’t stop. The land answered again, stronger this time, moving around her like recognition settling into place. I felt the shift through my own connection to the territory.

Not a guest.

Not a rescued wolf.

Not a temporary presence inside my walls.

Hers.

Isla kept riding.

The road into wraithborne–2

Her eyes stayed forward, but I saw the change in her face. The road ahead was no longer just the road away from Ashcrest. It was the road into something waiting for her. Something that had already made room before she asked.

After a while, Isla spoke without looking at me.

“It feels different.”

“It is different.”

“No,” she said. “I mean me.”

I looked at her then.

She kept her attention ahead. “I feel different here.”

I understood.

Ashcrest had recognized what she was with fear.

Wraithborne recognized her with welcome.

That difference mattered.

“You’re not walking into someone else’s place anymore,” I said.

Her fingers tightened once on the reins. “No.”

The single word carried more than agreement.

It carried acceptance.

We rode on as the first lights of the outer watch appeared through the trees. Men moved along the ridge ahead, and horns sounded once from the tower, low and controlled, announcing our return. A second horn answered from deeper inside the territory. Then a third.

Wraithborne knew its king had returned.

And this time, it knew who rode beside him.

Isla looked toward the lights ahead.

I watched her instead.

She didn’t look back.

She didn’t need to.

Ashcrest was gone behind us. Wraithborne opened ahead, dark and waiting and already hers in ways none of us fully understood yet. I kept my horse beside hers as the road carried us home.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 126

Where I belong

(Isla)

The pack house was lit when we came up the rise.

Pack members had come out along the path, not summoned, just there the way the Wraithbone pack was always just there when something was happening. I kept my eyes forward as we rode toward the steps.

The first heads lowered before we reached the halfway point. Then more. Moving through the pack the way it always moved now, without command, without hesitation. Vaela stirred inside me and I let her.

We reached the steps and I dismounted.

Caius was beside me when my feet hit the ground. He didn't say anything. Neither did I. We walked up the steps together and through the doors and the warmth of the pack house came out to meet us.

Dena appeared from the kitchen corridor. She stopped when she saw me.

"Welcome back," she said.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded and moved off.

I stood in the entrance hall and let the building settle around me. The bond with the territory was still moving through me, quiet and steady, not asking anything from me. Caius stood beside me, close enough that I could feel him without looking. For once, I didn't need time to decide what I wanted.

I looked toward the stairs.

"Your quarters," I said.

Caius's attention shifted to me at once, but he didn't ask if I was sure this time. We had already crossed that line in Ashcrest. He knew I wasn't asking for permission, and I knew he wouldn't make me explain the same choice twice.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then he nodded once.

"Come with me."

Where I belong

He didn’t take my hand first.

He waited.

That small pause mattered more than it should have.

I reached for him, and his fingers closed around mine at once. The bond warmed between us, familiar now, easier than it had been the first night. Together, we walked toward the stairs.

The stairs felt different this time.

Not because they had changed, but because I had. I wasn’t being taken somewhere safe for the night. I was walking toward the room I had chosen, with the man I had chosen, in the territory that had welcomed me before I fully understood why.

Caius kept his pace even with mine.

No pulling.

No guiding.

Just beside me.

When we reached the upper corridor, I didn’t look toward the east wing. I already knew where I wanted to go. Caius turned toward his quarters, and I went with him.

The door was closed when we reached it.

Caius opened it and stepped aside, letting me enter first. He didn’t make the moment bigger than it needed to be, and I was grateful for that. I crossed the threshold without stopping.

The room was warm.

A fire had already been lit, and the scent of him was everywhere. It wasn’t strange to me anymore. It settled around me in a way that made Vaela go quiet inside my chest.

Caius came in behind me and closed the door.

For a moment, I stood there and looked around without speaking. This was not the temporary room in Ashcrest. This was his place, the room he returned to when no one else needed him.

Now I was here too.

My chest tightened, but not from fear. I turned to him and found him already watching me. His expression was calm, but the bond told me he was feeling more than he showed.

Where I belong

“I need my things moved here,” I said.

Caius’s gaze stayed on mine.

“They will be,” he said.

Just like that.

No argument.

No question.

The answer made something settle inside me. I nodded once and looked toward the room again.

For a few seconds, I didn’t know what to do with myself. That almost made me laugh. I had faced Ashcrest without lowering my eyes. I had stood in front of the pack that broke me and spoken without shaking. I had crossed into Wraithbone with the land itself reaching for me.

And now I was standing in Caius’s room, unsure where to put my hands.

Caius noticed.

Of course he did.

He didn’t point it out.

He only walked to the wardrobe and opened one side of it.

“This side is yours,” he said.

I stared at the empty space.

Mine.

A simple word.

A dangerous one.

I walked closer and touched the edge of the wardrobe door.

“When did you clear it?”

Caius didn’t look away.

“When you told me in Ashcrest that you didn’t want to keep sleeping in a different room,” he said. “I had one of the servants clear it before we returned.”

Where I belong

I stared at the empty space until it stopped feeling like something I needed to react to and started feeling like something that was simply true.

Then I closed the wardrobe and stood there with my hand still on the door.

Caius hadn’t moved.

I turned around and looked at him and he looked back and the room was quiet between us and neither of us said anything for a long moment. There wasn’t anything that needed saying. The empty wardrobe had said it. The cleared shelf had said it. The fire already burning when we walked in had said it.

He’d made room before I arrived.

I crossed to the bed and sat on the edge of it. “I’m glad you’re taking this seriously,” I said.

When I looked at him I could tell he knew exactly what I was talking about.

Caius didn’t come closer.

That helped more than I expected.

He let me sit there with the choice I had made instead of trying to turn it into something else.

“I know what this means,” he said.

I looked up at him.

His eyes stayed on mine.

“And I know what it doesn’t mean.”

My fingers curled once against the blanket.

I nodded once.

Then I took my boots off and set them beside the bed. I lay back and looked at the ceiling. Caius moved around the room in the quiet way he moved through spaces that belonged to him and after a while he came to bed and lay down beside me.

The bond warmed between us.

Outside Wraithbone was dark and still.

I closed my eyes and the day finally finished.

Where I belong

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 127

et them try–1

(Caius)

The council met the following morning.

I'd sent word the night before that the meeting would happen at first light and nobody would be excused from it. Pryor had the Ashcrest records arranged on the table by the time I walked in, every document sealed and signed and ready to be presented in the exact order they needed to be presented in.

Seven council members sat around the table.

I looked at each of them once before I sat down.

They'd had a day to talk among themselves, which meant they'd had a day to form opinions and share concerns and decide what questions they were going to ask. I preferred it that way. A council that had already discussed something privately came to a formal meeting with clearer positions and clearer positions were easier to address than the vague discomfort of people who hadn't yet worked out what they thought.

I sat down.

"Let's begin," I said.

The first question came from Aldric.

He was the oldest member of the council, sixty three, silver haired, with the particular stillness of someone who had sat in rooms like this one for long enough that he no longer felt the need to perform authority. He'd served under my father before me and he'd served under me for eight years and in that time he'd never once asked a question he didn't already know the answer to.

"The girl," he said.

I held his gaze. "Her name is Isla."

He accepted the correction without visible reaction. "Isla Thorne. Former member of Ashcrest pack. Currently residing in Wraithbone." He paused. "As your mate."

"Yes," I said.

"And as a Celestial wolf," he said.

"Yes."

et them try–1

The table absorbed that. Not with shock. They'd had a day. The shock had already happened somewhere private and what was left was the controlled version of it, seven experienced wolves sitting around a table trying to work out what this meant for the territory they served.

"The last confirmed Celestial wolf was over three centuries ago," said Coren, third seat from the left, younger than Aldric by twenty years and sharper in the way younger council members were sharp before experience taught them patience.

"Yes," I said.

"Which means there is no living precedent," she said.

"No," I said.

"And the old laws," Aldric said.

I looked at him.

"You've read them," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said.

"Then you know what they say about a Celestial wolf's position relative to an Alpha King."

“I do,” I said. “Equal in all things to her mate.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Seven wolves sitting with the weight of it. I let them have the time because forcing the conversation forward before they’d processed what equal actually meant in practice would produce the wrong kind of discussion.

Aldric broke the silence.

“The mark hasn’t been given,” he said.

“No,” I said.

“Which means her position isn’t formally recognised under current law.”

“The old laws recognise it,” I said.

“The old laws haven’t been invoked in three centuries,” Coren said. “There are packs who will argue they no longer apply.”

“They apply,” I said.

“With respect,” Aldric said, “that will need to be demonstrated rather than stated.” He looked

Let them try–1 at me steadily. “Other territories will hear about this. Some already have. A Celestial wolf mated to the Alpha King is not information that stays contained.” He paused. “There will be those who move quickly to challenge what she is before it becomes formally established.”

I looked around the table.

“Let them try,” I said.

Aldric held my gaze. “That’s not a strategy,” he said.

“No,” I said. “It’s a certainty.”

Coren leaned forward slightly.

“The simplest solution is the mark,” she said. “Once it’s given her position becomes undeniable under both old and current law. No challenge holds after that.”

“I’m aware,” I said,

“Then why hasn’t it been given?”

The question landed plainly. Not disrespectfully. Just directly, the way Coren asked most things.

I looked at her.

“Because it’s her choice,” I said. “Not mine. Not the council’s. Not any external pressure that arrives from other territories.” I held the room. “When she’s ready it will happen. Until then nobody in this room or outside it gets to decide the timeline for her.”

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 128

Let them try–2

Silence followed that.

Not uncomfortable. The silence of seven wolves absorbing something and deciding whether to push further.

Aldric didn’t push.

He simply nodded once, slowly, the nod of a man who had understood something and filed it correctly.

“Then we prepare,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“For challenges.”

“For whatever comes,” I said. “Wraithbone doesn’t respond to pressure by moving faster than it should. We hold our position. We make clear what she is and what that means. We let anyone who wants to test it understand exactly what they’re testing.”

Coren looked at me. “And if someone moves against her directly?”

I held her gaze.

“Then they find out what it means to move against the Alpha King’s mate,” I said. “And against a Celestial wolf.”

The table absorbed that.

Nobody asked anything further.

Pryor stepped forward from the wall.

“There’s one more matter,” he said.

I looked at him.

“Three territorial leaders have already sent correspondence since our return.” He set the letters on the table in front of me. “All three are requesting formal confirmation of the mate bond. Two are requesting details about the Celestial wolf claim specifically.”

I looked at the letters without picking them up.

“Who sent them,” I said.

Let them ary–2

“Alpha Caden of Ironfield. Alpha Voss of Coldmere.” Pryor paused. “And the High Council of the Eastern Territories.”

The room changed at that last name.

Not dramatically. Just a shift in the quality of the attention around the table. The High Council of the Eastern Territories didn’t send correspondence without reason and their reasons were never simple.

“What does the High Council of the Eastern Territories wants,” Aldric said.

“A formal audience,” Pryor said. “Within thirty days.”

I looked at the letters for a moment.

Then I picked them up and read each one in turn. The first two were what I expected, territorial leaders responding to information they’d received and wanting confirmation before they decided what position to take. Standard political movement. Manageable.

The third was different.

The High Council’s language was careful the way language was careful when it was being precise on purpose. They didn’t question the mate bond. They didn’t challenge the Celestial wolf claim. They simply requested a formal audience to discuss the implications of the old laws being invoked for the first time in three centuries.

I set the letters down.

“Tell Alpha Caden and Alpha Voss that the bond is confirmed and the Celestial wolf claim is documented and verified by Wraithbone’s head healer,” I said. “Tell the High Council I’ll receive them in thirty days.”

Aldric looked at the letters on the table before looking back at me.

“Thirty days is not much time,” he said.

“It’s enough,” I said.

“The High Council will come with questions about the mark,” he said. “They’ll want to know when it will be given. They’ll frame it as a matter of territorial stability.”

“They can frame it however they want,” I said.

“And your answer?”

I looked at him.

Let me try–2

“My answer is the same answer I gave this council an hour ago,” I said. “It happens when she chooses it. Not before. Not because external pressure has decided the timeline matters more than she does.”

Aldric held my gaze for a long moment.

Then he nodded once.

“I’ll have a draft response to the High Council on your desk by tomorrow,” he said.

“Good,” I said.

He gathered his documents and stood and the rest of the council followed and the room emptied around me and I sat alone with the three letters on the table in front of me and thought about a woman somewhere in the pack house who didn’t yet know that the world had already started paying attention to what she was.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 129

The council’s notice

(Caius)

Isla was at breakfast when I came back from the council room.

The table was quieter than usual at this hour, most of the pack already done with their morning meal and back to their routines. She sat in her usual seat beside mine with a plate in front of her and her eyes on the window. She looked up when I came in and something in her expression shifted.

I sat down beside her.

She waited.

“I need to tell you something,” I said.

She didn’t ask what it was before I said it. She simply looked at me and waited.

“Three territorial leaders sent correspondence while we were traveling back from Ashcrest,” I said. “Two want formal confirmation of the mate bond and the Celestial wolf claim.”

“And the third,” she said.

“The High Council of the Eastern Territories,” I said. “They want a formal audience. Within thirty days.”

“What does that mean,” she said.

“It means word has spread faster than expected,” I said. “They want to discuss the implications of the old laws being invoked for the first time in three centuries.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“They’ll want to know about the mark,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“What did you tell the council?”

“That it’s your choice,” I said. “Not mine. Not theirs. Not anyone outside this territory.”

“And the High Council?”

“Same answer,” I said. “Same answer for everyone.”

She looked at me for a moment.

The councils notice

Then she nodded once.

“Do they have authority over you?” she said.

“No,” I said. “They’re a governing body not a ruling one. They advise. They mediate between territories. They don’t command.”

“But they carry weight?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “Their opinion matters to other packs.”

“And if their opinion is that the mark should happen on their timeline?”

“Then their opinion is wrong,” I said.

She looked at me. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I said.

She nodded once and went back to her breakfast and said nothing more about it for a while. Then without looking at me she said, “I want to be in that room when they come.”

“You will be,” I said.

“From the beginning,” she said. “Not brought in after.”

“Yes,” I said.

She picked up her cup. “Good.”

We finished breakfast without talking about it further.

That was one of the things I appreciated about her. She didn’t pull a subject apart after it had been settled. The High Council was coming in thirty days, she would be in the room from the beginning, the mark was her choice and nobody outside Wraithbone was going to change that. Those were the facts and she’d received them and filed them and moved on.

I watched her from the corner of my eye while she finished eating.

She was thinking. I could tell by the particular quality of her stillness. Not worried. Working something through.

“What do you know about them?” she said eventually.

“The High Council?”

“Yes.”

sounds notice

(+25 Points

“Enough,” I said. “I’ve dealt with them before. They move carefully and they speak carefully and nothing they say in a room is only about what it appears to be about.”

She looked at me. “So they’ll come here pretending it’s about the old laws.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And it’s actually about the mark.”

“Partly,” I said. “It’s also about understanding what a Celestial wolf means for the balance of power between territories. That hasn’t been tested in three centuries. They want to see it for themselves.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“They want to see me,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

She looked at the window. “Then I want to be ready.”

“Then we prepare,” I said.

She looked at me. “How?”

“You need to know how they operate,” I said. “How they ask questions. What they’re listening for underneath the answers. How to read the room when they’re being careful with their language.”

“And Vaela?” she said. “Will they feel her?”

“Yes,” I said. “They’re experienced enough to feel something. Whether they know what it is before you tell them is another question.”

She thought about that. “I don’t want them to see her as a threat.”

“They already do,” I said. “A Celestial wolf changes the balance of power in ways that haven’t existed for three centuries. They’d be foolish not to take it seriously.”

“Then I need to show them she isn’t something to be afraid of,” she said.

I looked at her. “She doesn’t need to be afraid of anything,” I said. “That’s not the same thing.”

She held my gaze for a moment.

Then she nodded once. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

The country notice

She looked back at the window. “Okay.”

I watched her for a moment longer.

She wasn’t shrinking from what was coming. She wasn’t looking at me like I had brought danger to her table and expected her to carry it quietly. She was taking the information apart piece by piece and deciding where she stood inside it.

That was Isla now.

Not untouched by fear.

Not careless with power.

Just unwilling to let either one make her smaller.

“You don’t have to become what they expect,” I said.

Her eyes moved back to mine.

“You don’t have to prove Vaela is safe by making yourself less than you are.”

She was quiet after that.

Then she nodded once. “I don’t want to hide her.”

“Then don’t.”

Her fingers tightened around the cup for one second before relaxing again.

“What if they don’t like what they feel?”

“Then they’ll learn to sit with it.”

That earned the smallest breath from her. Almost amusement. Almost disbelief.

“You make it sound simple.”

“It isn’t,” I said. “But it’s still true.”

She looked back toward the window.

Morning light touched the side of her face, and for a moment I saw both versions of her at once. The girl Ashcrest had tried to silence. The woman Wraithbone had already begun to answer.

Then she said, “I want Sera there tomorrow.”

council’s notice

“She’ll be there.”

“And Pryor.”

“Yes.”

She nodded again, already building the shape of what she needed around herself.

I let her.

This was not mine to take over.

After a while, she picked up her fork again.

“Then we start tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes.”

She took one bite, calm as if the High Council hadn’t just placed itself on the edge of our lives.

But the bond told me the truth.

She wasn’t calm because she didn’t understand.

She was calm because she did.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 130

Hard questions

(Caius)

I cleared my schedule for the morning.

Pryor looked at the items I moved without commenting, which meant he approved, and by the time Isla appeared at my office door everything that could wait had been pushed to the afternoon.

She came in and sat across from me and looked at me directly.

“Start from the beginning,” she said.

“The High Council was established two centuries ago as a neutral body to mediate disputes between territorial packs. Seven members elected from the major territories every ten years.”

“Are any of them from packs that would want to challenge Wraithbone?” she said.

That was a good first question.

“Two of them,” I said. “Elder Sorin of the northern territories and Councillor Halvon of the western pack alliance. Both have interests that a Celestial wolf complicates.”

“How?” she said.

“Sorin controls the northern bloc,” I said. “Four of the seven council votes follow his lead. If he decides to push for the mark formally the numbers are there to make it an official council position.”

“Can they force it?” she said.

“No,” I said. “The High Council has no authority over the mark itself. But they can make the political cost of refusing high enough that other packs start applying their own pressure.”

“And Halvon?”

“He wants Wraithbone’s attention divided,” I said. “A Celestial wolf and an unmarked mate bond is exactly the kind of thing that keeps a king occupied.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“So Sorin wants to settle things on his terms,” she said. “And Halvon wants things to stay unsettled.”

“Yes,” I said.

Hard questions

“They’ll work against each other,” she said.

I looked at her.

“If Sorin pushes too hard for the mark Halvon will push back,” she said. “Because a settled situation doesn’t serve him.”

“Yes,” I said.

She looked at the documents on the table. “What do the other five want?”

“Mostly what councils always want,” I said. “To appear neutral while protecting their own interests.”

She almost smiled at that. “So the same as everyone.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And Sorin specifically,” she said. “What does he look like? How does he move in a room?”

I looked at her.

“You’re already thinking about reading him,” I said.

“I want to know what I’m walking into,” she said. “Tell me.”

“Older,” I said. “Deliberate. He speaks slowly and chooses every word carefully. If he asks you something twice it means your first answer didn’t satisfy him.”

“And Halvon?”

“Younger. Less patient. He’ll push harder and faster than Sorin and he’ll make it look like reasonable questions.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Questions about the mark,” I said. “About the timeline. About what formal recognition of a Celestial wolf means for territorial law. He’ll frame everything as procedural concern.”

“But it won’t be,” she said.

“No,” I said. “It’ll be pressure dressed as process.”

She nodded slowly and looked at the documents again.

“Can I read those?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s why they’re there.”

Hard questions

She reached for the nearest document and I watched her settle into it with the particular focused attention she gave things that mattered and I thought that whoever the High Council sent in thirty days was going to walk into a room they hadn’t fully prepared for.

She read through the first document without speaking.

I watched her from across the table. Not obviously. The way I watched most things, present and aware without making it into something that required acknowledgment. She turned the pages carefully, the same focus she gave everything that mattered, and the room was quiet around us except for the fire and the distant sounds of the pack house going about its morning.

After a while she set the document down.

“They’re going to push hard,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Sorin especially.”

“Yes.”

She looked at the table for a moment. Then she looked at me directly.

“What if it comes to that?” she said.

I waited.

“What if the political cost becomes too high,” she said. “What if not marking me creates problems for Wraithbone that can’t be managed any other way.” She held my gaze. “I’m not saying that’s where we are. I’m asking what happens if we get there.”

“It won’t come to that,” I said.

“You don’t know that,” she said.

She was right. I didn’t know that with certainty and she knew I didn’t and saying otherwise would have been the wrong kind of answer. I held her gaze and said nothing for a moment.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know that.”

She nodded once. Then she said, “If it does. If it comes to the point where it has to happen regardless of everything else.” She paused. “Can we do it properly? Not because the High Council pushed for it. Not because thirty packs are watching. Because we chose it.”

The room went very quiet.

Hard questions

She wasn’t asking me to mark her now. She wasn’t asking me to rush anything or collapse the distance between where we were and where that was. She was asking something more specific. Whether the mark, when it came, could still be theirs. Whether outside pressure could be kept out of the room when it happened even if outside pressure was what had moved the timeline.

I looked at her.

“Yes,” I said. “However it comes. Whatever moves the timeline. The moment itself will be ours.” I held her gaze. “Nobody else is in that room. Nobody else gets to put their name on it.”

She was quiet for a moment.

Then something in her expression shifted. Not relief. Not the careful management she used when something had landed somewhere vulnerable. Just settled. The particular look she had when something had been confirmed that she’d already suspected was true but needed to hear plainly.

“Okay,” she said.

That was all.

She picked up the next document and went back to reading and the room settled around us again and I stayed where I was across the table from her and felt Vorak go very still inside

‘She’s thinking about it,’ he said.

‘I know,‘ I said.

‘She’s been thinking about it for a while,’ he said.

I looked at her bent over the document, focused and certain and asking hard questions without flinching from the answers.

‘Yes, I said. ‘She has.’

Because I decided

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 131

Because I decided

(Isla)

He answered without hesitating.

That was the part I kept coming back to while I read through the second document. Not the answer itself, though the answer mattered. The fact that he hadn’t needed time to find it. I’d asked something that could have gone several ways and he’d looked at me and given me the cleanest version of the truth without dressing it up or managing it into something easier to receive.

The moment will be ours.

I turned a page without fully reading what was on it.

I’d been thinking about the mark for longer than I’d admitted to anyone including myself. Not with urgency. Not with the particular fear I used to carry around anything that required me to want something that could be taken back. Just thinking about it the way you thought about something that was coming and needed to be understood before it arrived.

The mark meant permanence.

Not the bond itself, that was already permanent in ways that had nothing to do with ceremony or law. But the mark was something else. It was the difference between a truth that existed between two people and a truth that existed in the world. Visible. Undeniable. Something that every wolf who came near me would feel and understand without being told.

I'd spent my whole life being told what I was.

The mark would tell them something different.

Not because I needed it to. I knew what I was now in a way I hadn't before Ashcrest, before Vaela, before standing in that hall and watching sixty wolves lower themselves to something they hadn't expected to find. The mark wasn't about knowing. It was about something else entirely and I was still working out what that something else was.

Vaela moved inside me.

'You know what it is,' she said.

'Tell me then,' I said.

'Choice, she said. 'It's the first thing you've ever been able to give that nobody can take back.'

I stared at the document without reading it.

That landed somewhere specific.

Every choice I'd made since Caius walked through my door had mattered because I'd made it. The rules. Sleeping beside him. Riding my own horse out of Ashcrest. Asking to be in the room when the High Council came. All of it chosen. All of it mine. The mark was the same thing in a different form.

Something given because I decided to give it.

Not taken. Not forced. Not extracted by bond or instinct or political pressure.

Given.

I looked up from the document.

Caius was still across the table, working through something of his own, pen moving occasionally. He hadn't spoken since I went back to reading and he hadn't looked at me either. Just present the way he was always present, giving me the space to be wherever I was without requiring me to explain it.

I watched him for a moment.

He felt it through the bond. I knew because his pen stopped moving briefly before starting again. He knew I was looking at him and he was letting me look without making it into something that needed to be addressed.

I went back to the document.

Vaela was quiet inside me now. Not absent. Satisfied in the particular way she got satisfied when something had been understood properly. She didn't push me toward anything. She never did. She simply confirmed things I was already moving toward and waited for me to arrive at them on my own.

I turned another page.

The High Council was coming in twenty nine days and I was going to be in that room from the beginning and I was going to know exactly who Sorin and Halvon were and how they operated and what they were actually asking when they asked their careful questions. I was going to sit in that room as a Celestial wolf and as Caius's mate and as someone who had already survived things that made a council meeting look manageable.

And at some point, on my own timeline, I was going to choose the mark.

Not because of them.

Because I decided

Because of me.

Because of what Vaela said.

The first thing I'd ever been able to give that nobody could take back.

I kept reading.

The afternoon came before I finished the documents.

Not because there were too many. Because I read carefully and I didn't rush through things that needed to be understood properly. By the time I set the last one down the light through the window had shifted and the pack house had changed around us from its morning sounds to its midday ones.

Caius had been in and out of the room through the afternoon. Not interrupting. Just moving the way he moved through a working day, present and purposeful, stopping occasionally to add something to the table or remove something that was no longer needed.

He came back in as I set down the final document.

“Done?” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

He sat across from me. “What did you think?”

I looked at the stack of documents. “Sorin is more careful than I expected,” I said. “His rulings are always framed around pack stability but the outcomes consistently favor the northern bloc.”

“Yes,” he said.

“He’ll frame the mark the same way,” I said. “Territorial stability. The implications of unresolved Celestial wolf status for pack law across the eastern territories.”

“Yes,” he said.

“And I’ll tell him that my status isn’t unresolved,” I said. “It’s simply on my timeline.”

Caius looked at me for a moment.

“That’s exactly right,” he said.

I nodded once and pushed the documents back across the table toward him. “What’s next?”

He looked at the documents for a moment then back at me.

Because I decided

“Tomorrow we cover how the High Council conducts a formal audience,” he said. “The structure of it. What happens in what order. Where they’ll try to create openings.”

“And Halvon specifically?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “He’ll come in after Sorin has established the tone. That’s how he operates. He lets Sorin set the room and then he pushes in a direction Sorin can’t openly object to without contradicting himself.”

I thought about that. “So they’re not actually working against each other.”

“Sometimes they are,” he said. “Sometimes they use each other. It depends on what the room gives them.”

“Then I need to watch both of them at the same time,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

I looked at the window. The afternoon light had gone lower and outside Wraithbone was moving into its evening. I’d been in this room for most of the day and I wasn’t tired in the way I expected. I felt sharper than when I’d walked in.

“Same time tomorrow?” I said.

Caius looked at me with that steady expression.

“Yes,” he said.

I stood and he stood with me and we left the office together and walked back through the pack house toward our quarters and I thought about twenty nine days and Sorin and Halvon and the mark and Vaela’s voice saying the first thing you’ve ever been able to give that nobody can take back.

Twenty nine days now.

I was going to be ready.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 132

efore it’s official

(Caius)

Pryor appeared in the doorway on the third morning of our sessions.

He had the look he had when something required my attention before it required anyone else’s. I held up one hand toward Isla without looking away from the page she’d asked me to explain and finished the sentence and then looked at him.

He crossed to me and spoke quietly. “Alpha Caden’s delegation arrived at Ironfield’s border this morning,” he said. “They’re requesting a formal meeting. Not correspondence. In person.”

I looked at him.

“Here?” I said.

“At a neutral location,” he said. “His suggestion. Three days from now.”

Isla had stopped reading. She was listening without pretending not to.

I looked at Pryor. “Who’s in the delegation?”

“Three wolves,” he said. “Senior rank. No warriors.”

“That’s deliberate,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “He’s signaling he wants conversation not confrontation.”

I picked up the note and read it once. The language was careful the way Caden’s language was always careful. Nothing aggressive. Nothing that could be read as challenge. Just a request framed as courtesy.

Isla spoke from across the table.

“Is this about me?” she said.

I looked at her.

“Partly,” I said.

“What’s the other part?”

“Caden wants to know where Wraithbone stands before the High Council makes it official,” I said. “He doesn’t like being caught on the wrong side of something after it’s already been decided.”

Before it’s official

She looked at the document in front of her for a moment. Then back at me. “What are your going to tell him?”

“That depends on what he asks,” I said.

She held my gaze. “I want to be there.”

“Caden didn’t request your presence,” I said.

“He didn’t need to,” she said. “I’m not going as a courtesy. I’m going because whatever he says in that room is about me and I’m not sitting here waiting to hear about it afterward.”

She was right and we both knew it. Keeping her away from the meeting would send exactly the wrong message to a man who was already trying to assess how strong our

position was. Bringing her said something different. Bringing her as an equal said something different again.

“You’d need to be prepared for Caden specifically,” I said. “He’s not the High Council. He operates differently.”

“Then tell me how he operates,” she said.

I looked at Pryor. He was still standing in the doorway with the particular stillness of someone who had understood that the meeting he’d interrupted had changed shape and was waiting to find out what his instructions were.

“Tell Caden’s delegation we’ll receive them in three days,” I said. “Neutral location accepted. I’ll send the specific coordinates by tomorrow morning.”

Pryor nodded and left.

I looked back at Isla.

“Caden is not subtle the way Sorin is subtle,” I said. “He doesn’t work through careful language and procedural framing. He asks direct questions and watches how you answer them. Not the words. How you sit when you answer. Whether your eyes move. Whether you take time before you speak.”

“He reads people,” she said.

“He’s been doing it for twenty years,” I said. “He’s very good at it.”

She absorbed that. “What does he want to find?”

“Weakness,” I said. “Not hostility. He’s not looking for a reason to challenge Wraithbone. He’s looking for a reason not to align with us. If he finds weakness he’ll wait to see which way the

Before it’s official

High Council rules and position himself accordingly.”

“And if he doesn’t find weakness?”

“Then he aligns with us before the High Council arrives,” I said. “Which changes the political landscape considerably.”

She looked at the table for a moment.

“So this meeting matters more than it looks like it matters,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded once. Then she reached for the document she’d set down and opened it again.

“Tell me everything you know about Caden,” she said. “We have three days.”

I looked at her for a moment.

Then I took the document from Pryor’s stack that I’d been saving for later in the preparation sessions and set it in front of her.

“Start with that,” I said.

She looked at it and then at me.

“You already had documents on him,” she said.

“I had documents on everyone,” I said.

Something moved through her expression. Not surprise. The particular look she had when something confirmed what she already suspected about him.

She read without speaking for a long time.

I went back to my own work and let her read. The morning session had shifted into something different from what it had been an hour ago but the purpose was the same. She was preparing. The subject had simply changed.

After a while she looked up.

“He’s been Alpha of Ironfield for fourteen years,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“And in that time he’s never formally challenged Wraithbone.”

“No,” I said.

Before it’s official

“But he’s tested the borders twice,” she said. “Both times he backed down before it became official.”

I looked at her. “Yes.”

“So he’s careful,” she said. “But not passive.”

“Correct,” I said.

She looked back at the document. “He lost his mate three years ago.”

“Yes,” I said.

She was quiet for a moment. “Is that relevant?”

“It might be,” I said. “A wolf who has lost a mate bond understands what one means in a way most don’t. He won’t dismiss what we have.”

She absorbed that without comment and went back to reading. I watched her turn a page and felt Vorak move inside me, quiet and settled, the particular stillness he had when something was going well without requiring his input.

She closed the document and looked at me.

“He’ll look at us together,” she said. “Not separately.”

“Yes,” I said.

“He wants to see how we operate in the same room,” she said. “Whether I defer to you. Whether you manage me.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then we just have to be what we are,” she said.

I looked at her. “Yes.”

She nodded once. “That’s the easiest thing you’ve asked me to do since we got back from

Ashcrest.”

Something moved through my expression before I could stop it.

She saw it and looked back at her document without comment.

I looked at her for a moment longer then went back to my own work.

Caden was coming to find out what we were and what we were was the one thing in all of this that required no preparation, no strategy, no careful management of language or

Before it’s official position.

It was simply what it had always been.

Vorak stirred once inside me.

‘She’s ready,‘ he said.

I looked at her across the table.

‘Yes, I said. ‘She is.’

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 133

The hardest hour

(Isla)

The document in front of me had stopped making sense ten minutes ago but I kept reading anyway. Not because the information wasn’t useful. Because stopping felt like admitting I’d reached the end of what I could absorb and I wasn’t ready to admit that yet. I turned another page and read the first line three times without taking it in.

Caius set his pen down. “Are you hungry?”

I looked up. “Yes,” I said. More than I’d realized.

He didn’t get up himself. He reached through the mind link and I felt it move through the bond between us, a brief exchange with someone on the other side of the pack house. He looked at me.

“Food’s coming,” he said.

I nodded and looked back at the document. The first line still wasn’t making sense. I moved to the second and had slightly better luck.

After a few minutes he said, “If you need a break take one.”

I looked up. “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I said,” he said.

I held his gaze for a moment. Then I closed the document. “Ten minutes,” I said.

He nodded once and went back to his work.

I pushed my chair back and went to the bathroom and stood at the basin and looked at my reflection for a moment. Whatever was moving through me wasn't visible from the outside yet. I ran cold water over my hands and dried them and stood there for another few seconds and then went back.

I sat down.

The bond hit the moment I did.

Not like Ashcrest. Not the tearing pressure of something waking up for the first time with nowhere to go. This was quieter and more specific and I recognized it immediately because I'd felt versions of it before, near him, when the bond was close to the surface and Vaela was paying attention.

The hardest hour

But it was stronger now.

It moved through me in a low steady wave, not painful, the opposite of painful actually which was somehow worse because it made it harder to treat as something to push through rather than something to move toward. I kept my face still and reached for my cup and took a slow drink and set it down and told myself it was manageable.

Vaela stirred.

'The bond,' she said.

'I know,' I said.

'It's been building since this morning,' she said.

I didn't answer that because she was right and acknowledging it out loud even internally felt like giving it permission to get worse.

Across the table Caius had gone very still.

Not the controlled stillness he used when he was managing something difficult. Different. The stillness of someone who'd felt something and was deciding what to do about it before it made the decision for him. His pen was flat against the table and he wasn't looking at anything in the room.

He was looking inward.

Which meant Vorak was already aware.

I picked up the nearest document and looked at it without reading it. The bond pulled again, slower this time, spreading through my chest. I kept my eyes on the page.

Caius exhaled once through his nose.

I looked up.

His eyes met mine across the table and I understood immediately that whatever he was managing right now was costing him considerably more than it had in Ashcrest. His jaw was set. His hand was flat on the table. Everything about him was controlled and contained and working harder than usual to stay that way.

“Isla,” he said.

His voice came out careful in a way it wasn’t usually careful.

“I feel it,” I said before he could ask.

The hardest hour

“How long?” he said.

“Since I sat back down,” I said.

He looked at the table for a moment. Then back at me. “We should stop for today.”

“We’ve still got work to do,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “We’re still stopping.”

I held his gaze. The bond pulled again and I saw the exact moment he felt it through his expression shifting, his hand pressing harder against the table. Vorak wasn’t being quiet about any of it.

“Caius,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. His voice was rougher now.

“Are you alright?”

He looked at me for a long moment.

“No,” he said. “Not particularly.”

That was honest enough that it pulled a smile out of me before I could stop it. He stood from the table and I understood immediately that the distance was deliberate, that he was

putting space between us because the alternative was not putting space between us and he was choosing to be in control of that.

I stayed where I was.

Vaela moved inside me, warm and certain and not helping at all.

‘He’s trying,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘Vorak isn’t,‘ she said.

‘I know that too,‘ I said.

I looked at Caius standing at the far side of the room with his back to me and his hands at his sides and I thought about Ashcrest and the rules and what I’d said about the mark and what he’d said back and none of that was what I was thinking about right now.

“Caius,” I said.

He turned.

The hardest hour

“Come back to the table,” I said. “We’ve got work to do.”

He looked at me for a moment.

“You’re certain?” he said.

“No,” I said. “Come back anyway.”

Something moved through his expression. Not quite a smile but close enough. He crossed back to the table and sat down and we both looked at our documents and neither of us said anything and the bond sat between us like a third presence in the room and we worked through it because that was what the work required.

It was the hardest hour of preparation we’d had.

Neither of us mentioned it afterward.

The knock came quietly at the door.

Caius brought the tray in and set it on the table between us and sat back down. We ate without speaking. The bond was still there between us, neither of us pretending

otherwise, but food and silence and the ordinary act of sitting at a table together did something to the intensity of it. Brought it back to something that didn't require managing every second.

We finished eating.

Neither of us reached for the documents right away.

The bond said everything neither of us was saying out loud and the room was quiet around it and after a moment Caius stood and held out his hand.

I looked at it for a moment.

Then I took it.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 134

The bond settles

(Caius)

She took my hand and I led her out of the office and down the corridor toward our quarters and neither of us spoke because there wasn't anything to say that the bond wasn't already saying louder than words.

I closed the door behind us and let go of her hand and put space between us immediately. Not because I wanted distance. Because what I was about to ask her required her to receive it clearly and that was harder when I was close to her.

She stood in the middle of the room and looked at me.

"Tell me what you need," she said.

That was Isla. No performance. No waiting for me to manage the moment into something easier. Just direct.

"There's something that will help," I said. "With the bond. With Vorak."

She waited.

"Scent marking," I said. "It's not the mark. It's not sex. It's something wolves do before the mating is complete when the bond becomes too strong to manage."

She looked at me steadily. “Explain it,” she said.

“Wolves have scent glands,” I said. “Neck. Wrists. Collarbone. When mates transfer scent between those points it temporarily satisfies the bond. Calms the wolves. Reduces the pressure.”

“Skin contact,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“How much?”

I held her gaze. “Enough to reach the glands,” I said. “Nothing more than that unless you choose it.”

She was quiet for a moment. Not uncertain. Processing. There was a difference and I knew it well enough by now not to fill the silence while she worked through it.

“Vorak would calm down?” she said.

The bond settles

“Yes,” I said. “And Vaela.”

She looked at me for another moment. “Would it work for you too?” she said. “Not just the wolves.”

That question landed differently than I expected. Not because it was inappropriate. Because she was asking about me specifically. Not the bond. Not Vorak. Me.

“Yes,” I said honestly. “It would help me too.”

She nodded once. “And you’re asking,” she said. “Not telling.”

“Yes,” I said. “Always asking.”

She held my gaze for another moment.

Then she reached up and began unbuttoning the top of her shirt without looking away from me. Not provocative. Practical. The way she did things she’d decided to do, without ceremony and without second guessing.

I stayed where I was and let her.

When she’d opened enough to reach the collarbone she stopped and looked at me. “Come here then,” she said.

I crossed to her slowly. The bond pulled hard the moment the distance closed but I held it and Vorak held it and I stopped in front of her and looked at her face first before anything else.

“Still your choice,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “I made it already.”

I brushed her hair aside and leaned in and pressed my face to the curve of her neck. Her scent hit me all at once and I held Vorak down by force because what he wanted and what this was were two different things and I wasn’t going to blur that line.

I stayed there. Just that. Breathing her in, letting the bond register the contact, feeling the pressure that had been sitting behind my eyes all day start to give.

She didn’t move. Didn’t pull back. She stood there and let me have it.

When I lifted my head her eyes had gone silver at the edges. Vaela close to the surface, warm and present. She was breathing differently now, not with fear or uncertainty, with the particular awareness of someone who had let something in and was feeling the full weight of it.

The bond settles

I turned my head and pressed her wrist to my neck where my own gland sat. The contact was immediate. The bond opened between us deeper than before, a warmth that settled all the way through rather than sitting at the surface the way it had been all day.

Vorak went still.

Not fighting. Not pushing. Still in the way he got when something he’d been waiting for had finally arrived.

‘Better,’ he said.

I didn’t answer him because I was focused on Isla, on the way her expression had shifted into something open and certain and completely without the careful management she usually kept between herself and things that mattered.

She looked at me. “It’s working,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” I said.

“Keep going,” she said.

I moved lower.

Her breathing changed the moment she understood where I was going. Not pulling back. The opposite. She shifted slightly, giving me access, trusting me the way she'd trusted me through everything else tonight. I pressed my lips to the back of her knee and the bond surged so hard between us that I had to stop and hold Vorak down by force before I continued.

She was trembling now. Her breathing was loud in the quiet room, faster and less controlled with every point of contact, her body leaning heavier into me than it had been a minute ago.

I worked slowly and carefully and without crossing anything she hadn't offered and by the time I lifted my head her eyes were fully changed and her grip on me had loosened considerably.

Then she pulled my head back gently and pressed her lips to my neck.

The effect was immediate. The bond opened between us fully, wider than it had been all day, and I held Vorak down by force because what was moving through me in that moment had nothing manageable left in it.

She moved to my collarbone. Slow and careful, her breathing loud against my skin, her body leaning heavier into me with each point.

pulled her closer. She continued to mark the same places I did with her scent. I let her

The bond settles because every point of contact was pulling the bond deeper into something that felt less like pressure and more like peace.

She lifted her head and looked at me.

"Caius." Barely a sound. Her mouth moved again, reaching for something else, but nothing followed.

Then her eyes went unfocused and her body came into me all at once and I caught her before she reached the floor.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 135

When I woke

(Isla)

I woke up warm.

That was the first thing. The particular deep warmth that wasn't about the room or the covers but about the bond sitting between us the way it hadn't sat all day. Quiet. Present. Not pulling. Just there.

I lay still and let myself take stock before I opened my eyes. My body felt different. Not wrong. The opposite of wrong. Like something that had been wound too tight had finally been allowed to release.

I opened my eyes.

Caius was watching me.

Not with concern. Not with the careful attention he used when he was assessing something. Just watching the way he watched things that mattered to him, present and unhurried, giving me time to arrive fully before he said anything.

"How long?" I said.

"Two hours," he said.

I looked at the window. The light had changed. Later in the afternoon than when I'd last been conscious. I lay there for a moment and let that settle.

"Did it work?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

I knew it had. I could feel the difference without needing him to confirm it. The bond was still there between us, warm and present, but the pressure that had been building all day was gone. Vorak was quiet. Vaela was settled inside me in the particular way she settled when something had been resolved rather than managed.

I looked at my wrist.

Then my collarbone.

His scent was on my skin. I could feel it more than smell it, the particular quality of something that had been transferred rather than simply absorbed through proximity. I understood what that meant. What it looked like to another wolf. What it said without either

When I woke of us having to say it.

I looked at him. "You're marked too," I said.

"Yes," he said.

I held that for a moment. Not with discomfort. With the particular clarity of someone understanding something properly for the first time. Every wolf who came near either of us would know. There was nothing ambiguous about what scent marking meant to a wolf. It was as close to a declaration as you could make without the mark itself.

“How do you feel?” he said.

I thought about that honestly before I answered. “Different,” I said. “Like the volume went down.”

Something moved through his expression. “Yes,” he said. “That’s what it does.”

“You could’ve told me sooner,” I said.

“You weren’t ready sooner,” he said.

I looked at him. He looked back. That was true and we both knew it and there wasn’t anything to argue with in it.

Vaela stirred inside me.

‘He waited,‘ she said.

‘I know,‘ I said.

‘That matters,‘ she said.

I didn’t answer her because she was right and she knew it and she didn’t need me to confirm

I sat up slowly. My body felt heavier than usual in a way that wasn’t unpleasant, the particular weight of someone who had been pulled deep and had come back up slowly. Caius stayed where he was and let me move at my own pace without reaching for me or asking if I needed anything.

That was one of the things about him I’d stopped being surprised by.

He always knew when to stay still.

I pushed my hair back and looked at the window and thought about everything that had happened today. The office. The bond building through the morning. The food. His hand. The

When I woke corridor. The room. All of it leading to this, to waking up in the quiet of a bond that had finally been given what it needed.

“The meeting,” I said.

“Two days,” he said.

I nodded once. Two days was enough. We’d covered what we needed to cover and what remained was the thing itself. Caden at neutral ground. Whatever he came looking for. Whatever we showed him without trying to show him anything.

I looked at Caius. “Are you alright?” I said.

He looked at me for a moment. “Yes,” he said.

“Vorak?”

“Quiet,” he said. “For now.”

I smiled at that. For now. As if the quiet was temporary and we both knew it and neither of us was pretending otherwise. The bond would build again. It always did. But today had given us something to measure it against, a proof that there was a way through it that didn’t require either of us to cross a line we hadn’t chosen to cross.

I turned my head and looked at him. “Next time will be easier,” I said.

He looked at me. “Probably,” he said.

“Probably isn’t yes,” I said.

Something moved through his expression. “No,” he said. “But it’s close.”

Vaela moved inside me, warm and certain.

‘You trust him,‘ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘You’ve trusted him for a while,’ she said.

‘I know,‘ I said.

I looked at Caius sitting beside me in the quiet of the room and thought about the first time I’d seen him. Standing in the doorway of the shack with the light coming in around him while

I sat in the corner with my knees pulled up and the chain on my ankle and everything in me waiting to find out what kind of pain was coming through the door next.

He hadn’t moved toward me.

He’d just stood there and looked at me and stayed still and I hadn’t understood then what that meant. I hadn’t understood that the stillness was him holding something back. That something had hit him the moment he stepped through that door and he was managing it while I sat there in my corner and waited for the worst.

I understood it now.

lay back down.

Not because I was tired. Because the room was warm and the bond was quiet and Caius was beside me and none of it required anything from me right now except to be here.

He lay back too.

Neither of us spoke for a while.

The afternoon light moved through the window and the pack house settled around us and the bond sat between us warm and quiet and present and asking nothing.

I turned back to the ceiling.

The room was warm and the bond was settled and in two days we would ride out to neutral ground and sit across from Alpha Caden of Ironfield and show him exactly what he’d come to see.

But that was two days from now.

Right now there was just this.

The quiet.

The warmth.

The bond sitting between us like something that had finally arrived where it was going.

I closed my eyes.

Vaela settled inside me, complete and certain.

I closed my eyes and let it be what it was.

Ironfield

Ironfield

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 136

When I woke

(Isla)

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The warmth.

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I closed my eyes.

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I closed my eyes and let it be what it was.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 137

Ironfield

One more day passed between the scent marking and the meeting. It was the quietest day we'd had since returning from Ashcrest.

Then the morning of the Caden meeting arrived.

Caius was already up when I opened my eyes.

He was standing at the window witUnlock its ok 137h his back to me, dressed, looking out at the territory the way he looked at things he was already thinking three steps ahead of. I lay there for a moment and watched him and felt Vaela stir inside me, alert and certain.

I sat up.

He turned when he felt me through the bond.

"How long have you been up?" I said.

"A while," he said.

I nodded and got up without asking anything else. There wasn't anything else to ask. Today was the day and we both knew what it required and neither of us needed to talk about it to be ready for it.

I dressed and we went down to breakfast together and ate without talking much. The pack house was quieter than usual at this hour, most wolves still in their quarters, the kitchen just starting to move. Dena brought food without being asked and set it between us and left without a word.

I ate and watched Caius across the table.

He was in the particular mode he got into before something significant. Not tense. Contained. Everything pulled inward and organized in a way that left nothing loose. I'd learned to recognize it. It wasn't the same as worry. It was the opposite of worry actually. It was a man who had accounted for every variable he could account for and had made his peace with the ones he couldn't.

When we were done he looked at me. "Zeron's waiting at the tree line," he said.

I stood. "Then let's go," I said.

Zeron was at the tree line with the others, already shifted, a bag secured between his teeth.

Ironfield

Two warriors flanked him, the same. Caius looked at me once and I nodded and we shifted together. Vaela arrived fully and the world opened up around me the way it always did in this form.

Caius's wolf looked at me.

I was already moving.

The forest was cold. The ground was solid. The distance closed faster than I expected, the trees moving past on either side, the bond warm between us as we covered the ground. Zeron and the warriors kept pace without effort.

When the trees thinned and the neutral ground came into view we slowed and shifted back. I dressed quickly, stood straight, looked at the stone building ahead of us sitting on open ground between two territories belonging to nobody.

Caius came to stand beside me.

"He's already inside," he said.

I nodded once. We walked toward the door.

The door opened into a single plain room.

Stone floor. A table with chairs on either side. A fire already burning in the far wall. Three wolves standing when we entered, Caden in the center, his beta to his left, his head of counsel to his right. The third wolf stood slightly back from the table exactly where Caius had said he'd be.

I took all of it in before I took my seat.

Caden was watching me when I looked at him directly. Not pretending he hadn't been. That told me something about him immediately, that he didn't perform neutrality the way some Alphas did, didn't go through the motions of appearing uninterested before revealing what he actually wanted. He was already looking at what he'd come to look at.

I looked back.

He was older than I'd expected from the documents. Not in a way that diminished him. In a way that had settled into him, the kind of age that came from carrying significant responsibility for a long time and not putting it down. His eyes were the most direct part of him. They moved between me and Caius once and then settled back on me and stayed.

"Alpha King," he said. Then, "Isla Thorne."

"Alpha Caden," Caius said beside me.

Ironfield

I said nothing. I didn't need to yet.

We sat and Caden's delegation sat and the room settled into the particular quality of silence that preceded something significant. The fire crackled once in the hearth.

Caden looked at me. "The reports from Ashcrest have been circulating for two weeks," he said. "A Celestial wolf. Unmated. Residing at Wraithbone."

"Mated," I said. "Unmarked. There's a difference."

He held that for a moment. "Yes," he said. "There is."

Something had shifted in him. I felt it through Vaela before I saw it in his face. A small internal adjustment, the kind that happened when a piece of information landed exactly where it was supposed to land.

"The High Council will argue the distinction," he said.

"They can argue whatever they want," I said. "The bond doesn't require their opinion to exist."

Caden looked at me for a long moment.

Then he looked at Caius.

Then back at me.

“You’re not what I expected,” he said.

“What did you expect?” I said.

He thought about that honestly before he answered. “Someone still finding her footing,” he said.

I held his gaze. “I found it,” I said.

Caden was quiet for a moment after that.

Not uncomfortable quiet. The quiet of a man sitting with something he’d just received and deciding what to do with it.

His beta leaned slightly toward him and said something low that I didn’t catch. Caden didn’t respond to it. His attention stayed on me.

“You lost your mate,” I said.

The room changed.

Not dramatically. The beta went still. The head of counsel stopped writing. Even the third

Ironfield wolf behind them shifted slightly.

Caden looked at me. “Yes,” he said. His voice was the same as it had been. Controlled. But something underneath it wasn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I mean that.”

He held my gaze for a moment. “I know you do,” he said quietly. “The bond tells you things about loss that you can’t know any other way.”

“Yes,” I said.

Something settled between us after that. Not the political calculation of two parties deciding whether to trust each other. Something more direct than that.

He looked at me for another moment.

Then he said, “When the High Council arrives they’re going to walk into a room with a Celestial wolf who has already decided who she is.” He paused. “That’s not something they’ve prepared for.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t.”

He nodded once slowly. Then he looked at Caius and something passed between them that didn’t require words.

When he looked back at me his position was already clear without him having to state it.

Ironfield wasn’t going to be a problem.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 138

What comes after

(Isla)

Ironfield wasn’t going to be a problem.

That didn’t mean nobody else would be.

Caden leaned back in his chair and looked between Caius and me.

“I didn’t come here to decide whether I believe the reports,” he said.

The room stayed quiet.

His beta glanced at him once before looking away again.

Caden folded his hands on the table.

“I came because the High Council is already dividing itself into camps.”

That got my attention.

Beside me, Caius’s expression didn’t change.

“What camps?” he asked.

“The wolves who think the old laws should be honored.” Caden paused. “And the wolves who think they should never have been invoked in the first place.”

The fire cracked softly behind him.

I felt Vaela lift her head.

“They want to challenge them?” I asked.

“No.”

His answer came immediately.

“Not publicly.”

That was somehow worse.

Caden’s eyes settled on me.

“Publicly, they’ll discuss procedure. They’ll discuss precedent. They’ll discuss historical interpretation.” His mouth flattened slightly. “Privately, some of them are afraid.”

What comes after

“Of me.”

“Of what you represent.”

The distinction mattered.

I could tell by the way he said it.

Caden wasn’t looking at me like I was a threat.

He was looking at me like I was a change.

And changes made people nervous.

“You support the laws,” Caius said.

“I support reality.”

The answer came without hesitation.

Caden looked at me.

“The bond exists. The wolf exists. The old laws exist. Pretending otherwise because it makes some council members uncomfortable isn’t governance. It’s stupidity.”

His beta looked like he’d heard the speech before.

The head of counsel didn’t even glance up from his notes.

Caden sighed.

“They’re coming to evaluate the situation.”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“They think they’re evaluating you.”

Something in his expression shifted.

“They’re not.”

The room went still.

“What are they evaluating?” I asked.

Caden looked directly at Caius.

“The future.”

What comes after

Silence settled over the table.

I looked at Caden for a moment.

“The future,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

He didn’t elaborate immediately.

That told me he wanted to see whether we’d ask the next question or whether we’d assume we already understood the answer.

Caius sat beside me without moving.

“What future?” he asked.

Caden nodded once.

“The one that follows this.”

He gestured vaguely between us.

“The bond. The old laws. A Celestial wolf returning after three centuries. Most of the territories aren’t worried about today. They’re worried about what happens after.”

I folded my hands on the table.

“What do they think happens?”

“They don’t know,” Caden said. “That’s the problem.”

The honesty caught my attention.

Most leaders preferred certainty. Caden seemed comfortable admitting when certainty didn’t exist.

“They don’t know what a Celestial wolf changes,” he continued. “They don’t know what authority the old laws will carry now that they’ve been invoked. They don’t know what role you’ll take in Wraithbone or whether your influence will remain inside Wraithbone’s borders.”

Vaela stirred inside me.

Not angry.

Listening.

“They’re making assumptions,” I said.

“Yes.”

“And some of those assumptions are wrong.”

“Most of them are.”

The head of counsel finally looked up from his notes.

“Fear fills empty spaces.”

It was the first thing he’d said since we’d entered the room.

Caden nodded once.

“Exactly.”

I thought about everything that had happened since Ashcrest. The hearing. The return to Wraithbone. The preparation sessions. Everything Caius had spent the last few days teaching

People who hadn’t seen any of that only had reports.

Reports never told the whole story.

“What do they think I want?” I asked.

Caden studied me for a moment.

“Power.”

I wasn’t surprised.

“Control.”

That didn’t surprise me either.

“Influence over other territories.”

I held his gaze.

“And what do you think?”

Caden didn’t answer immediately.

“I think if power was your goal, Ashcrest would’ve ended differently.”

The room went quiet.

“You had opportunities to make examples of people,” he continued. “You didn’t.”

What comes after

I remembered the hearing.

I remembered standing in front of wolves who had watched my suffering for years and realizing revenge wasn’t what I wanted.

“I wanted accountability.”

“Yes.”

The answer came immediately.

“And that’s different.”

Something settled between us.

Not agreement.

Understanding.

Caden wasn't trying to decide whether I was dangerous.

He was trying to decide what kind of leader I would become.

"The High Council won't understand that immediately," he said.

"No," Caius said. "They won't."

Caden looked at him.

"They'll think they understand."

"They'll think they do," Caius corrected.

A faint smile crossed Caden's face.

"Fair."

Caden looked back at me.

"When the High Council arrives, they'll ask questions. Some will be direct. Some won't."

I nodded.

"I know."

"They'll hide questions inside other questions. They'll test your answers without appearing to test them."

I thought about the preparation sessions.

What comes after

The reports.

The conversations.

Everything we'd been working toward.

"They'll want me to make mistakes."

"Yes."

“And if I don’t?”

A trace of amusement appeared in his expression.

“Then they’ll have to adjust.”

The room grew quiet again.

Then Caden leaned back slightly.

“That’s why I came before they did.”

Neither Caius nor I interrupted him.

“I wanted to know whether the reports were accurate.”

His eyes settled on me.

“They weren’t.”

I waited.

“They described a wolf still finding her place,” he said. “A wolf still deciding who she wanted to become.”

Vaela lifted her head.

Caden held my gaze.

“That’s not what I found when I walked into this room.”

The words landed quietly.

After a moment, he folded his hands together.

“Ironfield will stand with Wraithbone when the High Council arrives.”

No ceremony.

What comes after

No grand declaration.

Just a decision.

I glanced at Caius.

His expression remained calm, but I knew him well enough now to recognize satisfaction when I saw it.

“There will be other territories that support you,” Caden continued. “There will also be wolves who don’t.”

That didn’t surprise me.

Nothing this significant was ever going to be unanimous.

“What matters is knowing the difference between opposition and fear.”

I frowned slightly.

“They aren’t the same thing.”

“No.”

His answer came immediately.

“Fear can be educated.”

The head of counsel nodded once.

“Opposition usually can’t.”

I sat with that for a moment.

Then I nodded.

Because that might’ve been the most useful thing anyone had said all day.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 139

Too late for that

(Isla)

I sat with that for a moment.

Then I nodded because that might’ve been the most useful thing anyone had said all day.

The room settled into a quieter silence after that. Not awkward. Not strained. The kind that happened when the important things had already been said and everyone was deciding what came next. Caden leaned back slightly in his chair and studied me for a moment before speaking again.

“Can I ask you something that isn’t political?” he said.

I looked at him.

“You can ask.”

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth. That wasn’t permission. It was an answer that left the choice in my hands after the question was asked. Somehow that made me trust him a little more than I had an hour ago.

Caden folded his hands together.

“When did you know?”

I frowned slightly.

“When did I know what?”

His eyes didn’t leave mine.

“When did you stop being afraid of them?”

The room went quiet. His beta looked down at the table. The head of counsel stopped writing. Beside me, Caius didn’t move at all, but I felt his attention shift toward me through the bond.

I knew exactly who Caden meant.

Ashcrest.

Rodan.

Maren.

The wolves who watched.

The wolves who did nothing.

I thought about the question longer than I expected to. Not because I didn’t have an answer. Because I wasn’t sure the answer was the one he expected.

“I didn’t,” I said finally.

Too late for that

Gaden’s expression didn’t change.

“You didn’t?”

I shook my head.

“No. I was afraid when Caius found me. I was afraid during the hearing. I was afraid when I shifted for the first time. I was afraid when I stood in front of Ashcrest and spoke.”

Nobody interrupted. Nobody rushed to fill the silence. Caden watched the carefully.

“Then what changed?” he asked.

I looked down at my hands for a moment.

Then back at him.

“I stopped letting fear decide what I did.”

The room went completely still. Not because the answer was dramatic. Because it was true.

I’d spent years making decisions based on fear. What I said. Where I walked. Who I looked at. Whether I spoke. Whether I stayed silent. Every choice had been shaped by what would happen if ! made the wrong one.

Then Caius had found me.

After that, things had changed one decision at a time. Not all at once. Not magically. One choice after another.

Caden nodded slowly.

“I thought that might be the answer.”

I tilted my head slightly.

“Why?”

His eyes moved briefly toward the window before returning to me

“Because I’ve met wolves who aren’t afraid. They’re usually dangerous for the wrong reasons.”

That caught my attention.

Caden leaned back slightly.

“The wolves who concern rne most aren’t the ones who fear nothing. They’re the ones who think fear no longer applies to them.”

His beta gave a faint nod beside him like he’d heard the thought before.

“Fear isn’t always weakness,” Caden continued. “Sometimes it’s information. The problem starts when fear becomes the thing making every decision.”

I understood what he meant. More than I would’ve a year ago. Maybe more than most wolves ever would.

Too late for that

Gaden studied me for another moment.

“You’re still afraid of some things.”

It wasn’t a question

I nodded.

“Yes.”

“And yet you’re sitting here.”

“Yes.”

Something like approval crossed his face. Not the approval of an Alpha judging another wolf The approval of someone who’d lived long enough to recognize a difficult truth when he saw it.

His gaze shifted toward Caius.

“You were right.”

Caius raised an eyebrow.

“About?”

“Her.”

I felt the bond warm slightly. Not enough for anyone else to notice. Enough for me.

Caden looked back at me.

“The reports made it sound like you were recovering.”

I frowned.

“I am recovering.”

“Yes,” he said. “But that’s not all you’re doing.”

I waited.

Caden’s expression remained thoughtful.

“Most wolves spend so much time surviving that they never become anything else. They stay in the moment they escaped for the rest of their lives.”

The words landed harder than I expected. Because part of me understood exactly what he meant.

For years my entire life had been survival. Getting through one day. Then the next. Then the next. Nothing beyond that.

Caden gestured lightly toward me.

“You’re already building something beyond it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. For once, words didn’t arrive immediately. Maybe because I wasn’t sure I

Too late for that saw myself the way he did.

The silence stretched.

Then Caius spoke.

“She’s stubborn.”

I looked at him.

His expression remained completely serious.

The room stayed quiet for a second.

Then Caden laughed.

Actually laughed.

The sound surprised everyone, including his own delegation.

His beta shook his head.

“I’ve been telling him that for years.”

“Then he’s ignored excellent advice for years,” Caius said.

That earned another laugh.

Even the head of counsel looked mildly amused.

435 Pointe

The tension that had existed at the beginning of the meeting finally disappeared. Not because anyone forgot why we were there. Because the important questions had already been answered.

Caden’s support wasn’t conditional. It wasn’t waiting on a report. It wasn’t waiting on the High Council.

He’d made his decision.

After a moment he became serious again.

“When the Council arrives, they’ll expect uncertainty.”

I looked at him.

“They’ll expect hesitation. They’ll expect confusion. They’ll expect a wolf still trying to figure out who she is.”

His gaze held mine steadily.

“Don’t give them that.”

“I won’t.”

“I know.”

The answer came immediately. No hesitation. No doubt. Just certainty.

Too late for that.

Something settled inside me at that.

Not confidence.

Something quieter.

The feeling that I wasn't walking into the High Council alone.

Caden pushed back his chair and stood. The meeting was over. His beta stood with him and the head of counsel gathered his notes and slid them into a leather folder.

Across the table, Caius rose beside me.

Caden looked at me one final time.

"The Council's coming to evaluate the future."

I nodded.

"I know."

A faint smile touched his face.

"No," he said. "I don't think you do."

I frowned slightly.

He glanced between Caius and me.

"They think the future is something they're arriving to judge."

Then he shook his head once.

"They're arriving too late for that."

The room went quiet.

I looked at Caius.

Then back at Caden.

The bond existed.

Vaela existed.

The old laws had already been invoked.

None of that was waiting for the High Council's permission.

It was already happening.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 140

What he came to confirm

What he came to confirm

(Isla)

The door closed behind us and the cold air hit immediately.

Caden and his delegation moved toward their own tree line without looking back. His beta said somethin low to the head of counsel and the third wolf who never spoke fell into position behind them and within a minute they were at the edge of the neutral ground and gone into the trees.

I stood and watched them go.

They're arriving too late for that.

I turned the words over without trying to land on anything specific about them. Caden hadn't said it to be dramatic. He'd said it because it was true and he'd understood it was true before he walked through that door and he'd wanted us to understand it the same way before we walked into whatever the High Council was bringing in twenty four days.

Caius stood beside me.

Neither of us moved immediately.

"He knew," I said.

Caius looked at me. "He knew before he sent the letter," he said. "The meeting wasn't about finding out. It was about making sure he hadn't missed anything."

"And did he?" I said. "Miss anything?"

“No,” Caius said. “Which is why he declared when he did. Caden doesn’t commit until he’s certain. When he commits that quickly it means the certainty arrived before he expected it to.”

I thought about that. “You mean me,” I said.

“I mean both of us,” Caius said. “But mostly you.”

I looked at the building behind us. Plain stone. A door that didn’t belong to anyone. A fire inside that was

Γ probably still burning with nobody left to sit around it.

I thought about everything Caden had said.

Not the political parts. Those I’d already filed and would return to. The other part. The question he’d asked that wasn’t political.

When did you stop being afraid of them?

I hadn’t expected that question. I’d prepared for Caden the reader of rooms, the careful Alpha who watched how people answered more than what they said. I hadn’t prepared for Caden the wolf who’d lost his mate and understood certain things because of it that couldn’t be understood any other way.

I didn’t stop, I’d told him. I stopped letting fear decide what I did.

Standing outside now in the cold air I understood why that answer had landed the way it had. Not

What he capete sanfirm because it was the right thing to say. Because it was true and it had been true for longer than I’d been saying it out loud. The shift hadn’t happened in a single moment. It had happened in the accumulation of small ones. The rules in Ashcrest. Sleeping beside Caius for the first time. Riding my own horse out of the gate. Asking to be in the room when the High Council came.

One choice at a time.

Fear still present.

Just not driving anymore.

Vaela moved inside me, warm and certain.

‘He saw you clearly,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘More clearly than most,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘He did.’

I turned and looked at Caius. “The camps he mentioned,” I said. “In the High Council. The ones who want the old laws honored and the ones who think they shouldn’t have been invoked. How split are they?”

Caius was quiet for a moment. “Three and three with Sorin holding the deciding position,” he said. “Halvon leads the faction that wants the laws challenged. Not publicly. He’s too careful for that. But privately he’s been building a case that invoking three hundred year old laws in response to a single unmated bond sets a precedent that could destabilise territorial agreements across the eastern territories.”

“And Sorin?” I said.

“Sorin wants the mark,” Caius said. “In his view a marked and formally recognised Celestial wolf operating within established law is manageable. An unmarked one operating outside the timeline he’d prefer is a variable he can’t account for,”

“So they both want to control it,” I said. “Just differently.”

“Halvon wants it destabilised so it stays uncertain,” Caius said. “Sorin wants it resolved so it stops being uncertain. Neither of them is thinking about what you actually want.”

I held that for a moment. “But Caden was,” I said.

“Caden lost his mate,” Caius said. “That changes how a wolf thinks about bonds. He wasn’t evaluating a political situation in that room. He was evaluating two wolves and what exists between them and whether it was real.”

“And he decided it was,” I said.

“He decided it was before he finished his first cup,” Caius said. “Everything after that was him deciding what to do with that information.”

I looked at the tree line ahead of us where Zeron and the warriors were waiting. Cold morning light. Still ground. Nothing moving.

What he camete-confirm

“The High Council won’t be like him,” said.

“No,” Caius said. “Most of them have never lost a mate. Most of them have spent their careers making decisions based on law and precedent rather than what’s actually in front of them. They’ll come in looking for the framework that fits what we are and when they carrt find one they’ll try to create one.”

“And if I don’t fit the framework they create?” Lsaid.

“Then they’ll have to adjust,” Caius said. “Which is uncomfortable for people who’ve spent twenty years. being the ones who set the frameworks.”

I smiled at that. “Good,” I said.

Caius looked at me. “You’re not approaching this as something to survive anymore,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“No,” I said. “Caden said something that changed how I’m thinking about it.”

“The thing about building beyond survival,” Caius said.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about the High Council as something to get through. Something to come out the other side of intact. But that’s not what it is.”

“No,” Caius said. “It’s something to walk into on your own terms. The same way you walked into that room today.”

I looked at him. “You saw it differently from where you were sitting,” I said. “Tell me what you saw.”

Caius was quiet for a moment. “I saw a wolf who walked into a room with one of the most careful Alphas in the eastern territories and didn’t wait to be assessed,” he said. “She assessed first. She corrected his framing in the first minute, read his delegation before anyone spoke, and found the one thing that would move him out of political calculation and into honesty. None of that was in the preparation sessions.”

“I was afraid before we walked in,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “You walked in anyway. That’s the part that matters.”

I didn’t answer that because there wasn’t anything to add to it and we both knew it.

Vaela settled inside me, complete and warm.

I looked at the tree line where Zeron was waiting.

“We should go,” I said.

“Wraithbone has twenty four days left to prepare,” Caius said. “And so do we.”

We crossed the neutral ground together toward the trees and I thought about Caden’s last words and what they meant and what was waiting in twenty four days and what I was going to walk into it as.

Not sorneone surviving.

Not someone managing fear.

Someone who’d already decided.

What he cante confirm

I-shifted and ran.

Comment’s

What comet-

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 141

What comes next

(Isla)

The cold air rushed throught my fur. The scent of Caius moved beside me, steady and familiar, while Zero and the warriors fell into position without needing instruction.

I focused on the path ahead and let the run take over.

I ran harder than I needed to.

Not because I was trying to outrun anything. Because movement felt good. Because something inside m felt lighter than it had when we’d arrived at the neutral ground this morning.

Vaela matched my pace easily.

‘You’re happy.’

The observation carried quiet amusement.

‘Maybe.’

‘You are.’

I couldn’t argue with that.

The meeting hadn’t solved everything. The High Council was still coming. Sorin was still going to push. Halvon was still going to look for weaknesses and uncertainties he could use.

But one thing was different now.

Ironfield wasn’t standing on the fence waiting to see who won.

Caden had chosen.

That mattered.

The trees began to thin as we crossed a ridge and Wraithbone appeared in the distance.

Even from here I could feel it.

The territory responded the same way it always did now. Quiet recognition. A connection that settled somewhere deeper than thought. It wasn’t demanding anything from me. It was simply there.

Home.

Vaela lifted her head

‘Home,’ she agreed.

The word settled warmly inside me.

Not Ashcrest.

What comes next.

Not the place where I’d survived.

This.

The territory ahead of us.

The wolves waiting inside it

The life I'd been building one decision at a time.

We crossed the border less than an hour later.

The change was immediate.

The bond between me and the land strengthened. Not enough to overwhelm. Just enough to remind me that I belonged here. The feeling moved through me as naturally as breathing.

Caius slowed first.

I matched him.

Zeron and the others adjusted their pace behind us as the pack house came into view through the trees.

Several wolves were outside working when we emerged from the forest.

They looked up immediately.

Some lowered their heads.

Others simply watched us pass.

None of it felt strange anymore.

That realization caught me by surprise.

Before this, every look would've made me uncomfortable. Every moment of attention would've felt like something I needed to endure until it ended. Now it felt different.

Not because the wolves had changed.

Because I had.

Vaela stirred.

'You stopped waiting to be judged.

The thought landed harder than I expected.

Maybe she was right.

The High Council was coming.

Twenty four days.

Twenty four days until six powerful wolves sat across from me and tried to decide what role I fit inside their world.

What comes next-

Gaius looked at me as we approached the pack house.

Something in my expression must've given me away.

"What are you thinking about?"

I shifted back as we reached the tree line and reached for the clothes secured to my saddle.

"The High Council."

His mouth curved slightly.

"I assumed."

I finished dressing and looked up at him.

"They're coming here to understand the future."

"Yes."

"They're not going to like every answer they find."

"No," Caius said. "They won't."

For some reason that made me smile.

Not because I wanted conflict.

Because I was finally starting to understand the difference between defending myself and standing my ground.

The two weren't the same thing.

And when we walked into that room twenty four days from now, I wasn't planning to do the first one.

Caius watched me for a moment longer before we walked.

“Caden’s going to send word to other territories. About what he found in that room.”

“How many does he move?”

“Two. Maybe three. The ones who’ve been watching him to see which way he went before they decided.” Caius looked at the pack house ahead of us. “His declaration today doesn’t just change Ironfield’s position. It changes the room the High Council is walking into.”

I thought about that as we crossed the grounds. The wolves we passed lowered their heads and I let them without breaking stride.

“They’re going to arrive expecting uncertainty,” I said.

“Yes.”

“But if Ironfield has already declared and other territories have moved because of it they’re not walking into uncertainty. They’re walking into something that’s already taking shape without them.”

Caius looked at me.

What comes next-

“Which is exactly what Caden meant.”

They were arriving too late for that.

I understood it differently how than I had standing outside that building an hour ago. Not as a statemen about the bond or the old laws or anything specifically political. As a statement about momentum. Abor the difference between judging something and catching up to something that had already decided what was.

We went inside and the pack house settled around us and Pryor appeared from the corridor with a letter already in hand.

“Alpha Voss of Coldmere,” he said simply.

Caius took it and I read it over his shoulder.

The words confirmed what I’d already suspected.

He’d been watching from a distance.

Now he was coming to make a decision for himself.

Ten days.

I looked at Caius.

“Different meeting from Caden’s.”

“Yes.” He set the letter down. “He isn’t coming to find out if we’re real. He already believes that. He’s coming to find out if we’re worth standing beside.”

“Then we show him something different from what we showed Caden.”

“Yes.” Caius looked at me. “Any idea what that looks like?”

I thought about it for a moment.

Then I smiled.

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

My smile faded slowly.

Not because the feeling was gone.

Because the bond chose that moment to remind me it was there.

It wasn’t subtle.

Warmth moved through me without warning, deeper than the connection I’d felt running back through the territory. Vaela lifted her head immediately and I felt her recognition of it before I fully understood it myself.

Caius went still.

What comes t

–

Just for a second.

Then his eyes found mine.

For a moment, everything else felt less important.

Pryor.

The letter.

The voices further down the hall.

None of it mattered as much as the awareness moving between us.

The scent marking had changed something.

Not completed it.

Not finished it.

But changed it.

The bond felt clearer now than it had before. Less like something reaching for us and more like somethin already woven through everything we did.

Vaela was quiet.

Vorak too.

Not restless.

Not pushing.

Content.

I felt that more than anything else.

For so long the bond had carried urgency with it. Questions. Pressure. A constant awareness of something unfinished.

Now there was something else mixed into it.

Trust.

Caius didn’t say anything.

Neither did I.

We didn’t need to.

The bond carried enough of the conversation on its own.

I looked at him for a moment longer.

Then I shook my head and started walking.

What comes

25 P

Gaius fell into step beside me without needing to be asked. The bond settled warmly between us as we moved through the pack house together.

The future was still coming, but I wasn't waiting for it anymore. I was already moving toward it.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 142

The shape of thirst

The shape of trust

(Isla)

We went to our quarters without saying anything about it.

The bond had been building since the corridor and we both knew it and neither of us was pretending otherwise. Not the overwhelming pressure of before the scent marking. Something fuller and more settl than that. The bond knowing what it was now and making itself felt without apology.

I sat on the bed.

Caius stood in the middle of the room and looked at me.

"It's different now," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"Since the scent marking."

"Yes."

I held his gaze. "Is it going to keep feeling like this?"

He crossed to me and sat beside me and the bond moved between us immediately, warm and deep and certain. "It'll keep changing," he said. "Every time something significant happens between us it settles into something new."

I thought about that.

“And the mark,” I said.

He looked at me.

“When it happens,” I said. “What does it change?”

He was quiet for a moment. “Everything,” he said. “And nothing. The bond is already there. The mark just makes it permanent in a way nothing can undo.”

I sat with that.

Vaela was warm inside me.

‘You already know,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I do.’

I looked at Caius for a long moment before reaching for his hand. Not because I’d planned to. Not because I’d thought through what I was doing. The bond wanted closeness and for once I wasn’t interested in questioning it.

His fingers closed around mine immediately and warmth spread between us. It wasn’t sharp or overwhelming. It wasn’t demanding anything from either of us. It was simply there.

The shape of trust

Imoved cluser until our shoulders touched Caits didn’t speak and neither did I. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable anymore. It hadn’t been uncomfortable between us for a long time.

I looked down at ourjoined hands and thought about the last few days. Everything felt different now th it had before. Not easier exactly. Just clearer.

“The scent marking helped more than I expected,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“It felt like everything quieted down afterward.”

“It did.”

I thought about the way the bond had felt before. The constant awareness had always been there. So ha the pressure and the feeling of something reaching for both of us. At times it had felt like neither of us fully understood what it wanted.

Now it felt different. Still strong and still impossible to ignore. But it felt steadier than before. More certa somehow.

Vaela stirred inside me and I felt her agreement immediately. The feeling wasn't only about the bond. It was about Caius too. It was about trusting him and trusting myself.

'Because we do,' she said.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and the bond responded immediately. Warmth spread through me and settled deep beneath the surface. On the other side of it I felt Vorak lift his head in recognition. The reaction was instant and impossible to miss.

Caius turned slightly toward me and his hand moved to the back of my neck. The touch wasn't possessive and it wasn't demanding. It was simply there. His thumb brushed lightly against the scent gland beneath my skin.

The bond surged hard enough to make me close my eyes. Warmth moved through every part of me. Vaela pushed closer and I felt her contentment as clearly as my own. The feeling settled into me instead of passing through me.

"That still happens," I said.

A faint smile touched his voice.

"Yes."

"It's ridiculous."

"Probably."

I laughed softly and the sound seemed to relax something in him. The tension I'd felt lingering beneath the surface eased a little more. We sat together for another minute before I shifted and turned toward him. The bond followed the movement immediately.

"Show me," I said.

The shape of trust His eyes met mine.

"Show you what?"

"What wolves do."

Understanding crossed his face almost immediately. I lifted my wrist toward him and held it there. The gesture felt natural now in a way it wouldn't have before.

“The scent marking helped,” I said. “If the bond’s changing again then show me how wolves handle it.”

He studied me for a moment and I knew what he was doing. Making sure. He always made sure. It was one of the things I trusted most about him.

Then he nodded slowly and reached for my wrist. Nothing about the movement felt rushed. Nothing abou it felt dramatic. He simply lifted my hand toward him.

He pressed his face lightly against the scent gland at my wrist and closed his eyes. The bond reacted immediately. Warmth spread through me and settled somewhere deep inside my chest. It felt less like excitement and more like recognition.

Vaela sighed happily and I felt Vorak do the same. The feeling spread through both of us at once. It wasn’ satisfaction exactly. It was something quieter.

When Caius lowered my hand again I finally understood why wolves did it. Not because it satisfied the bond. Not because it solved anything. It reminded the bond where it belonged.

I was here. He was here. The bond wasn’t reaching across empty space anymore. It knew exactly where both ends of it were. That certainty settled warmly inside me.

I reached for him before I could overthink it. My hand found his wrist and his eyes followed the movement immediately. Then I did the same thing he’d done. Simple contact and nothing more.

The reaction was immediate.

His shoulders loosened slightly and the bond warmed again. The feeling layered over what already existed between us. It didn’t replace anything. It simply settled deeper

I lowered my hand and neither of us spoke for a while. There wasn’t much to say. The bond carried enough of the conversation on its own. The room felt quieter than it had a few minutes ago.

Eventually I leaned back against the headboard and Caius stayed beside me. Close enough that our arms touched. The fire burned steadily and the room felt warm. Outside, Wraithbone continued moving through its evening without needing either of us.

That realization brought an unexpected sense of comfort. No councils needed answers tonight. No territorial politics demanded attention. No High Council was sitting across a table waiting for explanations.

Just this. Just us. I looked at him after a while.

“Do you ever get tired of everyone wanting something from you?”

His expression softened slightly.

The shape of thist

“Sometimes.”

“Me too.”

That earned the smallest hint of amusement. His hand found mine again and neither of us let go. The bond settled warmly between us. Vaela curled up inside me, content and completely at ease.

The feeling spread through me until my eyes started to feel heavy. Not exhaustion. Peace. A different thi entirely.

I couldn’t remember the last time peace had felt this easy. Maybe because it never had. Caius shifted slightly beside me and his arm settled around my shoulders. The bond warmed one final time, quiet and certain.

I closed my eyes.

The High Council was coming. Alpha Voss was coming. The future was coming whether any of us were ready for it or not.

But for tonight none of that needed an answer. Tonight I had Wraithbone. I had Vaela. I had the bond and the wolf sitting beside me.

And for tonight, that was all I wanted.

The shape of trust

“Sometimes.”

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 143

The parts didn’t know

The parts I didn’t know

(Isla)

I stayed where I was with my head against his shoulder.

Neither of us moved for a while.

The bond had settled into something warm and quiet and I wasn’t in a hurry to disturb it. Outside the room, the pack house carried on with its evening while everything inside felt slower.

Caius’s hand rested over mine.

The contact was simple.

Comfortable.

Easy.

That still felt strange sometimes.

Not because of him.

Because there’d been a time when I couldn’t imagine feeling this relaxed beside anyone.

I looked down at our joined hands for a moment.

Then I looked up at him.

“What were you like when you were younger?”

Caius glanced down at me.

The question clearly wasn’t what he’d expected.

“Younger?”

“Before all this.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Before what?”

I shifted slightly so I could see his face better.

“Before the council. Before everyone came to you with their problems. Before you became the wolf everyone expects to have answers.”

Something moved through his expression.

Not discomfort.

Something closer to consideration.

“I got into fights.”

Claire

The parts Ldidn’t know stared at him.

That wasn’t the answer I’d expected.

“You did.”

“Yes.”

I looked at him for another second.

Then I shook my head.

“You still do.”

A faint hint of amusement appeared in his eyes.

“I do not.”

“You put Rodan through a wall.”

“Rodan chained my mate.”

“That’s not a denial.”

“No,” he said. “It isn’t.”

I felt myself smile.

The bond warmed slightly between us.

“What I mean is that you make it look like you’re always in control.”

Caius was quiet for a moment.

“Most of the time I am.”

“Most.”

“Most.”

I studied him.

“So what were you actually like?”

His gaze shifted toward the window before returning to me.

“I had a temper.”

That didn’t surprise me.

Not after Ashcrest.

Not after seeing what happened when he opened that shack door and realized what had been done to me.

“What kind of temper?”

The parts Ldie’t know

The corner of his mouth moved slightly.

“The kind that kept my father busy.”

I laughed softly.

“There it is.”

“There what is?”

“The answer.”

Something warmer moved through the bond.

Actual amusement this time.

“My father used to tell people I was an excellent future Alpha and a terrible son.”

I blinked.

Then I laughed again.

Chin

For some reason that was easier to picture than the perfectly controlled Alpha King sitting beside me now.

The laughter faded gradually and the room settled back into quiet.

The bond remained warm between us. Caius’s arm was still around my shoulders and neither of us seemed interested in moving anytime soon. For once there wasn’t anywhere we needed to be.

“What about your parents?” I asked.

Caius looked down at me.

“My parents?”

“Yes.”

Something shifted in his expression.

Not enough that most people would’ve noticed.

Enough that I did.

I immediately wondered if I'd asked something I shouldn't have.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I don't mind answering."

His voice stayed calm.

I waited.

"My mother died when I was young."

The words landed quietly between us.

The parts Ldidn't know

Not because they lacked weight.

Because he'd clearly lived with them for a very long time.

"I'm sorry."

He nodded once.

"Thank you."

I hesitated.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk about her."

"Most of the wolves who knew her are older," he said. "The rest never met her."

I thought about that.

"What was she like?"

For a moment something softer appeared in his expression.

Not sadness.

Memory.

"Patient."

I smiled immediately.

“That sounds familiar.”

A faint hint of amusement crossed his face.

“Everyone says that.”

“Because it’s true.”

His hand squeezed mine once.

Clawn

“My mother had a way of making people feel heard. It didn’t matter if they were warriors, servants, council members, or children. She treated them the same.”

I listened quietly.

The bond carried something warm from him while he spoke.

Not pain.

Affection.

The kind that remained long after someone was gone.

“You miss her.”

“Yes.”

The parts didn’t know

The answer came without hesitation.

Hlooked down at our joined hands.

“I’m glad I asked.”

He was quiet for a moment.

Then he surprised me.

“So am I.”

I looked back up.

That wasn’t the answer I’d expected.

He looked toward the window briefly before continuing.

“My father lives in another country now.”

I blinked.

“You’ve never mentioned that.”

“There hasn’t been much reason to.”

I frowned slightly.

“What’s he doing there?”

“He found his second chance mate.”

That caught my attention immediately.

“He did?”

“Yes.”

Something about the answer made me smile.

Maybe because second chance mates always felt like proof that life wasn’t finished with people as quickly as they thought.

“Are they happy?”

His expression softened.

“As far as I know.”

“As far as you know?”

He looked back at me.

“I haven’t visited yet.”

That surprised me.

The parts Ldidn’t know

“You haven’t?”

“No”

I studied him.

“Why not?”

He was quiet for a second.

“Wraithbone.”

I understood immediately.

The council.

The territories.

The responsibilities.

The endless line of wolves needing something from him.

All the things that came with being Alpha King.

“You want to go.”

“Yes.”

The answer was immediate.

Something tightened in my chest.

Not because of what he’d said.

Because of how quickly he’d said it.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“A little over two years ago.”

I sat with that.

Two years wasn’t a short time.

Not when it was family.

Caius was quiet for a moment.

Then he said, “I have a sister.”

I blinked.

“A sister?”

He nodded.

The parts Lokant know

“My father’s mate has a daughter.”

I looked up at him.

“You never mentioned that.”

“There wasn’t much reason to.”

That sounded exactly like Caius.

“How old is she?”

“Twenty.”

That surprised me.

Not because of her age.

Because I’d never stopped to think about Caius having siblings.

The Alpha King of Wraithbone.

The wolf responsible for an entire territory.

And somewhere in another country he had a younger sister living her own life.

“Have you met her?”

“A few times.”

The answer came easily.

I tilted my head slightly.

“What’s she like?”

Something shifted in his expression.

Not quite amusement.

Not quite exasperation.

Something in between.

“Persistent. Opinionated. Convinced she’s always right.”

I smiled immediately.

“That definitely sounds familiar.”

A low breath of laughter escaped him.

“Apparently it runs in the family.”

The bond warmed between us and I found myself smiling too.

The parts didn’t know

For some reason, I liked knowing there were still-parts of Caius I hadn’t discovered yet.

Comment’s

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 144

The wolf betert the crown

The wolf before the crown

(Isla)

I stayed quiet for a moment after that.

The room felt different now than it had when we’d first come upstairs. Not because anything around us had changed. Because I’d spent the last hour learning things about Caius that had nothing to do with councils, territory disputes, or old laws.

Just him.

The wolf sitting beside me.

I looked down at our joined hands and thought about everything he'd told me. A younger Caius getting in fights. A patient mother who somehow managed to keep up with him. A father who'd spent years trying to stop him from becoming a problem.

And somewhere in another country, a twenty year old sister who apparently argued with him whenever sh felt like it.

The thought made me smile.

"What?"

Caius's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I looked up at him.

"I was just trying to imagine it."

"Imagine what?"

"Younger you."

That earned a look.

I ignored it.

"The fights. The temper. Your father wondering what you'd done now."

A faint hint of amusement appeared in his eyes.

"It wasn't that bad."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I don't believe that."

"You don't?"

"No."

His hand tightened around mine briefly.

The wolf belent the crewn

The bond warmed in response and I felt myself smile again.

"Did you ever get caught doing something stupid?" I asked.

“Frequently.”

I turned my head immediately.

That answer had arrived much too quickly.

“Frequently?”

Caius sighed.

The sound carried the resignation of someone who already knew he wasn’t getting out of this conversation.

“One time my father spent three hours looking for me.”

I sat up slightly.

“What happened?”

“I climbed onto the roof of the council building.”

I stared at him.

“The council building?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

His expression remained completely serious.

“I wanted to see if I could.”

For a second I just looked at him.

Then I laughed.

Not a polite laugh. Not a quiet one. A real laugh that escaped before I could stop it.

Caius waited patiently while I laughed at him.

“You climbed onto the roof of the council building because you wanted to see if you could?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the entire reason?”

“Yes.”

I shook my head.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Clear

The wolf befer the crown

“So I’ve been told.”

I laughed again and Caius looked entirely too satisfied with trimself about it.

The worst part was that I could actually see it. Younger Caius sitting on a roof somewhere refusing to come down while his father stood below wondering what he’d done to deserve him.

“You were a nightmare.”

“Probably.”

“Definitely.”

That earned another small smile.

The bond felt warm between us and I found myself smiling too. It wasn’t really the story that was making me smile. It was getting to see this side of him.

The side that existed before titles and responsibilities.

I rested my head against his shoulder again and listened to the quiet of the room. Voices carried faintly through the walls. Somewhere downstairs a door opened and closed before the sound disappeared again.

The pack house was still moving around us.

For once neither of us felt much interest in joining it.

I looked down at our hands again.

“Do you think you’ll visit them after the High Council leaves?”

Caius was quiet for a moment.

“I’d like to.”

The answer came without hesitation.

I nodded slowly.

“You should.”

His arm tightened slightly around my shoulders.

“Maybe.”

I turned my head enough to look at him.

“That’s not an answer.”

A faint look crossed his face.

“It might be the best answer you’re getting tonight.”

I smiled.

Then I settled back against him and closed my eyes.

The wolf belert the crown

The High Council was still coming. Alpha Voss was still coming. None of that had changed.

But right now I wasn’t thinking about any of it.

Chuim

I was thinking about a younger Caius climbing onto a council building roof because he wanted to see if he could.

That felt like information I should’ve had much sooner.

I opened my eyes again after a moment.

The image refused to leave my head.

“You really stayed up there for three hours?”

Caius looked down at me.

“I stayed up there until my father climbed up after me.”

I stared at him.

“He climbed up there too?”

“Yes.”

“What happened then?”

A faint look crossed his face.

“He sat down.”

I blinked.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t understand your family.”

That earned the smallest hint of amusement.

“My father said the same thing.”

I laughed softly.

The bond warmed between us and settled again.

For a while neither of us spoke.

Then another question occurred to me.

“Does your sister know who you are?”

Caius raised an eyebrow.

The wolf befert the crown

“She knows exactly who I am.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

His expression shifted slightly.

I could tell he'd understood immediately.

I wasn't asking if she knew he was Alpha King

I was asking if she knew him.

The person sitting here.

The wolf who climbed onto roofs, got into fights, and apparently drove his father insane.

"She does," he said quietly.

For some reason that answer made me smile.

The room grew quiet again.

Not uncomfortable quiet.

The kind that came when neither of us felt the need to fill every space with words.

Then Caius looked down at me.

"What about you?"

I blinked.

"What about me?"

"What would've you been like?"

I frowned slightly.

"When?"

"If things had been different."

The question settled between us.

I knew what he meant.

If Ashcrest hadn't happened.

If Rodan hadn't happened.

If my life had belonged to me from the beginning.

I looked down at our hands.

“I think I would’ve talked more.”

Claimi

The wolf betert the crown

The answer surprised the as soon as it left my mouth.

Caius was watching me carefully.

“I think I would’ve been louder.”

A small smile touched his face.

“I can see that.”

For some reason that made me smile too.

I thought about it for another moment.

“I think I would’ve asked more questions.”

“You ask plenty of questions now.”

“Not like that.”

He waited.

I looked toward the window.

“I think I would’ve asked them because I was curious, not because I was trying to figure out what would happen if I said the wrong thing.”

The words came out quieter than I intended.

Caius didn’t interrupt.

He never did when something mattered.

“I used to think about things and keep them to myself,” I said. “It was easier. Safer.”

His hand tightened around mine.

“You don’t do that as much anymore.”

“No.”

A faint smile touched my face.

“Now I ask why you climbed onto roofs.”

That earned a low laugh from himn.

And somehow that felt like progress.

Chair

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 145

What she doesn’t see

What she doesn’t see

(Caius)

I looked down at Isla after she spoke

Now I ask why you climbed onto roofs.

A smile appeared on my face before I could stop it. The fact that she’d chosen that as proof of progress was ridiculous. The fact that she was probably right made it worse.

She settled against me again.

I let her.

Neither of us seemed interested in saying anything else. The conversation had already gone farther than I’d expected it to.

My thoughts stayed on what she’d said.

Not about the roof.

About herself.

I think I would’ve talked more.

The words stayed with me.

I understood why she'd said them. I understood why she'd wondered who she might've been if her life had been different. Most wolves probably would've wondered the same thing.

The truth was that there was no answer.

There was no version of her waiting somewhere to be discovered. There was no way to separate Isla from everything that had shaped her life. The past couldn't be undone.

Even so, I thought she was wrong.

Not about everything.

Just about herself.

She thought she would've been louder.

Maybe.

She thought she would've asked more questions.

That part was definitely true.

The thing she didn't seem to realize was that she already did.

I'd lost count of how many questions she'd asked since arriving in Wraithbone. Some were serious. Some weren't.

What she doenstsen

It didn't matter.

She asked them anyway.

Because she wanted answers.

Because she was curious.

Because she wanted to understand things.

That wasn't new.

That was her.

Maybe she'd hidden parts of herself to survive Ashcrest. Maybe she'd learned to stay quiet because speaking came with consequences. That didn't mean those parts had disappeared.

They were still there.

I'd seen them myself.

The wolf sitting beside me asked questions constantly. She challenged things she didn't agree with. She paid attention to details other people missed.

She was curious about everything.

Sometimes that curiosity created problems.

More often than not it created arguments.

I wasn't sure she'd admit that.

Then again, she probably would.

One thing I'd learned about Isla was that she rarely pretended to be something she wasn't. If she disagreed with someone, she usually said so. If she wanted an answer, she asked for it.

That wasn't weakness.

That was confidence.

The realization would've surprised her.

For years she'd been taught the opposite.

Ashcrest had spent a long time trying to convince her she had no value. Rodan had spent years trying to make her smaller. So had everyone who stood beside him and allowed it to happen.

They'd failed.

Not completely.

They'd left scars.

They'd left fears.

What she doet ees

They'd left inemories she would probably carry for a long time.

But they'd failed.

Because the woman sitting beside me wasn't small.

She never had been.

I thought about the first day I'd found her.

The chain.

The wolfsbane.

The way she'd looked at me when I removed it.

At the time she'd seemed breakable.

Now I knew better.

A breakable wolf wouldn't have survived what she survived. A breakable wolf wouldn't have stood in front of Ashcrest and faced the people responsible for it.

A breakable wolf wouldn't have walked back into that territory at all.

Isla had.

She'd done it while afraid.

She'd done it while angry.

She'd done it anyway.

That mattered.

Most wolves thought courage meant fear wasn't present.

They were wrong.

Courage existed because fear was present.

Without it there was nothing to overcome.

I looked down at her again.

Tomorrow Alpha Voss would arrive.

Soon after that the High Council would arrive too.

Questions would follow.

Opinions would follow.

Some of them would support her.

Some wouldn’t.

What she doesh-see

That part didn’t concern me

The High Council wasn’t the problem people imagined it was. They could ask questions. They could debate. They could argue among themselves for days if they wished.

The facts wouldn’t change.

Isla was my mate.

Isla was Celestial.

Neither of those things required permission.

I already knew Sorin would have opinions.

That wasn’t surprising.

Sorin had opinions about everything.

Voss would probably arrive with questions of his own. That was expected too. Alpha Voss rarely accepted information without examining it himself.

I preferred that.

Suspicion was easier to deal with than blind acceptance.

Blind acceptance usually disappeared the moment something became inconvenient.

At least with suspicion everyone knew where they stood.

The High Council would see her eventually.

They’d meet the woman sitting beside me.

They'd see the wolf Ashcrest tried to bury.

They'd see the Celestial wolf standing in front of them.

Then they'd decide what they thought.

The decision wouldn't matter nearly as much as they believed.

My attention shifted again.

This time my thoughts landed on another part of our conversation.

My family.

I hadn't expected to spend part of the afternoon talking about my father. I definitely hadn't expected to tell stories about climbing roofs and falling off horses.

Now Isia knew them.

At least a little.

The thought was strange.

What she does see

Not unpleasant.

Just strange.

For most of my life those memories belonged to a different version of me. They belonged to a time before councils, disputes, and responsibilities. They belonged to a life that seemed very far away now.

Today she'd listened to them.

She'd laughed at them.

Repeatedly.

I wasn't going to forget that anytime soon.

The thought made me smile.

Then my attention shifted to my sister.

Not often enough.

The answer I'd given Isla earlier was true.

I didn't see her often enough.

Life always seemed to create another responsibility. Another meeting. Another problem that needed attention first.

There was always something.

At some point something had turned into years.

That realization wasn't particularly comfortable.

Maybe Isla was right.

The idea was irritating.

Mostly because she usually enjoyed being right.

Unfortunately she often was.

When all of this was over, I'd visit.

The decision settled into place more easily than expected.

I should've done it sooner.

That much was obvious.

There wasn't much point regretting it now.

What mattered was fixing it.

For a moment my thoughts returned to the future.

What she doet see

Not the High Council.

Not Voss.

Not politics.

Something else.

Family.

The word carried a different meaning than it once had.

When I'd first met Isla, I wouldn't have imagined conversations like today's. I wouldn't have imagined spending hours listening to her thoughts about things that had nothing to do with territory business.

Now I couldn't imagine wanting anything else.

The realization arrived quietly.

It didn't surprise me.

Not anymore.

The bond had changed many things.

The woman beside me had changed even more.

I looked down at her one more time.

Tomorrow would bring meetings.

Tomorrow would bring questions.

Tomorrow would bring the High Council one step closer.

None of that seemed particularly important right now.

For the moment, I was content exactly where I was.

Right now, I wasn't interested in being anywhere else.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 146

Exhile and purTTONS-

Exhile and rumors

(Rodan)

They hadn't moved us far.

Just outside the Ashcrest border, far enough that we weren't standing on land that had belonged to my family for generations, close enough that I could still see the tree line I'd walked through every morning fo most of my life. The guards had stopped here to rest the horses before the next stretch of the journey. Nobody had told us where we were going. Nobody needed to.

I knew what waiting for execution looked like.

I sat on the ground with my back against a tree and my wrists in front of me, the cuffs cold against my skin, and I thought about the hall. About Caius standing where I had stood for years and delivering sentence like it was routine. About the word execution landing in the room and the way it had moved through my body before I could stop it.

Not fear.

Not yet.

Something colder than fear. The stillness of a man who has just understood that the thing he thought was still far away has already arrived.

Maren was a few feet away, sitting with her back straight the way she always sat, even now, even with her wrists bound and guards on either side of her. She hadn't spoken since we left the hall. Neither had Derek, who sat with his head down and his hands loose between his knees, the fight gone out of him completely.

One of the guards said something low to another and they both looked toward the road. A wagon was coming. I watched it without moving.

Vera was crying quietly somewhere behind me. Cole wasn't making any sound at all. Helene sat beside Derek with her eyes closed, her bound hands resting in her lap.

I looked at my cuffs.

Execution under territorial law.

I had sentenced wolves before. Not often. Not lightly. I understood what the words meant and what they required and I had always believed, when i handed them down, that the situation had called for them. Standing on the receiving end of them was a different thing entirely. The words had weight I hadn't fully accounted for when they'd belonged to me.

The wagon slowed on the road nearby and the guards began moving, directing everyone to their feet with the efficiency of wolves who had done this before and had no interest in making it harder than it needed to be.

I heard one of the guards mention the Alpha King's name. Then something about the High Council. The words came in pieces, not meant for me, just two guards talking while they worked.

The High Council was coming to Wraithbone.

stayed where I was until the guard behind me indicated it was time to move, and I thought about seven wolves traveling toward a territory where a Celestial wolf had just been confirmed as Luna and a completed bond was about to remove every argument anyone had left.

The High Council was coming.

And I was going to a cell.

I stood and walked toward the wagon because there was nothing else left to do, and the cuffs were cold on my wrists and the tree line was behind me and Ashcrest was already becoming something that had belonged to someone else.

The wagon was larger than I expected.

They loaded us in order, the guards efficient and without cruelty, which was its own kind of insult. I had expected anger from them. Satisfaction at minimum. Instead they handled the transfer the way they handled everything under Caius's command, without expression, without commentary, without any indication that what they were doing was anything other than routine.

I sat across from Maren inside the wagon and she looked at me for the first time since the hall.

Her face had changed.

Not broken. Maren didn't break easily and I had known that about her since before we were mated. But something in it had shifted in a way I hadn't seen before, the look of someone who had built their entire life around a position that no longer existed and hadn't yet worked out what they were without it.

I understood that look.

I was wearing it myself.

"They'll delay it," she said quietly. Her voice was low enough that the guards nearest the front of the wagon couldn't hear her clearly.

I looked at her.

“The execution,” she said. “The High Council arriving changes things. Caius won’t act on it while they’re watching.”

I thought about that.

She wasn’t wrong. Caius was precise about how things looked to outside observers. An execution carried out while the High Council was en route to Wraithbone would create questions he didn’t need. It would look like he was moving quickly to eliminate opposition before scrutiny arrived. He was too careful for that.

“He’ll wait,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“And while he waits?”

She held my gaze. “Things can change.”

Exhile and unfors

Hooked at my cuffs and then at the wagon walls and then at the tree line moving past the gap in the canvas as we traveled. The territory was already different. I could feel it even through the cuffs, even through everything that had happened in that hall. Something had shifted in Ashcrest itself, the land answering a different authority now, a pack that had just been claimed by someone who outranked everything it had known before.

That was the part I hadn’t fully accounted for.

Isla.

Not the bond. Not the Celestial wolf claim, which I had dismissed as theater until she shifted and the ground responded and even wolves who hadn’t been there could feel what she was when she walked back in. Not even Caius’s certainty about what she was, which I had also dismissed as the blindness of a mated wolf who couldn’t see his mate clearly.

All of it had been real.

That was the thing sitting heaviest in me now, heavier than the execution sentence, heavier than the cuffs, heavier than watching Ashcrest disappear behind us. I had looked at Isla Thorne for years and seen nothing worth accounting for. A wolfless girl. A burden. Something to be managed until it stopped requiring management.

I had been wrong.

Not about her value in the way Caius meant it. Not about what she deserved or didn’t deserve. I had been wrong in the way that cost me everything, the practical calculation of

it. I had looked at something significant and decided it wasn't and built my entire position on that decision and now I was sitting in a wagon in cuffs headed toward a cell while she stood in Wraithbone with a Celestial wolf inside her and the Alpha King's bond around her and the High Council traveling toward her to confirm what was already true.

Derek shifted across from me.

He hadn't spoken since the hall, not since he'd dropped to his knees and said Isla's name and got nothing back from her. I'd watched that happen and felt something I hadn't expected. Not sympathy for him. Something closer to recognition. He'd looked at her and finally understood what he'd thrown away and she'd stood there and let him understand it without giving him anything to hold onto.

That was not the girl from the shack.

The wagon hit a rut in the road and everyone shifted with it, cuffed hands unable to catch properly, and for a moment the only sound was the creak of the wheels and the horses and Vera's quiet crying that hadn't fully stopped since we left the hal!.

Maren was still looking at rne.

"We're not finished," she said.

I looked at her for a long moment.

I wasn't sure I believed that anymore. I wasn't sure it mattered whether I believed it. What I was sure of was that a cell was waiting at the end of this road and an execution was waiting after that and the only thing standing between me and both of those things was the fact that Caius preferred to do things

Exhile and correctly rather than quickly.

He would wait for the right moment.

Which meant I had time.

Whether that time amounted to anything was a different question.

The tree line had thinned out completely now, the wagon moving through open road with nothing on either side except the flat grey of a morning that hadn't decided yet what it wanted to be.

I looked at my cuffs one more time.

Then I looked at the road ahead.

And I kept my thoughts to myself.

princess jody

Editing this story, so updates will be paused for now. I made some mistakes that needs correcting. Sorry about the wait.

I‘

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 147

The arrival

The arrival

(Caius)

The message arrived just after sunrise.

I was finishing breakfast when one of the gate guards entered the dining hall. He crossed directly to our table without hesitation and stopped beside me.

“Alpha Voss is at the northern gate.”

The room went quiet.

Not because anyone was surprised.

Because everyone knew what his arrival meant.

I set my cup down and looked at the guard.

“How many?”

“Six vehicles.”

I nodded once.

That sounded about right.

Voss rarely traveled alone. Not because he was afraid of anything. Because territory leaders attracted attention whether they wanted it or not.

The guard waited.

I stood.

“Bring them through.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

He turned immediately and headed back toward the entrance.

Across the table, Isla looked at me.

Neither of us spoke.

There wasn’t much left to say.

We’d known this was coming.

Now it was here.

Zeron pushed back his chair.

“I’ll meet them outside.”

I nodded.

The arrival

A second later he was already moving toward the door.

The rest of breakfast was forgotten

I looked at Isla.

“Ready?”

The question earned a small smile.

“I don’t think it matters.”

A faint smile appeared on my face.

That was probably true.

Voss had crossed half the continent to see her. Ready or not, the meeting was happening.

I held out my hand.

She took it without hesitation.

Together we headed for the entrance.

By the time we stepped outside, several wolves were already moving across the grounds. Nobody was rushing. Nobody was crowding the gate.

They were watching.

Curiosity had been building for days.

Now they finally had something to look at.

The vehicles appeared a few minutes later.

Six black SUVS crossed through the northern gate and moved along the main road toward the pack house.

Then they stopped.

The driver’s door of the lead vehicle opened.

A familiar figure stepped out.

Alpha Voss had arrived.

I watched him cross the distance between the vehicle and the pack house. Members of his escort stepped out behind him, but none moved ahead of him. They spread out naturally, alert without being intrusive. Cedric ignored the attention on him and kept walking.

He looked exactly as I remembered.

Age had added more gray to his hair over the years, but very little else had changed. He still carried himself with the confidence of a wolf who’d led a territory for a long time. He still looked like someone who paid attention to everything around him.

His gaze settled on me first.

The arrival

Then it shifted briefly to Isla.

Nothing about his expression changed.

That didn’t surprise–me.

Alpha Voss wasn’t known for reacting quickly to anything. He preferred to observe before deciding what he thought.

I stepped forward.

“Cedric.”

“Caius.”

We shook hands.

His grip was firm.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

When the greeting ended, his attention moved to Isla again.

For a moment he simply looked at her.

Not rudely.

Not suspiciously.

Just carefully.

Then he inclined his head.

“Luna Isla.”

The title wasn’t accidental.

I noticed it immediately.

So did Isla.

“Alpha Voss.”

A faint look crossed his face.

Approval.

Interest.

Possibly both.

It disappeared before I could be certain.

The wolves who'd arrived with him remained silent while the introductions finished. They watched

The arrival everything without interrupting. That was another thing Voss was known for.

He rarely surrounded himself with fools.

"I appreciate the welcome, Cedric said.

"You're welcome in Wraithbone."

His eyes shifted briefly toward the pack house.

"I imagine the next few days will be interesting."

That was one way to describe them.

The High Council would arrive soon enough. Once they did, privacy would become difficult to find.

"Probably."

A small smile touched his face.

The expression vanished almost immediately.

I wasn't sure most wolves would've noticed it.

"Good," he said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Good?"

"I dislike being bored."

That earned a laugh from Isla.

The sound seemed to surprise him slightly.

Not because she'd laughed.

Because she'd done it without hesitation.

Cedric looked at her again.

Something thoughtful appeared in his expression.

Interesting.

I filed that away for later.

"Come inside," I said.

He nodded once.

Together we headed toward the pack house.

Around us, daily life gradually resumed. Curiosity remained, but nobody was foolish enough to crowd an Alpha's guest. The attention followed us for a while before returning to normal.

The arrival

Voss walked beside me while Isla remained on my other side.

For a while nobody spoke.

Then Cedric glanced toward Isla.

"I heard you've had a busy few months."

The corner of her mouth lifted.

"That's one way to describe it."

His expression suggested he appreciated the answer.

"I've heard several versions of the story."

"I imagine you have."

"I suspect most of them are wrong."

That made Isla smile.

I didn't miss the fact that he was speaking directly to her rather than through me. Many Alphas would've addressed me instead.

Cedric wasn’t many Alphas.

“Some are probably closer than others,” she said.

His attention remained on her.

“And which version would you recommend?”

The question was casual.

The purpose behind it wasn’t.

Cedric had started asking questions.

Exactly as expected.

Isla seemed to recognize it too.

“I’d recommend seeing things for yourself.”

For a second Cedric looked genuinely pleased.

Then he laughed.

A short sound.

Brief but real.

“I was hoping you’d say something like that.”

I glanced at him.

The arrival

“Why?”

“Because wolves who tell me to see things for myself are usually confident in what I’ll find.”

That was fair.

More importantly, it was true.

We reached the entrance and stepped inside.

Several greetings followed as we passed through the building. Cedric acknowledged each one with a nod before continuing forward. Nothing escaped his attention.

Nothing ever had.

He looked around as we walked.

Not openly.

Not in a way most wolves would notice.

But I knew what he was doing. –

Taking everything in.

Building a picture.

Drawing conclusions.

The habit was one of the reasons he'd remained Alpha for so long.

Eventually he looked back at me.

"I've heard some interesting stories about you recently."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Should I be concerned?"

"Probably not."

That wasn't particularly reassuring.

Cedric looked entirely unconcerned about that fact.

"Are you going to tell me, or should I guess?"

Cedric considered that for a moment.

"You could guess."

"I'm not going to."

"A wise decision."

Isla laughed beside me.

The arrival

Hooked at her.

“This isn’t your conversation.”

“It became my conversation the moment he refused to answer.”

Cedric nodded once.

“She’s got a point.”

I wasn’t sure which part of this annoyed me more. “I’ll tell you after our meeting.”

That wasn’t the answer I wanted.

Cedric looked entirely satisfied with himself.

Beside me, Isla looked amused.

Unfortunately, that was becoming a pattern.

I was beginning to suspect Cedric was enjoying this far more than he should.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 148

A position declared–1

(Caius)

The suspicion only grew stronger when we reached the reception room. He looked around once before choosing a chair near the window instead of the head of the table. Most Alphas preferred seats that announced authority. Cedric had never needed that.

Isla sat beside me while Cedric settled into his chair. The wolves who’d arrived with him remained outside, leaving the three of us alone. That wasn’t unusual. When Cedric wanted a conversation, he preferred having it directly.

For a few moments nobody spoke.

Cedric's attention moved around the room before settling on us. lknew that look. He wasn't studying the furniture or the walls. He was studying the people sitting in front of him.

"You've already decided why you're here," I said.

A faint smile touched his face..

"I usually do."

"I assumed."

His eyes shifted briefly toward Isla.

"Good. That saves us both time."

One corner of Isla's mouth lifted.

"Most Alphas don't seem interested in saving time."

Cedric looked at her.

"No. Most Alphas enjoy listening to themselves."

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it.

Cedric looked pleased by that. The reaction disappeared quickly, but I noticed it. He appreciated honesty more than most wolves did.

The room settled again.

Then Cedric folded his hands together.

"Coldmere hasn't announced a position."

Neither of us interrupted.

"There are reasons for that."

I nodded once.

A position declared–1 expected there would be."

Cedric glanced toward the window.

“When Coldmere moves, other territories pay attention. The same is true of Ironfield. That’s why I don’t make decisions lightly.”

That wasn’t arrogance.

It was fact.

Territories watched one another constantly. A public declaration from Coldmere would influence more wolves than most people realized.

“Caden moved first.”

“Yes.”

Something thoughtful appeared on Cedric’s face.

“Caden reaches decisions quickly once he’s convinced.”

That sounded accurate.

Cedric preferred taking longer. Not because he doubted himself. Because he preferred seeing things personally before making commitments.

His attention returned to Isla.

“What happens after the Council leaves?”

She looked at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean everyone is focused on the meeting.”

His voice remained calm.

“Everyone is focused on old laws, votes, and decisions. I’m interested in what comes after.”

The room grew quiet.

Cedric continued speaking.

“The Council arrives, asks its questions, argues among itself, and eventually leaves. Then what?”

Isla considered the question carefully.

“I don’t know.”

The answer didn’t seem to bother him.

If anything, it made him more interested.

“Why not?”

A position declared–1

“Because I’ve spent most of my life surviving one thing at a time.”

She looked down briefly before continuing

“I know what I don’t want. I don’t want wolves treated the way Ashcrest treated people. I don’t want fear deciding everything.”

Cedric listened without interrupting.

The way he always did when something mattered.

“But beyond that,” Isla said, “I’m still figuring it out.”

For a few seconds nobody spoke.

Then Cedric nodded once.

“That’s a better answer than most leaders give.”

A faint smile appeared on her face.

“Because I admitted I don’t know?”

“Because you didn’t pretend you did.”

The room fell quiet again.

Cedric leaned back slightly in his chair.

“When I was younger, I thought leadership meant having answers.”

His gaze shifted between us.

“It doesn’t.”

Neither of us interrupted.

“It means deciding what to do when the answers don’t exist yet.”

Isla was quiet for a moment.

Then she nodded slowly.

“I think I’m still learning that.”

“So is everyone else,” Cedric said.

That answer seemed to surprise her.

It didn’t surprise me.

Cedric had always been realistic about leadership. He understood that experience didn’t magically remove uncertainty. It simply taught you how to live with it.

After a moment his attention shifted toward me.

A position deetered–1

“You’re not worried about the High Council.”

It wasn’t a question.

“No.”

“Good.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Good?”

A faint smile appeared.

“Someone should stay calm.”

That earned a laugh from Isla.

Cedric looked entirely satisfied with himself.

Then the amusement left his face.

“I know what happened in Ashcrest.”

His eyes settled on Isla.

“I know what she is. I know what the bond is. None of that concerns me.”

The room remained quiet.

“What concerns me is whether the wolves standing at the center of all this understand what’s coming next.”

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 149

A position destored–2

A position declared–2

Isla looked at him.

“I don’t think anyone fully understands what’s coming next.”

Cedric held her gaze.

“No.”

A small smile appeared.

“They don’t.”

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then Cedric nodded once, as though something had settled into place.

“Good.”

I looked at him.

“That’s twice you’ve said that.”

“It is.”

“And?”

Cedric stood.

“And I trust wolves who know the difference between certainty and arrogance.”

The decision was already made.

I could hear it in his voice.

Cedric looked between us.

“When the High Council arrives, Coldmere will stand where it should.”

The statement was simple.

No dramatic announcement.

No speech.

Just a decision.

Exactly the way Cedric preferred to make them.

Then he moved toward the door.

“I assume lunch is better than the food my escort has been complaining about all morning.”

I stared at him.

25 Parts

A position declared–2

“You brought six vehicles.”

“Yes.”

“And they’re complaining already.”

“They started complaining three hours ago.”

Beside me, Isla laughed.

Cedric reached the door before stopping.

He looked back once.

“One piece of advice.”

Neither of us spoke.

“If the High Council starts arguing with each other, let them.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“That’s your advice?”

“Yes.”

A small smile appeared.

“Half their meetings end with them disagreeing anyway. There’s no reason for you to do their work for them.”

Isla laughed softly.

“That’s surprisingly reassuring.”

“It should be.”

Cedric opened the door.

“Enjoy the rest of your afternoon. The Council will create enough problems soon enough.”

Then he walked out.

The door closed behind him.

The room grew quiet again.

Isla looked at me.

“I think I like him.”

I sighed.

“I was afraid of that.”

Her smile widened immediately.

A position declared–2

Of all the possible outcomes from this meeting, that one should have been lower on the list. Unfortunately, It wasn’t. Cedric had a habit of making wolves like him without appearing to try.

Most wolves noticed it eventually.

Apparently Isla had noticed it immediately.

“You’re going to tell him that.”

“Probably.”

I looked at her.

“That’s unfortunate.”

Her laugh filled the room again.

The bond warmed in response and I already knew Cedric would enjoy hearing about it. The fact that I knew that with complete certainty only made it worse.

For a few moments neither of us moved.

My thoughts returned briefly to the conversation we’d just had. Not the support from Coldmere. Not even the High Council.

Cedric had come here for one reason.

He wanted to know what happened after the meeting was over.

Most wolves were focused on proving what Isla was.

Cedric had been focused on who she would become.

There was a difference.

I understood why it mattered.

The Council would arrive. Questions would be asked. Arguments would happen. Decisions would be made.

Then everyone would go home.

What happened after that was the part that actually mattered.

I looked at Isla.

She was still smiling slightly.

“What?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing.”

“That’s never true.”

Alaugh escaped her.

The sound carried through the room and settled somewhere warm inside the bond.

For a long time I had measured success by stability. By territory borders, council agreements, and problems solved before they became larger problems.

Somewhere along the way that had changed.

Now success looked different.

Power

It looked like the woman sitting beside me laughing without hesitation. It looked like her speaking her mind without fear of punishment. It looked like her planning a future instead of surviving one day at a time.

The High Council could ask whatever questions it wanted.

None of those things were changing.

Not now.

Not ever.

I leaned back slightly in my chair.

Outside, Wraithbone continued moving through its day. Wolves trained, worked, argued, and carried on with their lives. The territory felt steady around us.

Right now, the approaching Council felt less important than everyone seemed to think.

The facts hadn’t changed.

Isla was my mate.

Isla was Celestial.

The Council wasn’t arriving to decide those things.

They were arriving to catch up to them.

And whether they realized it or not, Coldmere had just made that process much harder to ignore.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 150

Tomorrow's journey

(Isla)

I looked at the closed door for a moment after Cedric left.

Then I looked back at Caius.

"Can I ask something?"

"You usually do."

I ignored that.

"If the High Council of the Eastern Territories only governs the eastern territories, why does everyone care so much what they think?"

Caius looked at me for a moment.

"Because influence doesn't stop at borders."

I waited.

"The Eastern Council isn't the oldest council."

That caught my attention.

"It isn't?"

"No."

He leaned back slightly.

"The northern territories established their council first. The eastern territories followed decades later. Over time the eastern council became the most politically stable."

I thought about that.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning their decisions are respected even outside their jurisdiction.”

I frowned.

“So if the Eastern Council supports something, other councils pay attention.”

“Yes.”

“And if they oppose something?”

“The same.”

I looked toward the window.

“That sounds like a lot of power for seven wolves.”

“It is.”

The answer came without hesitation.

“Then why hasn’t anyone challenged it?”

“Because most wolves benefit from stability more than they benefit from conflict.”

I considered that for a moment.

Unfortunately, it made sense.

“So Sorin isn’t dangerous because he’s on the council.”

Caius looked at me.

“Correct.”

“He’s dangerous because people listen when he speaks.”

A faint look appeared in his eyes.

“Exactly.”

I sat back in my chair.

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then another thought occurred to me.

“If the Eastern Council agrees that I’m Celestial, will the other councils follow their decision?”

Caius was quiet for a moment.

“Most of them.”

“Most?”

“There will always be wolves who disagree with whatever decision is made.”

That sounded familiar.

“But the argument becomes much harder after that.”

I nodded slowly.

Now I understood why everyone cared so much about the Council’s arrival.

This wasn’t just seven wolves coming to Wraithbone.

This was seven wolves whose opinion would spread far beyond the eastern territories once they left.

I was still thinking about Sorin when a knock sounded at the door.

Caius looked toward the entrance.

“Gome in.”

The door opened and Serà stepped inside.

A smile appeared on my face–immediately.

Sera noticed.

“So that’s the welcome I get.”

“It is.”

She smiled.

Caius looked between us before returning his attention to the paperwork on his desk.

Sera stepped further into the office.

“I was looking for Isla.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“That sounds suspicious.”

“It might be.”

I laughed softly.

That only seemed to encourage her.

Sera stopped beside the desk.

“Tomorrow morning a few healers are heading to the human settlement.”

My attention sharpened immediately.

The human settlement.

I knew it existed. Wraithbone traded with it regularly and the healers traveled there often enough that nobody considered it unusual.

I’d just never been there myself.

Sera seemed to notice my interest.

“We need supplies.”

She shrugged.

“And there are a few people we’d like to check on while we’re there.”

I nodded slowly.

That sounded simple enough.

Then she looked directly at me.

was wondering if you’d like to come.”

Before I could answer, Caius spoke.

“No.”

The answer arrived so quickly that Sera smiled.

I looked at him.

“You didn’t even think about it.”

“I did.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You answered immediately.”

His expression didn’t change.

That only made it worse.

Sera looked entirely unsurprised.

Apparently she had expected that response.

“The settlement is crowded.” Caius said.

I looked at him.

“So?”

25 Pets

“So you’ll be surrounded by people you don’t know and I won’t be able to go with you, I’m going to be busy.”

I stared at him.

“That’s your argument?”

“It’s two of them.”

Sera shook her head.

“You realize she arrived in Wraithbone surrounded by strangers and survived just fine.”

Caius ignored her.

That didn’t stop her,

“Most of the wolves she trusts now were complete strangers when she first got here.”

I pressed my lips together to stop myself from smiling.

Unfortunately, Caius noticed.

His cyes narrowed slightly.

“You are not helping.”

Sera’s smile widened

“I think I’m helping quite a bit.”

“No.”

“I disagree.”

I looked between them.

Watching the two of them argue was becoming increasingly entertaining.

Neither seemed willing to give the other any ground.

Sera folded her hands in front of her.

“She should be allowed to see more of the world than the pack house and training grounds.”

“No one said otherwise.”

“Good.”

She nodded once.

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Caius looked at her.

Sera held his gaze without backing down.

I had a feeling neither of them intended to end the conversation anytime soon.

“Yes.”

Both of them looked at me.

I’d almost forgotten they were arguing about me.

“I want to go.”

Sera smiled immediately.

Caius remained unconvinced.

I met his gaze.

“I’ve never seen the settlement.”

His expression softened slightly.

Not enough for most wolves to notice.

25 Ports

Enough for me.

The human settlement wasn’t dangerous.

That wasn’t what concerned him.

Ashcrest had taught him exactly how vulnerable my life had been before Wraithbone. Part of him still expected something to go wrong whenever I stepped beyond territory walls.

I understood that.

It didn’t change my answer.

Sera waited quietly.

For once she seemed content to let me handle it.

Eventually Caius exhaled.

“I’ll send guards.”

I smiled.

That sounded a lot closer to agreement than refusal.

Sera looked relieved.

“I think we’ll manage.”

His eyes shifted toward her.

“You’ll manage better with guards.”

That earned a small smile from Sera.

Unlike before, she didn’t argue.

“Fair enough.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him.

At least enough to stop objecting.

Then his attention returned to me.

“If you see something you want, buy it.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“The settlement has markets.”

His expression remained completely serious.

“If you need something, buy it.”

A smile tugged at the corner of my trouth.

“I wasn’t planning to go shopping.”

“You weren’t planning to visit the settlement yesterday either.”

That was annoyingly reasonable.

I looked at him.

“And what exactly am I supposed to buy it with?”

Caius looked entirely unimpressed by the question.

“I’ll have Pryor give you money before you leave.”

Sera immediately smiled.

“That’s probably a good idea.”

I laughed softly.

Caius shook his head once.

The look on his face suggested he was already regretting this conversation.

Sera looked back at me.

“We leave shortly after sunrise.”

I nodded.

“Okay.”

Something inside me felt unexpectedly light.

Not because of the trip itself.

Because nobody was deciding for me.

-25 Painte

No punishment waited on the other side of the decision. No one was going to tell me where I could go and where I couldn’t. The choice belonged to me.

For a moment I simply sat with that feeling.

Sera seemed to notice.

Because her expression softened slightly.

“You’ll enjoy it.”

I looked at her.

“You’ve been there often?”

“Hundreds of times.”

Tomorrow’s youmey

That caught my attention immediately

“Hundreds?”

“Healers spend a lot of time there.”

I thought about that.

Then another question occurred to me.

“Do they know what we are?”

Sera laughed.

“Some do.”

“Some?”

“The rest think we’re unusually stubborn people who heal far too quickly.”

A laugh escaped me.

That sounded surprisingly believable.

Caius shook his head.

The look on his face suggested he was already questioning whether agreeing to this had been a mistake.

Unfortunately for him, I was already looking forward to tomorrow.

And judging by Sera’s smile, she knew it.